



# 12 Intentional Activities for Increasing Life Satisfaction



## Person – Activity – Fit

Adapted from  
*The How of Happiness* by  
Sonja Lyubomirsky (2007)

## Introduction

Research shows that 40% of your life satisfaction is dependent on your intentional activity... what you **think**, **feel**, and **do**.

There are many pathways to happiness. Researchers have identified **12 activities** that have been **shown to increase life satisfaction**.

It would be daunting to try every intentional activity at once.

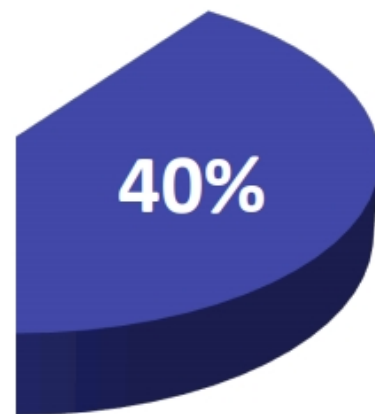
The activity that is likely to give you the maximum outcome for your effort is matched by your **interests**, **values**, and **needs**.

In this process you will take a survey to identify **which activities would be most effective for you**, learn about each activity, and get specific examples of how to put them into practice. Enjoy!

## Instructions

Take the **Person Activity Fit Scale**. Review your results and all of the research-based activities for increasing life-satisfaction included here.

**Commit to practicing** 1 or 2 of these activities over the next month. Remember, happiness skills require endurance training!



## Savor life

### **What is it?**

Being attentive and appreciative of a particular experience. Often involves the use of the senses.

### **Proof it works**

Research shows:

- A recent study in Sonja Lyubormirsky's lab showed that the practice of remembering happy life events and attempting to replay them in one's mind prolongs and reinforces positive emotions.

### **Why it works**

- Elicits conscious memories of positive past
- Builds past, present, and future minded positive emotions, which builds resilience and buffers against depression
- Relieves any current stress and refocuses brain

### **One-liners**

According to psychologist Bryant and Veroff, *"Positive events alone are not enough to bring about happiness. People need to be able to attend to and appreciate the positive feelings that emerge from positive events."* (2007, p43)

### **How to use it**

1. **Savoring album** – Take a picture of something of beauty you encounter and write a short text description of what you found to be beautiful about it. This is a great way to stop and take a good look at things that you admire and appreciate. Use your camera not to document, but to help you truly look at things and experience their beauty.
2. **Replay happy days** – Some psychologists suggest taking "mental photographs" of pleasurable moments to review them in less happy times. Look back at past photos to remember and "replay" your happiest days. The trick is to remember the details: the events and thoughts and emotions that happened that day.
3. **Create your own**

## Nurture social relationships

### **What is it?**

Proactively enhancing the quality of your relationships. Deepening existing relationships.

### **Proof it works**

Research shows nurturing relationships:

- Promote a charitable perception of other people and community
- Create favorable social comparisons
- Relieve distress or guilt over other's misfortunes
- Foster heightened sense of interdependence and cooperation

### **Why it works**

- Leads people to view themselves as generous and to feel confident, efficacious, in control, and optimistic about their abilities to help
- Inspires liking and friendship by others, as well as their appreciation and gratitude
- Produces prosocial reciprocity

### **One-liners**

Research shows that strong social ties are the only things that separate very happy people from very unhappy people.

### **How to use it**

1. **Connect** – Contact someone from your family or a friend with whom you haven't been in touch with for a while – someone with whom you want to strengthen your relationship. Think of a person who can benefit from your skills, time, or support. Make time to listen and to express your appreciation and affection.
2. **Create your own**

## Express gratitude

### **What is it?**

Something you feel when you feel you have been the recipient of someone or something else's positive actions.

### **Proof it works**

Research shows grateful people have:

- More satisfaction with life
- More pro-social behavior
- More other-centered approach
- Less negative “self-preoccupation”
- Better sleep and vitality
- More optimism

### **Why it works**

- Increases positivity
- Enhances the experience
- Enables savoring
- Counters hedonic treadmill
- Counters materialism & adaptation
- Decreases stress

### **One-liners**

Research shows that expressing gratitude increases your happiness by helping you notice the good things that are already happening.

### **How to use it**

1. **Gratitude journal** – Write down the 3 to 5 things for which you are currently grateful – from the mundane (your flowers are finally in bloom) to the magnificent (your child's first steps). Do this once a week. Keep the strategy fresh by varying your entries.
2. **Gratitude expression** – If there's a particular person who has been kind or influential in your life, don't wait to express your appreciation. Call, text, or if possible, visit them and express your appreciation in concrete terms. This can be someone you saw today – or someone you have not seen in a long while. Open your phone's contacts and choose someone now.
3. **Create your own**

## Commit to your goals

### **What is it?**

Picking one, two, or three significant goals that are meaningful to you and devoting time and effort to pursuing them.

### **Proof it works**

Research shows:

- Seeing and meeting goals increases a sense of satisfaction and productivity
- People who set high goals tend to be more satisfied with their work

### **Why it works**

- Achievement builds a sense of self-efficacy
- Setting specific and challenging goals that give you immediate feedback fuels your desire to achieve more

### **One-liners**

It's essential that people connect to the "why" of their goals and to the intrinsic motivation of their achievement.

### **How to use it**

1. ***Seeing and reaching goals*** – For this activity, you will write down a goal (or goals) you think you might want to attain. To help you choose the right goals, you will rate each goal on your list on whether it is:
  - Intrinsic (as opposed to extrinsic)
  - Authentic (as opposed to inauthentic)
  - Approach-oriented (as opposed to avoidance-oriented)
  - Harmonious (as opposed to conflicting)
  - Activity-based (as opposed to circumstance-based)
  - Flexible & appropriate (as opposed to rigid & inappropriate)
2. ***Create your own***

## Create coping strategies

### **What is it?**

Coping is what people do to alleviate the hurt, stress, or suffering caused by a negative event or situation.

### **Proof it works**

Research shows:

- Developing coping strategies builds resilience
- Resilient people build more supportive social networks that help facilitate positive coping with negative events
- Resilient individuals show faster cardiovascular recovery after negative events

### **Why it works**

- Coping allows one to recover from the harmful effects of negative emotional appraisal and experience a more positive emotional appraisal of events
- Coping allows one to engage in more proactive behaviors in the face of a stressor

### **One-liners**

Developing coping strategies allows one to “bounce back” quicker from life’s adversities and experience a more positive appraisal of the events.

### **How to use it**

1. ***Problem-focused coping*** – When the problem you’re facing is concrete and specific, concentrate your efforts on doing something about it and focus on what has to be done, one step at a time. Make a plan of action and put aside other activities to concentrate. Get advice from others or talk to someone about options to confront the problem directly.
2. ***Emotion-focused coping*** – When facing an overwhelming or uncontrollable situation, focus on more emotional coping strategies. Engage in activities that bring you joy to activate the Broaden and Build Theory of positive emotions. Focus on cultivating closer relationships with those you love and seek social support.
3. ***Create your own***

## Practice acts of kindness

### **What is it?**

A spontaneous gesture of goodwill toward someone or something.

### **Proof it works**

Research shows:

- Altruistic people tend to be happier
- Altruism and volunteering tend to benefit the giver even more than the receiver
- Performing acts of kindness increases people's happiness level, and the more acts that are performed in one day, the higher the happiness

### **Why it works**

- Creates upward spirals
- Helps people shift into a self-perception of "I do good in the world"
- Produces prosocial reciprocity
- Strengthens social ties

### **One-liners**

When people are stuck in a negative state, they are often self-centered in their thinking and feeling. Performing a kind act gets people into an "other-centered" way of being, which can increase their mood and put them into an upward spiral.

### **How to use it**

1. ***In your network*** – Think of a person who can benefit from your help. Perhaps they can use your support, your time, or your experience. This could be a person you know or just someone who can use some thoughtfulness and consideration.
2. ***Examples of acts of kindness*** – When you go through the day, be aware of the people around you and think of what you can offer them. Write acts of kindness you have done in a journal.
3. ***Create your own***



## Engage in flow experiences

### **What is it?**

State of intense absorption: “In the zone.” Feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and enjoyment in the process of the activity in the moment.

### **Proof it works**

Research shows frequent flow correlates with:

- Life satisfaction
- Achievement
- Better health
- Creativity

### **Why it works**

- Focuses energy and attention
- Creates more self-regulation
- Engages a person in the creation process
- Gets them stepping out of their “stuff” into an altered state, even if for just a short period of time

### **One-liners**

The key to flow moments is having the appropriate balance of challenge and skills.

### **How to use it**

1. ***Adopt new values*** – Be open to new and different experiences. Continue learning all the time. Think like a young child.
2. ***Learn what flows*** – Establish precise time periods and activities during which you find yourself in flow – and then multiply them.
3. ***Flow in conversation*** – During your next 1-on-1 with someone (a friend, a colleague), focus your attention as intensely as possible on what the other person is saying. Don’t be too quick to respond. Be curious and ask questions for clarity.
4. ***Create your own***

## Cultivate optimism

### **What is it?**

A sense of hopefulness about the future.

### **Proof it works**

Research shows optimism:

- Improves self-regulation
- Provides opportunity to gain insight about one's priorities, motives, and emotions
- Reduces conflicts among one's life goals
- Integrates life experiences in a meaningful way
- Fuels a feeling of control
- Improves performance
- Fosters positive thinking

### **Why it works**

- Gets you feeling pulled by your future
- Creates hopefulness
- Creates pathways for achievement

### **One-liners**

Optimism is both a style of thinking and a hopeful outlook in the world.

### **How to use it**

1. **Best future self** – Sit in a quiet place and take 15 to 30 minutes to think about and write down what you expect your life to be a few years from now. Imagine that everything has gone as well as it possibly could. You have worked hard and succeeded at accomplishing all of your life goals. Think of this as the realization of all of your life dreams. Then write about what you imagined.

Start with, “In 5 years, I am...” This exercise will help you identify your most important and meaningful life aspirations and to practice thinking positively and optimistically about them. Not only has this exercise been shown to make people happier, but it also increases the chances that those goals will actually come to pass!

2. **Create your own**

## Practice spirituality

### **What is it?**

Feeling a strong, intimate, and personally valuable connection to something greater than yourself, and living life from that space of faith.

### **Proof it works**

Research shows:

- Acts of faith are beneficial when the activity increases a state of calm and positivity, focuses your attention, and you believe in it
- People who consider themselves to be of “faith” are happier than those who do not

### **Why it works**

- Participating in religion or spirituality can often be tied to being a part of a group and cultivating a sense of shared meaning and belonging
- Helps people make meaning in their life

### **One-liners**

Having faith is correlated with life satisfaction.

### **How to use it**

1. ***Seek meaning and purpose*** – Creating meaning comes from having a coherent “life scheme.” Sit back and write down your own life story. Who are you now, and who were you before? What future do you imagine for yourself? What are the obstacles in your path? What assumptions do you hold about the world and why things are the way they are? What is your life for? How do you live a virtuous life and improve the world around you?
2. ***Pray*** – A universal way to practice spirituality is through prayer. Dedicate a period of time each day, from five minutes to an hour, to prayer or choose to pray spontaneously throughout the day – when you feel stressed, when you witness a beautiful object or kind act, or when something particularly good (or bad) has happened.
3. ***Find the sacred in the ordinary*** – Develop an ability to see holiness in everyday things, both beautiful and plain – a meal, a child’s laugh, an autumn leaf. Sanctifying day-to-day objects, experiences, and struggles takes great practice, but it’s at the heart of spirituality and its rewards.
4. ***Create your own***

## Take care of your mind and body

### What is it?

Both meditation and exercise have powerful positive effects on the mind-body. This activity has to do with self-care practices to keep you healthy and clear.

### Proof it works

Research shows:

- Both meditation and exercise can be stress relievers
- Decreases anxiety and stress
- Increases heart-rate variability
- Increases immune response
- Activates pre-frontal cortex

### Why it works

- Releases endorphins
- Resets brain chemicals
- Communicates to the body that you are alive
- Eats up stress hormones

### One-liners

Self-awareness enables self-compassion, which enables self-care.

### How to use it

1. **Get support** – Meditation has many rewards, but it doesn't come effortlessly for everyone. For a boost of encouragement, consider taking a class on meditation, visiting a meditation website, or buying a how-to CD (you can also find some guided meditations on YouTube). Meditation is a very personal experience and may be performed in many ways, but experts have put together several crucial elements to aim for in your practice:
  - Be nonjudgmental (observe the present moment impartially, with detachment, without evaluation)
  - Be nonstriving (it's all about progression)
  - Be patient; be trusting; be open
  - Let go
2. **Movement is for everyone** – No one in our society needs to be told that exercise is good for us. Whether you are overweight, have chronic illness, or are a slim couch potato, remember that it's all about building endurance, one step at a time. And it will make you happier.
3. **Create your own**

## Learn to forgive

### What is it?

Forgiving those who have done wrong; giving people a second chance; not being vengeful.

### Proof it works

Research shows:

- Holding on to grudges takes away from our health
- Forgiving people are less likely to be “hateful, depressed, hostile, anxious, angry, and neurotic” and are more likely to be “happier, healthier, more agreeable, and more serene”

### Why it works

- Helps the person let go of trying to change the past
- Decreases negative rumination about the event
- Helps the person let go of feelings of resentment, regret, and revenge
- Moves people out of a narrow and focused state into a broaden and build state

### One-liners

Forgiving is not the same thing as forgetting. Forgiving is a gift you give yourself of not letting the situation continue to plague you.

### How to use it

1. ***Appreciate being forgiven*** – Before you are able to forgive another, a good first exercise is to appreciate an instance of when you yourself have been forgiven. Recall a time you harmed another and were forgiven. What insights do you have? This exercise will help you see the benefits of forgiveness and perhaps provide a model for your own forgiving. Another way to appreciate being forgiven is to seek forgiveness of yourself.
2. ***Imagine forgiveness*** – First, identify a particular person whom you blame for mistreating or offending you. Second, engage in an imagination exercise, during which you imagine empathizing with the offender and granting him or her forgiveness. Trying to feel empathy involves viewing the situation through the offender’s eyes and ears and seeing them as a whole person rather than defining them solely by the offending behavior.
3. ***Write a letter of forgiveness*** – Describe in detail the injury or offense that was done to you. Illustrate how you were affected by it at the time and how you continue to be hurt by it. State what you wish the other person had done instead. End with an explicit statement of forgiveness and understanding (e.g. “I realize now that what you did was the best you could at the time, and I forgive you”). You can either send it or not.
4. ***Create your own***

## Avoid overthinking and social comparison

### **What is it?**

Shifting away from ruminating thoughts and avoiding continuously comparing oneself to others.

### **Proof it works**

Research shows:

- Social comparison in either direction negatively influences wellbeing
- Ruminative thoughts are associated with depression
- Social comparison mitigates experiences of gratitude

### **Why it works**

- Escaping the cycle of rumination reduces the negative affect
- Enables gratitude by shifting focus away from what one doesn't have compared to others to what one does have

### **One-liners**

Avoiding social comparison and overthinking allows us to escape cycles of rumination and to be grateful for our own unique strengths and assets.

### **How to use it**

1. **Distract** – The first step is simple but powerful: distract, distract, distract. The distracting activity you choose must be engaging enough so that you don't have the opportunity to lapse back into ruminations. Good bets are activities that make you feel happy, curious, peaceful, amused, or proud. When you catch yourself thinking those ruminating thoughts, read or watch something that's funny or suspenseful, listen to a song that's transporting, meet a friend for tea, do a physical activity that gets your heart rate up. This will activate Fredrickson's theory of positive emotions: that they allow us to see things more panoramically and to build resources and skills that will be useful in the future.
2. **Write** – Writing out your ruminations can help you organize them, make sense of them, and observe patterns that you haven't perceived before. Writing can also help you unburden yourself of your negative thoughts – to spill them on the page – allowing you to move past them.
3. **Create your own**