

Happiness Makes Your Brain Work Better

A Harvard psychology researcher explains that rather than thinking of success as the source of happiness, we should think of happiness as a source of success—and one that's more under our control than we imagine.

Entrepreneurs, in general, are strivers. We set targets, battle to meet them, and believe that getting to that point, whatever it is, will bring us increased satisfaction. But according to one positive psychology researcher out of Harvard, as commonsensical as this tendency to chase achievement in order to attain greater happiness may sound, it's actually got the equation reversed.

In a fascinating (and funny) TEDxBloomington talk, Shawn Achor, author of *The Happiness Advantage*, argues that while we may think success will bring us happiness, the lab-validated truth is that happiness brings us more success. And understanding this is particularly valuable for entrepreneurs, Achor said in an interview. Business owners, he said, need to, reverse the happiness and success formula. We think if we work harder and achieve some entrepreneurial goal, then we'll be happier. But the research is clear that every time you have a success, your brain changes what success means. So for you and for your team, if happiness is on the opposite side of success, you'll never get there. But if you increase your levels of happiness in the midst of a challenge—in the midst of searching for investment, in the midst of a down economy—what we find is that all of your success rates rise dramatically—every business outcomes improves.

The brain, it turns out, works significantly better when you're feeling positive, so developing a sunny outlook allows you to be smarter and more creative. "We found that optimism is the greatest predictor of entrepreneurial success because it allows your brain to perceive more possibilities," said Achor. "Only 25 percent of job success is based upon IQ. Seventy-five percent is about how your brain believes your behavior matters, connects to other people, and manages stress."

If you're all set to argue that your level of optimism or ability to handle stress is out of your control and determined by either your genes or your childhood, requiring a Woody Allen-level commitment to psychiatric intervention to reverse, Achor would like to correct you. "It's a cultural myth that we cannot change our happiness," he said, explaining that:

Genes are really important to happiness, but that's based upon the cult of the average. What that means is that the average person doesn't fight their genes. So if you're born with genes for obesity or for pessimism, and you don't change your behavior than your genes win. Happiness comes easier to some people, but happiness is a possibility for all if we change our behavior or our mindset.

And changing your mindset is probably less difficult than you imagine. "No one would think that something small could change patterns of pessimism from decades or from genes," conceded Achor, but he said research proves the doubters wrong. "What we found was something as simple as writing down three things you're grateful for every day for 21 days in a row significantly increases your level of optimism and it holds for the next six months. The research is amazing. It proves we actually can change."

So if you're looking for more ways to boost your personal happiness quotient, than check out Achor's TED talk below for some simple interventions that have been proven to help (they're towards the end). Or if you're more focused on helping your team perform better by being happier, check out Achor's recent Harvard Business Review Magazine cover story, explaining, as Achor put it, that "happiness leads to greater levels of profits. In the article I described some things you can do at a team organizational level" to promote it.