

# Top Traits Happy People Have in Common

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › A 2010 study found a strong link between less small talk and more substantive conversations and increased happiness
- › A follow-up study revealed moderate associations between life satisfaction and the amount of alone time, conversation time and substantive conversations among the subjects
- › Meaningful conversation increased life satisfaction in virtually every group they studied, but small talk was less impactful, showing little effect one way or the other
- › Personality type didn't dictate the results, either, such that both introverts and extroverts stand to benefit from meaningful talks

The pursuit of happiness is more a choice than something that occurs by happenstance, but there are verifiable traits that those who achieve happiness tend to share.

In 2010, in a study titled "Eavesdropping on Happiness,"<sup>1</sup> researchers equipped nearly 80 college students with an Electronically Activated Recorder (EAR), which randomly recorded snippets of ambient sounds taken while the participants went about their daily lives.

Every 12.5 minutes, the EAR recorded 30 seconds of sound, which allowed the researchers to figure out if the participant was alone or talking with others, and, in the latter case, whether the talk was small talk or more substantive, deeper conversation.

The study revealed intriguing insights into how conversations and small talk weigh in on happiness. What's more, in 2018, researchers followed up on the study, recording new snippets and learning even more about the intricacies of what makes people happy.<sup>2</sup>

## **More Meaningful Conversations Make People Happier**

Do happiness and well-being relate to the amount of small talk and meaningful conversations in your life? The 2010 study found a strong link, with less small talk and more substantive conversations linked to increased happiness.

For purposes of the study, small talk was defined as "uninvolved conversation of a banal nature," in which only trivial information was exchanged. A substantive conversation was defined as one in which meaningful information was exchanged. The researchers wondered:<sup>3</sup>

*"Is the happy life full of shallow, happy-go-lucky moments and trivial small talk or full of reflection and profound social encounters? Both notions exist – the happy ignoramus and the fulfilled deep thinker – but little is known about which every day life is actually associated with greater happiness."*

It turned out that less alone time and more time talking with others was linked to higher well-being. But happiness levels rose even higher when there was less small talk and more meaningful conversation. According to the study, compared to the unhappiest participants, the happiest participants spent 25 percent less time alone and 70 percent more time talking.

However, while talking, they had one-third as much small talk and twice as many substantive conversations.<sup>4</sup> It could be, then, that making an effort to have deeper conversations could be a key to increasing happiness:

*"Together, the findings demonstrate that the happy life is social rather than solitary and conversationally deep rather than superficial ... On one hand, well-being may be causally antecedent to having substantive interactions. Happy people may be 'social attractors' that facilitate deeper social encounters."*

*On the other hand, deep conversations may actually make people happier. Just like self-disclosure can instill a sense of intimacy in a relationship, deep conversations may instill a sense of meaning in the interaction partners. Therefore, our results raise the interesting possibility that happiness can be increased by facilitating substantive conversations."*

## **Study: Small Talk Isn't as Meaningful**

In a follow-up study, researchers used data from the original sample along with a larger, more diverse data set, which included breast cancer survivors and their partners, recently divorced adults and adults who meditate.

The study again revealed moderate associations between life satisfaction and the amount of alone time, conversation time and substantive conversations among the subjects.<sup>5</sup> Meaningful conversation increased life satisfaction in virtually every group they studied, but small talk was less impactful, showing little effect one way or the other.

"We replicated that people who spend a lot of time alone are less satisfied with their lives and have lower well-being," study co-author Matthias Mehl, a professor of psychology at the University of Arizona, said in a news release. "People who spend more time interacting and have more meaningful, substantive conversations are more satisfied. The happy life is social, rather than solitary, and meaningfully so."<sup>6</sup>

Further, while small talk wasn't beneficial, it wasn't decidedly negative either. The researchers even suggested it may have a place in leading to more meaningful conversations. "We all understand that small talk is a necessary component to our social lives," Mehl said. "You cannot usually walk up to a stranger and jump right into a deep, existential conversation because of social norms."<sup>7</sup>

Personality type didn't dictate the results, either, such that both introverts and extroverts stand to benefit from meaningful talks.

"We expected that personality might make a difference, for example that extroverts might benefit more from social interactions than introverts or that substantive conversations might be more closely linked to well-being for introverts than for extroverts, and were very surprised that this does not seem to be the case," researcher Anne Milek, a senior research scientist at the University of Zurich in Switzerland, said.<sup>8</sup>

## Positive Humor Helps Maintain Happiness

Along with regular, deep talks with friends and family, previous research has identified the four following personality traits as being associated with happiness:<sup>9</sup>

- Extraversion
- Locus of control
- Self-esteem
- Optimism

Researchers writing in Europe's Journal of Psychology took the findings a step further, revealing that people with these four personality traits are happier because they use positive humor in their daily life.<sup>10</sup>

"The happiness of 'happy people' does not depend on life circumstances. Rather, happy people seem to have personalities that allow them to find happiness even in the midst of adversity and challenging life conditions," the study noted. And humor, it turns out, makes an effective adaptive strategy to maintain happiness.

Not just any type of humor was beneficial, however. Self-defeating and aggressive humor styles were linked to less happiness, while positive, self-enhancing and affiliative humor did the opposite by helping people cope with difficult circumstances. What's the difference in the styles of humor?<sup>11</sup>

- **Aggressive humor** is used as a means of teasing, criticizing or manipulating others, and may be used as a way to demonstrate superiority over others

- **Self-defeating humor** may be used to avoid confronting problems or dealing with negative feelings, and may make fun of your own weaknesses
- **Self-enhancing humor** is used to maintain positive psychological well-being by means of distancing yourself from adversity
- **Affiliative humor** is used to entertain others, which helps enrich the quality of social relationships

A positive sense of humor, encompassing both self-enhancing and affiliative styles, is indeed another common thread among people who call themselves "happy." The researchers explained:<sup>12</sup>

*"[O]ur findings suggest that people who are high in extraversion, internal locus of control, optimism and self-esteem have developed adaptive strategies of using humor in daily life, which in turn help make them happy. They experience greater happiness because they are better at finding strategies to regulate their emotions, and the habitual use of positive humor is one of those strategies.*

*Happy people may be adept at using positive humor styles as a means by which they frame or appraise life events to form positive, self-affirming views of the self. Indeed, people protect their psychological well-being by using self-enhancing humor as a means of reframing stressors in a more positive, light-hearted way."*

## **Additional Indicators of Happiness**

There's a close relationship between being kind and being happy. Happiness levels increase when people count their own acts of kindness for a week.

Further, kind people experience more happiness and have happier memories, with one study suggesting "happy people are more kind in the first place and ... they can become even happier, kinder and more grateful following a simple intervention [counting their acts of kindness]."<sup>13</sup>

As for why kindness makes people happy, this is still being explored, but it's known that your brain produces feel-good hormones and neurotransmitters like serotonin when you're kind, and kindness helps you to build strong relationships with others, fostering positive feelings and stronger, more meaningful social interactions all-around.

Giving to others is also linked to happiness, and generosity is certainly one form of kindness. People who agreed to spend money on others made more generous choices as well as had stronger increases in self-reported happiness compared to those who agreed to spend money on themselves.<sup>14</sup>

Those who agreed to give to others also had more interactions in brain regions linked to altruism and happiness. Like generosity, gratitude can also produce measurable effects on a number of systems in your body, leading to better sleep, more positive emotions and more, including beneficial effects on:

Mood neurotransmitters (serotonin and norepinephrine)	Inflammatory and immune systems (cytokines)
Reproductive hormones (testosterone)	Stress hormones (cortisol)
Social bonding hormones (oxytocin)	Blood pressure and cardiac and EEG rhythms
Cognitive and pleasure related neurotransmitters (dopamine)	Blood sugar

## Sleep May Be an Overlooked Part of Being Happy

Most research into happiness has focused on its social ties, but research has also found that people who sleep well are more satisfied with life, even after controlling for other factors like personality.<sup>15</sup>

While sleep has long been linked to mood, researchers also suggested that people who sleep poorly are more likely to have a zero-sum view of happiness, which causes people to engage in more social comparisons and savor their positive experiences less, ultimately leading to less happiness.

"As many societies become more competitive and market-oriented, sleep is easily regarded as a waste of time (and money). However, sacrificed sleep may create a vicious cycle of making the world appear as a zero-sum competition, which aggravates interpersonal stress," researchers wrote in *Frontiers in Psychology*, adding:<sup>16</sup>

*"What constitutes a good life? Many people in modern society may shove a 'good sleep' below other priorities, such as high status or income. However, our study suggests that this inconspicuous daily routine not only restores the body, but also elevates the mind's view of life."*

## **Even the Happiest People Have Negative Moods Occasionally**

Yet another study looking into the shared traits of very happy people found those at the highest level of happiness were highly social and had stronger romantic and social relationships than less happy people.<sup>17</sup>

In this case, the happiest people did not exercise more than the less happy people. Nor did they participate in religious activities more often or experience more "good events." However, they did tend to be more extraverted, more agreeable and less neurotic, and having good social relations was a necessary component.

It's important to note, too, that while the happiest people experienced positive (though not ecstatic) feelings most of the time, they also had negative moods on occasion. In short, it's completely natural to feel down sometimes, but happy people have ways of coping with negative emotions so they're able to turn them around and maintain a bright outlook overall.

## **Try This To Be Happier**

If you want to be happier, research suggests putting effort into your social relationships, particularly nurturing those that provide deep, meaningful conversations, will pay off. Likewise, be kind and keep a running tally of your acts of kindness, no matter how big or small.

Be sure to get quality shut-eye each night, and practice living in the present moment, not focused on past regrets or future worries. Ultimately, however, the social component of happiness cannot be ignored. If you're feeling lonely or socially isolated, the following strategies can help you to make meaningful connections with others in your community, which will ultimately increase your level of happiness:

Join a club that interests you	Volunteer for a cause you believe in
Enroll in a class to learn a new skill or hobby	Create rituals of connection, such as calling a certain friend every Monday
Join a gym or sign up for a fitness class so you can exercise with others	Frequent local shops and markets, where you can build relationships with shop owners and other regular customers
Talk to strangers during your daily commute, at the grocery store and while walking your dog	Consider adopting a pet, such as a dog, which can provide companionship and a source of unconditional love, as well as act as an icebreaker socially
Move to be closer to your friends and family	Attend religious services or support groups

## Sources and References

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