

Working for Happiness

HARVARD HAPPINESS GURU SHAWN ACHOR REVEALS SEVEN BRAIN SECRETS FOR FINDING PLEASURE IN OUR WORK (AND ELSEWHERE)

by Amy Klein

“

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■ Did you know that most Americans actually find free time more difficult to enjoy than work? Although many people also find their work stressful, boring or meaningless, success doesn't make people happy, either.

“More than a decade of groundbreaking research in the fields of positive psychology and neuroscience has proven in no uncertain terms that the relationship between success and happiness works the other way around,” writes Shawn Achor, one of the designers and teachers of Harvard's famous Happiness course, in *The Happiness Advantage: The Seven Principles of Positive Psychology That Fuel Success and Performance at Work*. Research shows that happiness is the precursor to success, not the result, and that, together with optimism, it fuels success. This is what Achor means by the competitive edge he calls the “happiness advantage.”

But can unhappy people—or even mildly content people—become happy? If so, how? And is it possible to be happy even at work?

Achor believes so. As the CEO of Good Think Inc., a global positive-psychology consulting company that has worked in over 50 countries, Achor uses the latest in research, including his own work with 1,600 Harvard undergraduates, to give practical steps to increase happiness in our daily lives. His TED talk on the subject has garnered millions of views.

STUMBLING UPON HAPPINESS

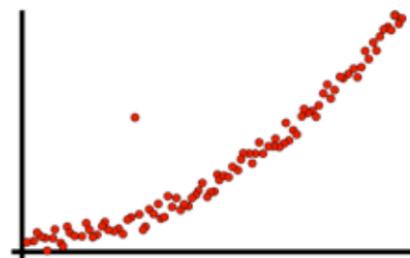
Achor got a taste of happiness when he unexpectedly got into Harvard, having applied on a dare. He then stayed in the dorms for the next 12 years, first as an undergraduate, then a graduate student, then as a live-in resident to help students with academic and personal success. There he witnessed a pattern of students getting worried, overwhelmed, depressed, sometimes failing. He wanted to know why some students—like himself—viewed Harvard as a gift or privilege, and others succumbed to stresses and pressures that made the experience unbearable.

It was only after he went to visit a shantytown school in Soweto, South Africa, that he began to understand the answer. When he asked, as an icebreaker, “Who here likes to do schoolwork?”—one of his opening lines in America that usually brought up groans and laughter—most of the kids there raised their hands. And they weren't lying. A CEO from South Africa told him, “They see schoolwork as a privilege... one their parents did not have.”

When he returned to Harvard and saw people complaining about the very thing Soweto students saw as a privilege, he “started to realize just how much our interpretation of reality changes our experience of that reality.” Students who saw learning as a chore missed out on the opportunities in front of them, but those who saw Harvard as an opportunity shined.

Achor loves to show a scatter-plot diagram, the standard graph plotting anything—weight

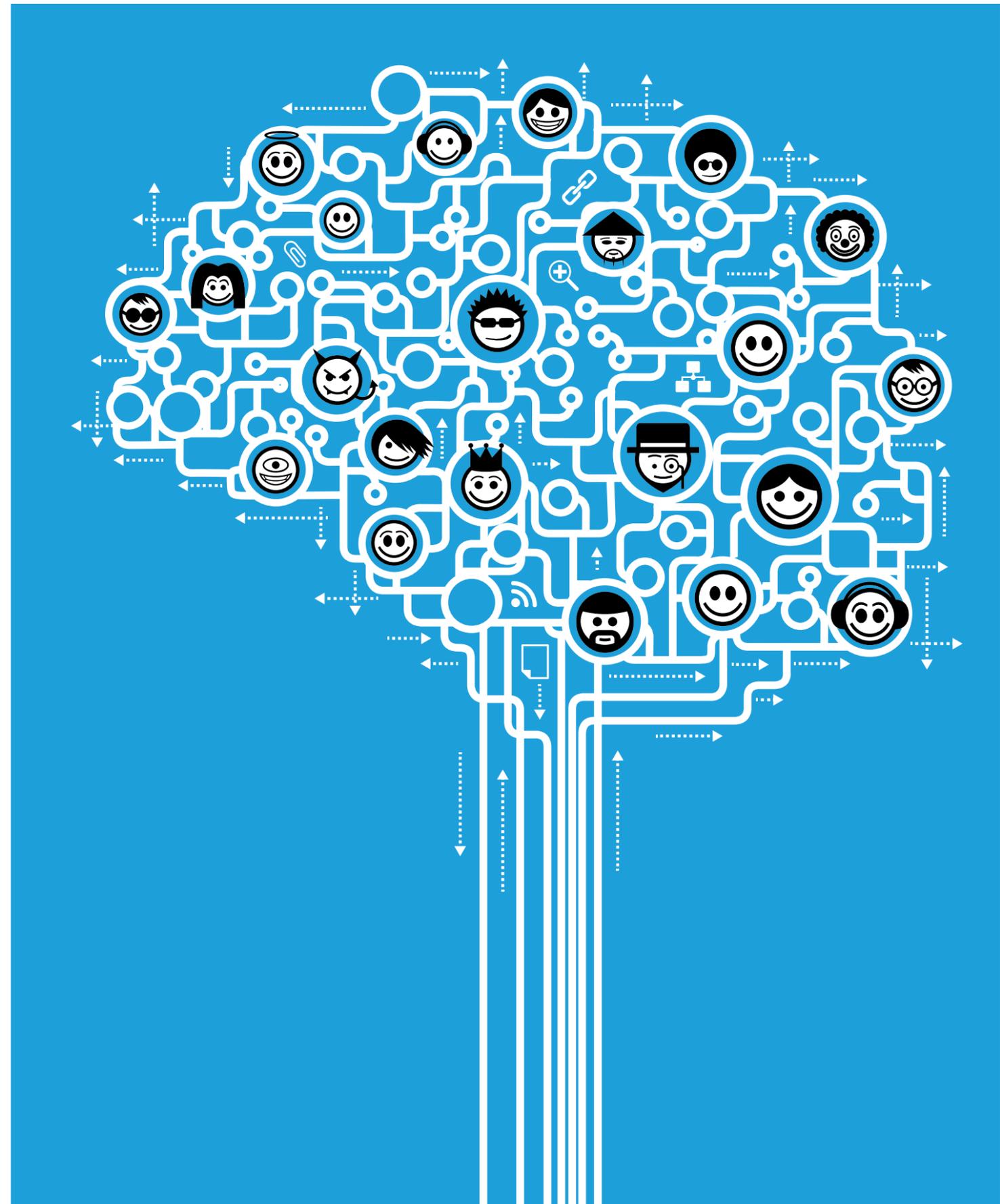
in relation to height, sleep in relation to energy, etc.—with one dot (individual) outside the standard path.



“If we got this data back as researchers, we would be thrilled because very clearly there is a trend going on here,” Achor says. Researchers usually believe the one weird red dot outside the path—the outlier—is a measurement error, and so would delete it. Which is statistically valid if you're studying trends or average behaviors or average outcomes. “If we study what is merely average, we will remain average,” says Achor. While conventional psychology ignores the outliers because they do not fit the pattern, Achor seeks them out in order to learn from them—as do others in positive psychology, who, unlike self-help authors, use scientific, empirical studies to research positive trends.

The seven principles in *The Happiness Advantage* are not about putting on a happy face, Achor believes. It's not using positive thinking to pretend problems don't exist, or that everything will always be great. It's about harnessing our neuroplasticity, our brain's ability to change and rewire itself. “The hardest part about happiness is remembering that we can choose it,” he says. “Our amygdala is constantly scanning for threats, so unless you are a monk with 8,000 hours of meditation, we have to actively choose happiness by remembering that our external world does not define our happiness and by creating positive habits that sustain us and get us back on track.”

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Achor continued...

Achor talked with *Brain World* about the seven principles of *The Happiness Advantage*.

Principle #1 The Happiness Advantage (Why Happier Workers Make Better Workplaces)

Happiness, Achor says, is “the joy we feel striving toward our potential. This definition links positive emotion with a cognitive awareness of growth. Positive emotion without growth is pleasure, which is fleeting. Growth without positive emotion is equally short-lived and leads to depression.”

“Your brain works significantly better at positive than it does when neutral or negative,” Achor says, noting that when positive, the brain has triple the creativity, 31 percent higher levels of productivity, 23 percent fewer fatigue-related symptoms, 37 percent higher levels of sales—all resulting in higher profit and lower burnout and turnover. “The greatest competitive advantage in the modern economy is a positive and engaged brain,” he says. “Why work with a negatively impaired brain?”

Happiness, health and heartiness came before success—not after, Achor points out. That’s because happiness gives us a chemical edge, flooding our brains with dopamine (the neurotransmitter responsible for reward-driven learning) and serotonin (the neurotransmitter contributing to well-being and happiness).

A study at the University of Toronto published in *The Journal of Neuroscience* in 2009 found that mood can affect how the visual cortex processes information. Those subjects primed for positive moods process much more than those primed for negative moods. People who were positive also did better business deals.

That’s why companies like Google, Yahoo! and Virgin make sure their environments are fun, happy places. “Smart companies cultivate these kinds of working environments,” says Achor, “because every time employees experience a small burst of happiness, they get primed for creativity and motivation.”

Achor advises basic life-happiness principles to elevate mood, such as meditation (which can help grow the prefrontal cortex and increase happiness), infusing positivity into your surroundings, and exercising a signature strength (something you know you excel in, which can make you less depressed).

Principle #2: The Fulcrum and the Lever (Change the way you think and maximize your potential)

Achor learned at an early age that the brain is like “single processors capable of devoting only a finite amount of resources to experiencing the world.” You can use those resources to see the world through a lens of negativity, stress, pain and uncertainty, he says, or through a lens of gratitude, hope, resilience and optimism. “Happiness is not about lying to ourselves, or turning a blind eye to the negative, but about adjusting our brain so that we see the ways to rise above our circumstances.”

Sure, some people have a lower baseline of happiness. “Genes set the initial baseline but our research in positive psychology has proven beyond a doubt that we can take a pessimist and turn them significantly more optimistic and happier,” Achor says. “Look at studies of twins, which are the basis for much of our genetic research in psychology, and the graphs show a different picture. There are outliers all over the place.”

An expectation of a happy event, like mirthful laughter, causes the same neurons to fire as if the event took place. “Mental construction of daily activities, more than the activity itself defines our reality,” Achor points out, citing an experiment performed on the cleaning staff of seven hotels, published in the 2007 *Psychological Science*. Researchers told half the staff how much exercise and how many calories they were burning doing their work, how vacuuming was similar to a cardio workout; they didn’t tell the control group anything. Some weeks later, only the cardio group lost weight, and their cholesterol went down.

It’s not enough to do activities you enjoy—your brain has to feel the activity has a purpose. The same goes for leisure activity: You have to know your leisure has a purpose for it to feel meaningful. You also have to believe your abilities can improve.

But a crucial part in work satisfaction is whether you view your work as a job (a chore to get a paycheck), a career (necessary to advance and succeed) or a calling (work as an end in itself contributing to a greater good), according to Yale psychologist Amy Wrzeniewski. It doesn’t matter what work one does, one can always connect it to one’s higher calling, Achor says.

Principle #3 The Tetris Effect (Rewiring a Stuck Brain)

According to Achor, the brains of people who repeatedly play video games became stuck in a “cognitive afterimage,” which causes them to see the game wherever they go. (Achor tells the story of almost stealing a police car after playing *Grand Theft Auto!*) “Playing hour after hour of Tetris actually changes the brain,” he says—new neural pathways are created.

People can get stuck that way, too, he says. Especially accountants, lawyers and other professionals trained to be critical. Lawyers “depose” their children, accountants make spreadsheets of their wives’ faults.

But you can create a “Positive Tetris Effect”—i.e., train your brain to get stuck in a positive afterimage using happiness, gratitude and optimism. Make a list of three good things at the end of the day, and your brain will have to scan for positive events. “This trains the brain to become more skilled at noticing and focusing on possibilities for personal and professional growth and seizing opportunities to act on them,” Achor says, adding that it pushes out the negative experience.

Principle #4 Falling Up (Learning Resilience)

The human brain has been wired to create mental maps to survive and navigate the world. After failure, we create a map with three possible outcomes:

1. Circling in the same spot.
2. Getting you further lost (going down a more negative path).
3. Getting to a place where you are stronger than before.

Achor says the third way “is the difference between those who are crippled by failure and those who rise above it.” After repeated setbacks, some people learn helplessness, believing their actions are futile, while others have what psychologists call “adversarial growth”—success because of their positive mindset.

How do you change your mindset to become one of the latter? Achor likes to tell people a fabricated scenario where you walk into the bank and are the only one to get shot in the arm by bank robbers. He then asks: Lucky or unlucky? About 70 percent usually say unlucky, and only 30 percent say lucky, for many different reasons, including *Why me?* and *Glad more people weren’t hurt*.

Achor says the brain invents a “counterfact”—Richard Wiseman’s term from his 2003 book, *The Luck Factor*: an alternate scenario to help the brain make sense of what occurred. When something goes wrong, we can all invent counterfactuals—even disputing our natural pessimistic tendencies—to make us feel better and handle the situation better.

Principle #5 The Zorro Circle (Get Control of The Small Stuff)

Before he could become a hero, the fictional character Zorro had to learn to control his impulsiveness and master his skills one by one, first within a small circle. Often, Achor says, we feel out of control, especially when we try to tackle too many things at once. In a study of 7,400 employees published in *The Lancet* in 2007, people who felt they had little control over their deadlines had a 50 percent higher risk of heart disease.

Our brain’s prefrontal cortex helps us think logically—to think first, then react. But in stressful situations, the amygdala floods our body with adrenaline and the reflexive fight-or-flight response, overpowering logic.

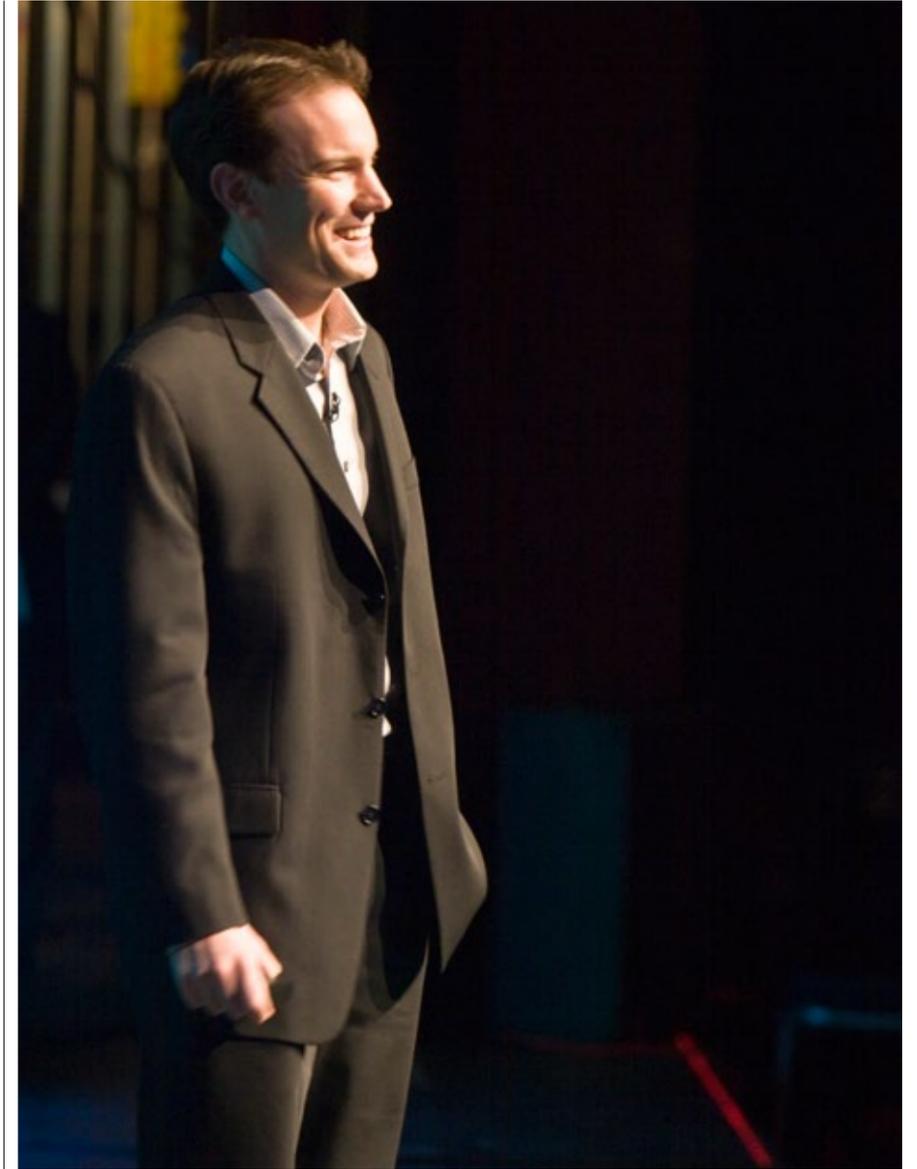
In times of stress, Achor says, it’s important to identify your feelings, find out which parts of the situation you can control, then try to accomplish one small goal. Then another, and another...

Principle #6: The 20-Second Rule (Minimize Barriers to Change)

Neuroplasticity tells us that we can change our brains: Bad habits wire them that way, as do good habits. Achor works with people to replace a negative habit with a positive one, “so that the brain’s resources are being allocated appropriately” toward change. “Your neurochemicals can change in less than a minute based upon your environment and cognitive responses,” Achor says. “Some researchers claim they can see changes in the neural pathways caused by a moderate-level habit in about 28 to 29 days.” Other researchers, like Achor, use 21 days of habit-formation as a starting foundation for long-term change.

But for a new habit to form, you have to create the path of least resistance. Achor found that committing to playing the guitar every day wasn’t enough when his guitar was stored in the closet. Once he moved it outside (“lower the barrier”), he was able to incorporate guitar-playing into his daily routine. You can raise the barrier of resistance for bad habits you want to avoid—removing the chocolate from the house, hiding your email folder in three other folders so you won’t check it—and lower it for habits you want to do. (Achor used to sleep in his running clothes so he would go exercise in the morning!)

Scientists have also found that willpower is a limited resource, so one should limit one’s choices so you don’t run out of willpower.



Principle #7 Social Investment (It’s All About Friends)

In times of stress and crisis, many people retreat into their shells and cut off communication with their friends and loved ones. But happy, successful people do the opposite: “Instead of turning inward,” says Achor, “they actually hold tighter to their social circle.” Forming social bonds increases oxytocin, reducing anxiety and improving concentration and focus. So many studies on illness find that support groups increase sufferers’ chances of survival.

The Harvard Men study followed 268 men from college in the 1930s to the present, and found that social relationships mattered more than anything else, regarding health, success and happiness.

Social relationships—they don’t always have to be deep—help people at work and at home to manage stress, lower cortisol, and get over

conflict. “At Harvard, I found a .7 correlation between happiness and social support,” Achor says. “Social support is as predictive of longevity as smoking and obesity, and can make you 10 times more engaged.”

In the end, Achor says we can always be happy at work by creating positive habits and sticking with them. “But if you feel like you could grow more in another job, then optimism should fuel the belief that you can make that change successfully,” he says. But if for some reason change is not possible, then “making the best of the current situation only makes good sense.”