

# How to Keep Happiness from Fading

Two tools you can use to make happiness last

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No matter how miserable you are feeling at the moment, if you look back, there have surely been events in your life that have made you happy. Maybe the time you bought your first car or the time you received that long-desired promotion. Or the time you lost fifteen pounds and were able to get back into your favorite jeans without cutting off your circulation. When good things happen, we feel positive emotions—like excitement, relief, pride, and of course, happiness. These feelings are essential for our well-being.

But the problem is, happiness doesn't usually last. The excitement of that first car purchase wears off, the thrill of the promotion gives way to the anxiety of handling the responsibilities that came with it. Sure, you think, it's nice to be a size 8 again. But it would be really great to be a size 6...

Psychologists call this phenomenon hedonic adaptation—the idea is that no matter how good something makes us feel (or, for the record, how bad), most of the time we drift back to where we started, emotionally-speaking. One often-cited study famously showed that despite their initial euphoria, lottery winners were no happier than non-winners eighteen months later. The same tendency to return to “baseline” has been shown to occur after marriage, voluntary job changes, and promotions—the kinds of things we usually expect to change our happiness and well-being for the better in a permanent way.

Why can't we make happiness last? Psychologists (and renown happiness experts) Kennon Sheldon and Sonja Lyubomirsky argue in a recent paper that our hedonic adaption occurs for two reasons.

When a positive change first occurs (say, you move into a great new house), there are usually lots of positive events happening as a result. You get to break in that new six-burner range, take a long bath in your first soaking tub, and appreciate the roominess of your new garage. But over time, there are fewer positive events to experience, because you get used to all the home's features, and after a while, you just don't notice them anymore. With fewer positive events, and thus fewer positive emotions (excitement, pride, happiness), your newfound well-being can't be sustained.

The second reason happiness fades is that even when positive events continue—if, for instance, your fitness and healthy eating habits leave you looking great, and this results in lots of new opportunities for romance on a regular basis—the change begins to simply be seen as the “new normal.” And as a result, your aspiration level shifts—you feel like you need to look even better. Nobel-prize winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman has referred to this process as a kind of “satisfaction treadmill.” Because we continuously shift our standards upward once we've reached them, we've got to keep running in order to feel satisfied again.

But don't despair—it is possible to make happiness last, by slowing the adaptation process, or even halting it altogether. Sheldon and Lyubomirsky found in a recent study that two anti-adaptation tools were effective in sustaining gains in happiness over time: variety and appreciation.

**Variety** is, as we all know, the spice of life. But it's also a potent weapon against adaptation because we don't get “used to” positive events when our experiences are novel, or unexpected. When, on the other hand, a positive experience is repetitive—when you know exactly what to expect—you don't get the same kick out of it.

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Positive changes that are experienced in a variety of ways are more likely to lead to lasting happiness. So you'll be happier with your new spouse if you spend time doing new things together, rather than getting stuck in a boring routine. You'll be happier at your job if you are able to tackle new tasks and challenges—if there is some day-to-day variety in what you do. You'll be happier with your soaker tub if you run out and get yourself some new bubble bath, or try lighting candles (or maybe ask someone to join you in it.)

The happiness you get from doing anything will fade if you do it the same way every day, so mix things up. Think about this before making a change because you believe it will make you happier—will you be able to experience whatever it is in a variety of ways? Because if the answer is no, don't expect the happiness to last.

Tool #2, **appreciation**, is in many ways the opposite of adaptation—it's going out of your way to focus on something, rather than taking it for granted or letting it fade into the background. Appreciating can mean paying attention or noticing, but it is even more powerful when you take it further—when you savor something, delighting in its qualities and relishing how it makes you feel, or when you experience gratitude, a sense of being fortunate for being in your current circumstances compared to others or compared to where you have been in the past. When we appreciate our positive experiences, when we turn our mind's eye toward them again and again in joy and wonder, we don't just make our happiness last—we kick it up a notch, too.

Human beings spend a lot of time trying to figure out what will make them happy, but not nearly enough time trying to hang on to the happiness they already have. In a way, this is like focusing all your energy on making more money, without giving any thought to what you'll do with the money you've already earned. The key to wealth, like the key to happiness, is to not only look for new opportunities but to make the most of the ones you've been given.

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