



Dr. Susan Biali is a GP, freelance writer, inspirational speaker, life coach, and professional flamenco dancer. Contact: susan@susanbiali.com

# the psychology of happiness

Tried-and-true happiness tips, including embracing those curve balls...

I'm open about the fact that my life used to feel pretty miserable, and that at one point I was actually clinically depressed. That experience was actually a gift, as my life now contrasts so brightly with those dark days. Today, I use what I learned to help other people create happier, more fulfilling lives.

It's not surprising, then, that I'm fascinated by the field of "positive psychology." Legendary psychologist Dr. Martin Seligman officially founded the positive psychology movement in 1996, the year he was elected President of the American Psychology Association.

Those of you familiar with psychology know that many of the traditional approaches focus on "what went wrong" (for example, negative childhood experiences). In a much-quoted 1999 speech, Seligman commented that "psychology was half-baked, literally half-baked. We had baked the part about mental illness; we had baked the part about repair of damage...The other side's unbaked, the side of strength, the side of what we're good at."

I agree with Seligman—and I also feel that this approach is similar to the concept of focusing on creating health in medical practice, versus focusing on treating established disease.

Positive psychology researchers, worldwide, have been working on uncovering what aspects of life or actions result in true, lasting happiness. Here are some tried-and-true happiness tips for you and your patients:

**1 focus on family and friends**  
Psychologist and happiness guru Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar, famous for having had the most popular course at Harvard for several years, consistently cites "interpersonal relationships" as the number one predictor of well-being. According to Dr. Ben-Shahar, people who have strong, intimate connections with their spouses, family or friends, demonstrate higher degrees of happiness.

## 2 analyze the happiest period of your life

This one also comes from Dr. Ben-Shahar. When in your life did you really flourish? What were you doing then that made you feel so fulfilled? When I think of my happiest times during my 20s, which were mostly spent in med school, two moments stand out: 1) the time a group of us went to Club Med and danced all night, every night; and 2) when I got to be one of the dancing, singing "Spice Nurses" in our class's award-winning "Skits Night" production. It's no wonder, then, that my life became dramatically more enjoyable the day that I finally signed up for dance classes at age 28.

## 3 get active

A 2007 study out of Duke University, published in the Journal of Psychosomatic Medicine, found that over 16 weeks, regular exercise was as effective in relieving symptoms of major depressive disorder as the prescription antidepressant Zoloft. The researchers hypothesized that it was probably increased levels of feel-good endorphins and serotonin that accounted for the "happiness" effect of exercise.

## 4 spend money on others

Though our society is more affluent than we were decades ago (at least we were more affluent until recently!), overall happiness ratings haven't increased with that affluence. According to some research, we were actually happier before, when we had less money and "stuff." A study published in the March 2008 edition of Science reported that when college students spent money on buying a gift for someone else or on a charitable donation they experienced far

more happiness and satisfaction than if they bought themselves something with that money. The best part: the "happiness boost" from giving was the same, no matter how much money was spent on the other person or charity.

## 5 accept life as a "roller coaster"

This might be the most surprising of these points, as your first reaction may be one of disappointment. Wouldn't it be nice if at some point, life could just be smooth, easy and steadily happy? This tip, too, comes from Dr. Ben-Shahar, who has said in one interview, "optimistic people have ups and downs like everyone else." He went on to say, "the difference is that happy people realize that if they're sad, they'll get over it. There's a misconception that being happy means being on a high and having

When in your life did you really flourish? What were you doing then that made you feel so fulfilled?

positive moods all the time. That's not what happiness is. If you're happy, you have a life—overall—that you find both meaningful and pleasurable."

Once, when I asked a psychologist about his best piece of advice for his clients, he said just that. "People would be so much better off, if they just accepted that every now then, with almost regular precision, life is going to hit you with a challenge," he told me. "It's the people who whine and cry about it, and resist and resent the turn of events, that have the toughest time and take the longest to recover."

Embrace those curve balls that life throws you—they always contain a gift! ●