

Relationships are essential for happiness

Happiness is important for us all.

Happiness is a much neglected emotion in mental health. We hear a lot about depression and anxiety, but only recently have people begun to research the importance of happiness in looking after ourselves.

On one level, it seems that happiness keeps us alive. At a very basic level, we strive to get things that are good for us and our reproduction, such as food and sex. Getting these needs met (or even just thinking about them) can release chemicals in the brain that make us feel happy. If we feel happy after doing something, such as eating, we are more likely to repeat that behaviour, which is good for our continued survival.

Some researchers are also finding that happiness has other less obvious benefits. Barbara Fredrickson has written about how positive emotions help us more generally. She notes that happier people tend to be more resilient and so cope with life's inevitable knocks and scrapes better. Happiness can help us to be more creative and open-minded, which can let us recognise more opportunities in our lives. Some people have shown that happiness can even undo negative emotions like fear and sadness. It's hard to be miserable and happy at the same time!

It's not just our mental health that benefits from happiness. In one famous study, researchers looked at the autobiographical sketches that nuns wrote just before taking their final vows in order to judge how positive each person was. They then followed these individuals over their lifetimes and found that those who showed more happiness in their writing tended to live longer. Other studies have shown that the immune systems of happy people also work more effectively than those of unhappy people. Being happy, it seems, can help you stay physically as well as mentally healthy.

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Relationships are important for happiness whatever age we are. Children tend to learn a lot from their peers. Adolescents who have good relationships with their peers tend to be happier than those whose peer relationships are less satisfactory. When researchers looked at the happiest 10% of college students, they found that the only thing that separated them from others was their rich and satisfying connections to friends and family. More recent studies have also shown that in

older adults, those with more friends had a lower risk of health problems and recovered faster if they did fall ill.

The consequences of not having relationships can be dire. Social isolation and loneliness are strongly associated with unhappiness, depression and poor physical health. Yet, a recent government survey found that 34% of people saw or spoke to friends less than once a week, while other authors have estimated that more than a quarter of all households in Britain consist of one person living alone. If we continue our trend of isolating ourselves, we will lose one of the most important contributors to happiness and good mental health.

Relationships also have other useful benefits. People with good relationships tend to be more successful at school, work, and also financially. Further, laughter is 30 times more likely to occur in a group situation than a solitary one. Having fun and getting on in life needn't be incompatible.

We are biologically programmed for relationships.

The need for relationships appears to be part of our biological legacy. We evolved in small, social groups, probably of about 150 or so. Due to our brain size, once a group gets bigger than 150, everyone finds it hard to keep track of who's who and we start to group people into "us" and "them".

We retain our preference for other human beings. Human babies are more interested in human faces than other patterns or shapes. Indeed some researchers have shown that the early attachment a child forms with its carer is essential in later life. We can see that the more attached a child is to the adult, the more likely they will have protection if danger appears on the horizon. Small wonder that we like to have others around.

The importance of relationships last well beyond childhood. People tend to be happier if they have good ties with family, some deep friendships as well as relationships with their wider community, such as school, work, or church groups. It's likely that we feel happier as all of these relationships would contribute to our survival. It seems we need to keep working on our relationships throughout our lives.