

WELLNESS TRAVEL + THE SECRET TO HAPPINESS

Happiness is something we all seek in one form or another and also something that is elusive to many or most of us. And yet, we persist. Because otherwise, what's the point?

There has been a lot of research over the years about where in the world people are happiest and what makes us happy.

According to Gallup's 2024 *World Happiness Report*, the top five happiest countries in the world are:

1. Finland
2. Denmark
3. Iceland
4. Sweden
5. Israel

Social scientist Arthur C. Brooks, who teaches a happiness course at Harvard University has been looking into what it means to be happy for decades. And, according to CNBC, he's found some answers. In a book co-written with Oprah Winfrey, Brooks and Winfrey write that happiness (like life) is not a destination and that, rather than seeking some end goal of happiness, we should be constantly working towards "happierness."

The book lists four major pillars for building a happy life: family, friendships, work, faith (which Brooks defines as "anything transcendent that helps you escape the boring sitcom that is your life"), as well as three "macronutrients of happiness": enjoyment, satisfaction, and purpose.

While all of this seems pretty intuitive, obtaining those increasing levels of "happierness" is still a common struggle. Lots of other past and ongoing research has found evidence for things that might make us happier. Here's a deeper look at research findings from Brooks and others into what makes us happy/happier:

Strong relationships

Strong social and family relationships are essential for psychological wellbeing. The Harvard Study of Adult Development, which has been tracking hundreds of subjects since 1938, emphasizes that close relationships are a key predictor of long-term health and happiness. In fact, they were found to be the single most important factor over fame or wealth. Regular interactions, whether with family, friends, or colleagues, provide emotional support and can significantly reduce stress and anxiety. And, as we know, bad relationships can increase stress and anxiety.

Gratitude practices

Expressing gratitude has been linked to increased wellbeing. Regular practices like writing gratitude journals or sending thank-you notes may enhance appreciation for life and foster positive relationships. These activities can shift focus from what is lacking to what is abundant, promoting a more positive outlook and reducing the risk of depression.

Physical health & exercise

Physical activity is strongly correlated with improved mood and decreased rates of depression and anxiety. The biochemical effects of exercise, including the release of endorphins, play a significant role in enhancing mood and overall emotional wellbeing. Regular exercise also contributes to better physical health, which in turn supports psychological health.

Generosity & helping others

Acts of kindness and helping others can lead to increased happiness for the giver. This phenomenon has been referred to as the “helper’s high,” and the theory is that helping others promotes the release of endorphins and provides a sense of satisfaction and belonging. Studies show that people who engage in acts of generosity report improvements in mental health.

Mindfulness & meditation

Mindfulness meditation has been connected with reduced stress and anxiety. By focusing on the present and accepting thoughts and feelings without judgment, mindfulness may help to decrease negative emotions and increase resilience. Regular practice has been correlated with structural changes in the brain in areas connected with memory, decision making, and mood regulation, all of which may increase happiness levels.

Positive life experiences & nostalgia

Positive childhood experiences, like supportive family relationships and opportunities for play and education, can set a foundation for lifelong happiness. These experiences help in developing resilience, emotional intelligence, and the ability to form those required

healthy relationships in adulthood. Research has also found that reminiscing about good times can improve mood and boost happiness, and that nostalgia may improve wellbeing by increasing gratitude.

Economic stability

Economic stability provides a foundation for happiness by eliminating stress related to basic survival needs like food, shelter, and healthcare. Higher incomes do correlate with higher happiness levels up to a certain point, after which the increase in happiness may plateau.

Each of these factors plays a role in shaping our overall happiness, highlighting the importance of a balanced approach to life that incorporates social, psychological, and physical wellbeing.

How wellness travel experiences promote happiness

Travel and wellness also increase happiness. In a 2020 survey by Amex, 91% of respondents said that the ability to travel is important to their overall happiness. Also, a 2021 study from Washington State University found that people who reported regularly traveling at least 75 miles away from home were about 7% happier when asked about their overall wellbeing than those who reported traveling very rarely or not at all.

Just planning travel improves our happiness. The Let’s Go There Coalition and happiness researcher Michelle Gielan from the Institute for Applied Positive Research survey 263 U.S.-based adults in 2020 and found that 97% of survey respondents said having a trip planned makes them happier. Eighty-two percent said a booked trip makes them “moderately” or “significantly” happier, and 71% reported feeling greater levels of energy knowing they had a trip planned in the next six months.

Some reasons why wellness travel makes us happier

Broadening perspectives: Travel exposes individuals to different cultures, lifestyles, and environments, broadening perspectives and fostering a deeper understanding of the

world. These experiences can increase understanding of people from different backgrounds.

Experiences over material goods: There's a lot of evidence for the value of accumulating experiences rather than material goods for long-term happiness. Cornell psychology professor Thomas Gilovich has found that "the satisfaction we get from buying vacations, bikes for exercise and other experiences starts high and keeps growing. The initial high we feel from acquiring a flashy car or megascreen TV, on the other hand, trails off rather quickly."

Building lasting memories: As mentioned above, nostalgia and positive experiences build happiness – and travel can be a big contributor to those things. Travel not only brings immediate joy but also contributes to long-term happiness through the creation of cherished memories. According to one study, people derive more satisfaction from memories of experiences than from memories associated with material objects.

Overcoming challenges & fostering personal growth: Let's be honest, travel can also be stressful. But those negative experiences, like getting lost in a foreign land or having to sleep on the airport floor, can later become some of our most cherished memories. Overcoming the obstacles and unexpected situations encountered on trips can lead to personal growth and resilience.

The added benefits of wellness + adventure: Wellness and adventure travel, meanwhile, have the added benefit of directly and deliberately enhancing health and wellbeing on top of the benefits of travel alone.


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