

Get happy for International Day of Happiness

✖ Scottish psychologist Professor Ewan Gillon is offering top tips on how to 'get happy' in light of the global celebration the International Day of Happiness today.

Professor Gillon is Clinical Director of First Psychology Scotland, which has centres in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen, Dundee and the Borders, so is well-placed to advise on how to make changes which will improve people's psychological wellbeing and overall feelings of happiness.

Professor Gillon says: "The Law of Psychological Control states that we feel good about ourselves to the same degree to which we feel we are in control of our lives. So it makes sense that, when we are physically, mentally and emotionally controlling the changes in our lives, this leads to higher levels of achievement, emotional satisfaction and a sense of fulfilment.

"Uncontrolled change however can lead to stress, anxiety, frustration and misery – all of which signifies to us that our mind lacks discipline and order, and therefore makes us feel unhappy. Taking control of your life is proven to have a wide range of psychological benefits, including improved feelings of happiness, and spring is the perfect time of year to shake off any mental cobwebs."

TEN TOP TIPS

Here are Professor Gillon's ten top tips to start you off on the right track:

1. Many people tend to drift through life thinking that it is something that happens to them, rather than something they can control themselves. They react to others instead of taking

steps on their own behalf. If this sounds like you, take a step back and think about your behaviour. Are you taking regular and positive steps to achieve your goals? If not, what is actually stopping you? Being honest about what you want to achieve and how you are going to achieve it is the first vital step in taking control of your own life. You can then start to break down any psychological barriers standing in the way of your success and happiness.

2. Spring is traditionally a time for de-cluttering, making more space and bringing more light into our homes. This can have a powerful effect on our mental wellbeing and overall happiness by symbolically breaking the link between past and present. Although it can be difficult to get rid of things we associate with particular people or times in our life, in doing so we are telling ourselves that, psychologically, it is now time to move on. This can result in positive, happy feelings of mental 'lightness' and relief.

3. Practice mindfulness and be 'in the moment' instead of worrying about what may happen tomorrow or next week. Focus on the here and now, particularly when spending time with loved ones, and you will find you enjoy the experience so much more.

4. Relationships can become stifled when you spend too much time cooped up inside, particularly through the darker winter months when we are lacking in vital Vitamin D. Springtime is an ideal time to develop new, individual hobbies which will help develop self-confidence and ultimately make you feel happier. Finding something you love to do with your time will provide an experience that psychologists call 'flow', which has been shown to improve both physical and emotional wellbeing – all of which has a positive impact on relationships with your loved ones.

5. It is helpful to keep a diary and (for one week) write down all the things you do, no matter how small, and how they made you feel. This 'life audit' will provide a good overall picture of how things are for you at the moment, highlighting

the areas of your life that need some attention as well as the things that seem to give you greatest pleasure. Make a list of the things in life which make you feel happy and prioritise them.

6. Make any changes that you need to in a considered, step-by-step way. One of the most common reasons we fail to accomplish things is that we set ourselves unrealistic targets, and this can invoke unpleasant feelings of failure and guilt, which lead to feelings of general unhappiness. Start with small, achievable goals and work your way up, week by week.

7. Physical exercise cannot be underestimated when considering improvements to your happiness levels and general mental health. Exercise has been proven to improve mood, as well as muscle strength and endurance, so a workout at the gym or a brisk 30-minute walk will always help blow away the cobwebs. Physical activity stimulates various brain chemicals that may leave you feeling happier and more relaxed. You may also feel better about your appearance and yourself when you exercise regularly, which can boost your confidence and improve self-esteem. Exercise delivers oxygen and nutrients to your tissues and helps your cardiovascular system work more efficiently, giving you more energy to go about your daily life.

8. Here's some food for thought – making the right nutritional choices can affect more than the fit of our clothes; it can impact on our mental health. Poor diet has played a role in the significant increase in mental health problems over the past 50 years and the trend for eating less fresh produce and consuming more saturated fats and sugars can prevent the brain from functioning properly. What we put on our plates becomes the raw material for our brains to manufacture hormones and neurotransmitters – chemical substances that control our sleep, mood and behaviour. To optimise our brain function, we need to eat a balanced diet of fresh fruits and vegetables, foods high in omega-3 fatty acids – such as fish, nuts, seeds and eggs – protein, and whole grains.

9. Managing stress – how do we do it? Firstly, it's vital to recognize the source(s) of your stress. Events such as the death of a loved one or starting a new job are certainly stressful, however much of our stress comes from within us. How we interpret things – a conversation, or a work performance review – determines whether something becomes a 'stressor'. And negative self-talk, where we focus on self-criticism and pessimistic over-analysis, can turn an innocent remark into a major source of stress. So, understanding where your stress originates can help you decide on a course of action. External stressors, like bereavement or career changes, can be managed over time and with the support of family and friends. Internal stressors, caused by our own negative interpretation, require changes in attitude and behaviour. The goal of managing stress is to cue the relaxation response – the physiological and psychological calming process our body goes through when we perceive that the danger, or stressful event, has passed.

10. Finally, enjoy yourself. We are all so busy and focused on getting through the day that we can often forget this very simple advice...have fun. Taking time out to spend time with a loved one or for your favourite hobby is a great way of connecting with and nurturing your creative self which ultimately leads to a happier life.

International Day of Happiness

The International Day of Happiness was established by the United Nations General Assembly on 28 June 2012 and is celebrated throughout the world on 20 March.

For further information visit: <http://www.dayofhappiness.net>.

This Featured Article was submitted by [Samantha McKay-Challen](#)

