



# *Be Happy*

*How to  
Take Control of  
Your Happiness  
as You Get Older*

**KENDAL<sup>®</sup>** *at Home*  
Together, transforming the experience of aging.<sup>®</sup>



If you were to take a stroll about town,  
stopping the people you see along the way to  
ask them what it is they want from life, most  
would give you this answer:  
***to be happy.***

*From the time we're children, we're  
told simply being happy is one of  
life's ultimate achievements.*

We're encouraged to share our happiness with others by clapping our hands, stomping our feet, and shouting "Hooray!" And we're taught "the pursuit of Happiness" is a right we possess by birth and by nature.

However, happiness is often more elusive than lullabies and textbooks let on. As time passes and life's stresses accumulate, happiness can (and often does) dissipate. The question is, can we get it back? We explore this question in the following pages.



# Is Happiness a Choice?

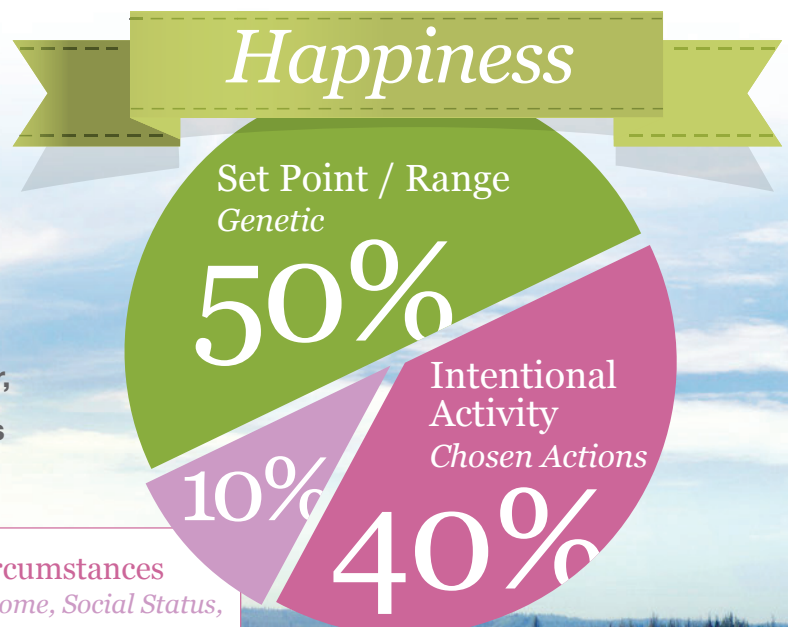
Happiness, according to biochemist turned Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard<sup>1</sup>, is a deep sense of flourishing and an optimal state of being. Happiness relates to how we feel, but it is more than just a passing emotion or mood; it is about being able to make the most of the good times and to cope effectively with the inevitable bad times in order to experience the best possible life overall.

According to a 2013 Harris Poll<sup>2</sup>, **only one in three Americans say they're very happy**. It's easy to link factors like economic conditions and stress to declining happiness levels, but is there more to the equation? Psychologists say there is.

In the documentary "Happy," narrator Marci Shimoff explains the breakdown.<sup>3</sup> "By studying identical twins, people with almost exactly the same genetic makeup," she says, "researchers have discovered that approximately 50 percent of the differences in our happiness levels is determined by our genes." This is called our genetic set point or set range. No matter if we're experiencing good or bad times, we always return to roughly our set point.

Our circumstances like income, social status, and age—the things many of us feel we must focus on to achieve happiness—account for 10 percent of the differences in our happiness.

**The remaining 40 percent of the happiness equation is reserved for intentional behavior, or things a person can do on a regular basis to become happier.**



**Because of this breakdown, psychologists theorize consciously varying your behavior, attitude, and outlook can greatly affect your happiness.**



# What Makes a Person Happy?

Imagine again you're chatting with people in town. If you were to ask them what it is they need to be happy, many would say things like money and material possessions. Our culture celebrates the pursuit of more, yet research suggests people who have more money or more possessions are not made happier by these things.

According to Tim Kasser, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology at Knox College<sup>4</sup>, while Americans' income has grown over the past 50 years—making us nearly twice as wealthy as we were in the 1950s—happiness has remained stagnant. In studies<sup>5</sup>, lottery winners do not report themselves as being much happier than other people, and as nations become wealthier, the well being of their citizens does not increase.

Having income to meet basic needs and live above the poverty level is highly important to happiness. Beyond this, however, more wealth does not translate to greater happiness. “The difference in happiness between a person who earns \$5,000 and \$50,000 is dramatic,” says Daniel Gilbert, Ph.D., author of *Stumbling on Happiness*<sup>6</sup>.

“*The difference in happiness between a person who earns \$50,000 and \$50 million is not dramatic.*

- Daniel Gilbert, Ph.D.



## *And it extends beyond money.*

In fact, research has shown other extrinsic (or outward) goals like image and status are associated with lower levels of well being and happiness when they are highly valued.

### *Intrinsic (or inward) goals*

—those that are inherently satisfying in and of themselves — have a positive effect on happiness.

*People who are intrinsically oriented have a strong desire for personal growth and desire to help.* They also emphasize

building and maintaining close personal relationships. Intrinsically oriented people regularly report feeling more satisfaction, vitality, and energy and less anxiety and depression than extrinsically oriented people.



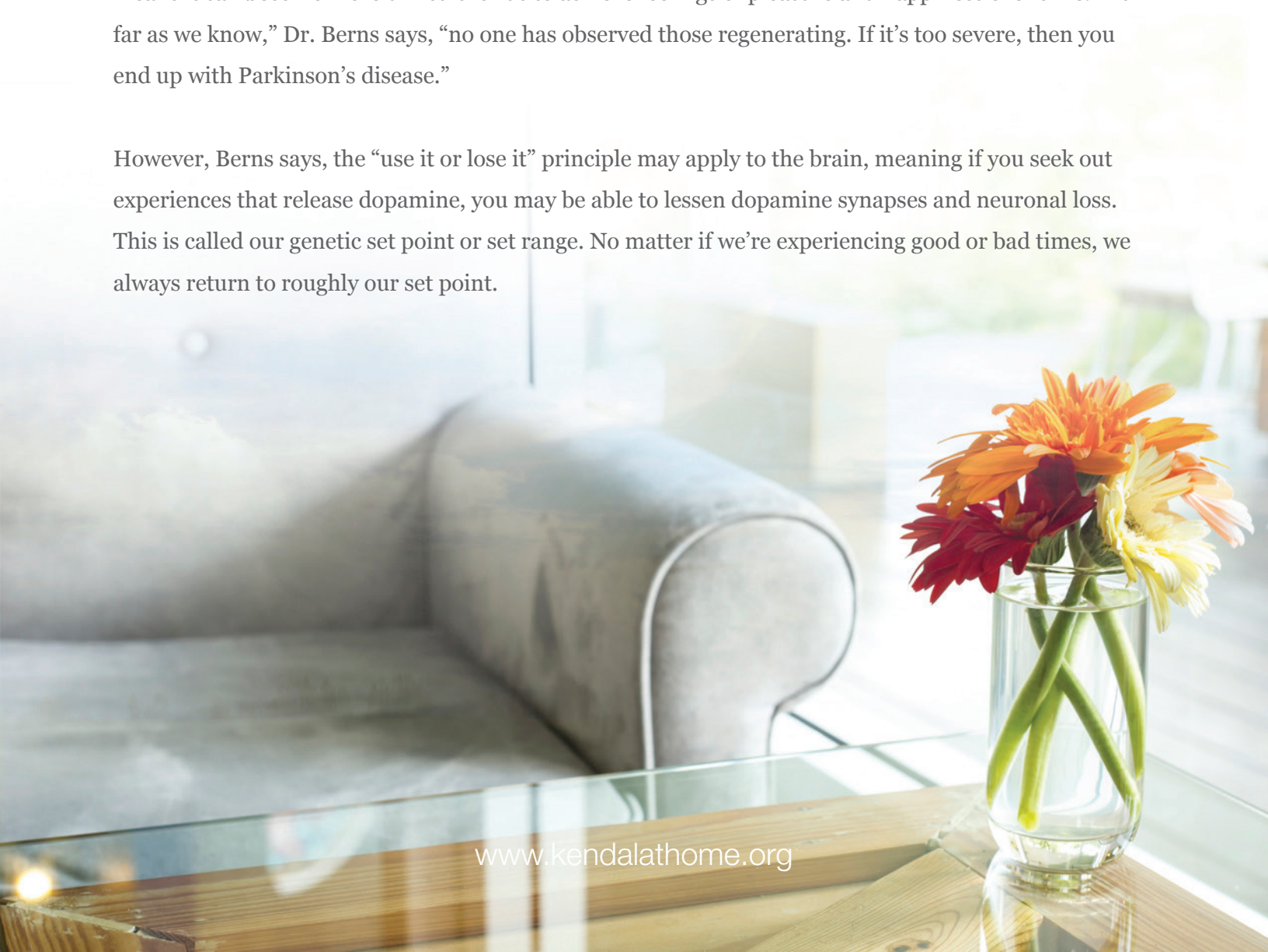


# Why Older Adults Should Make Happiness a Priority

Any discussion on happiness must include mention of dopamine. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter, a chemical that passes information from one neuron to the next, released when dopamine neurons become activated<sup>7</sup>. Dopamine neurons become activated when something good happens unexpectedly, leading to feelings of pleasure and happiness.

According to Gregory Berns, M.D., Ph.D., Professor of Psychiatry at Emory University, as we age, we slowly lose dopamine synapses (junctions between two nerve cells) and dopamine neurons<sup>8</sup>. This means it can become more difficult for us to achieve feelings of pleasure and happiness over time. “As far as we know,” Dr. Berns says, “no one has observed those regenerating. If it’s too severe, then you end up with Parkinson’s disease.”

However, Berns says, the “use it or lose it” principle may apply to the brain, meaning if you seek out experiences that release dopamine, you may be able to lessen dopamine synapses and neuronal loss. This is called our genetic set point or set range. No matter if we’re experiencing good or bad times, we always return to roughly our set point.



## *The elevated risk for depression is another reason older adults should make happiness a priority.*

According to the National Alliance on mental Illness, depression affects approximately 6.5 million Americans age 65 and older (just less than 20 percent)<sup>9</sup>. Depression increases risk for medical illnesses (especially cardiac diseases), death from illness, suicide, and cognitive decline and reduces an older adult's ability to rehabilitate. Depression in older adults often goes untreated because many people think depression is a natural reaction to chronic illness, loss, and life transitions.

It may seem contradictory, but negativity (or more accurately, how quickly a person can recover from negative experiences) is a key contributor to happiness. Responding to adversity—ranging from stubbing your toe to losing a loved one—is normal. According to Richard J. Davidson, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology & Psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, happy people show an appropriate response to adversity, and then come back down to baseline quickly<sup>10</sup>. Unhappier people, on the other hand, tend to dwell on negative experiences, which can lead to prolonged periods of sadness and, possibly, depression.

## *But perhaps the most important reason older adults should make happiness a priority is that people who are happier are more likely to make a positive contribution to society.*

According to The Guardian, they are more likely to vote, do voluntary work, and participate in public activities.<sup>11</sup> They also have a greater respect for law and order and offer more help to others.





# How to Take Control of Your Happiness

Because roughly 40 percent of person's happiness is determined by intentional behavior, there is a great deal a person can do to be happier.

*40% of person's happiness  
is determined by intentional  
behavior*

To begin, you must alter your attitude and cultivate positive emotions like gratitude, hope, inspiration, and love. Psychologist Barbara Fredrickson's research demonstrates how experiencing positive emotions on a regular basis can "undo" some of the physical effects of stress, build skills we can draw on in stressful times, and find meaning in ordinary and difficult events.<sup>12</sup>

Additional research from the Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH) shows a positive attitude may reduce your risk of cardiovascular events, such as heart attack and stroke.<sup>13</sup> And according to Jennifer Brush, M.A., CCC-SLP, director of healthcare research and education at the Brush Development Company, a positive attitude may lessen your chances of developing cognitive difficulty.





*With a new positive attitude, take control of your happiness by trying any (or all!) of the following:*

**Engage in Physical Activity:**

Physical activity, especially when done in novel ways or with others, releases dopamine in a safe, healthy way.

**Spend More Time in the Company of Positive People:**

Research shows simply surrounding yourself with happy, positive people can have a positive effect on your own happiness. (Happiness is, indeed, contagious.)

**Switch Up Your Routine:** Altering your routine to break out of the familiarity of everyday life can lead to unexpected moments of joy and positivity.

**Practice Mindful Meditation:**

Meditation and conscious breath control—two practices anyone can do anywhere—calm the body and mind and are thought to be happiness boosters.

**Linger on Small, Positive Moments:**

Taking a few minutes or even a few seconds to recognize and appreciate positive everyday experiences can help us overcome “negativity bias,” a phenomenon that causes us to form stronger bad memories than good ones.<sup>14</sup>

**Find Something Bigger Than Yourself to Care About:**

Giving time and energy to something we believe in, whether that’s structured religion or a charitable cause, helps us find a deeper level of contentment.

**Follow an Anti-Inflammatory Diet:**

Inflammation has destructive potential on the mind as well as the body. According to Andrew Weil, M.D., author of *Spontaneous Happiness*, excessive or inappropriate inflammation may underlie depression.<sup>15</sup>

**Do More of What You Love:** If you have the time and the ability, try not to limit yourself from doing more of healthy activities that make you feel good.

**Interact with Animals:** Interacting with animals is a proven alternative medicine treatment to help beat stress and battle depression.

**Count Your Blessings:** At least once per week, write down five things you are grateful for in your life. In doing this, you’ll slowly begin to appreciate everything you have rather than what you are lacking.



## To an extent, *happiness is a choice.*

By better understanding the things that really have an effect on happiness, and then making conscious mental, physical, and emotional changes, you can take control of your happiness for a healthier and more fulfilling life. After all, as Benjamin Franklin said, “The Constitution only guarantees the American people the right to pursue happiness. You have to catch it yourself.”

This information is presented by Kendal at Home, a unique program that combines the security of a continuing care retirement community with the freedom and independence of living in your home.



For information about Kendal at Home,  
visit us online at [www.kendalathome.org](http://www.kendalathome.org).

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/nov/03/why-does-happiness-matter>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/01/happiness-index-only-1-in\\_n\\_3354524.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/01/happiness-index-only-1-in_n_3354524.html)

<sup>3</sup> Happy. Dir. Roko Belic. Perf. Marci Shimoff. Wadi Rum Productions, Iris Films, Emotional Content and Shady Acres. 2011. Documentary.

<sup>4</sup> Kasser, Tim, Ph.D. Happy. Dir. Roko Belic. Wadi Rum Productions, Iris Films, Emotional Content and Shady Acres. 2011. Documentary.

<sup>5</sup> <http://faculty.som.yale.edu/ShaneFrederick/HedonicTreadmill.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Gilbert, Daniel, Ph.D. Happy. Dir. Roko Belic. Wadi Rum Productions, Iris Films, Emotional Content and Shady Acres. 2011. Documentary.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/mouse-man/200904/what-is-dopamine>

<sup>8</sup> Burns, Gregory, M.D., Ph.D. Happy. Dir. Roko Belic. Wadi Rum Productions, Iris Films, Emotional Content and Shady Acres. 2011. Documentary.

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=By\\_Illness&template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=7515](http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=By_Illness&template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=7515)

<sup>10</sup> Davidson, Richard J., Ph.D. Happy. Dir. Roko Belic. Wadi Rum Productions, Iris Films, Emotional Content and Shady Acres. 2011. Documentary.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/nov/03/why-does-happiness-matter>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.pbs.org/thisemotionallife/topic/happiness/what-happiness>

<sup>13</sup> <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2012/04/protecting-the-heart-with-optimism/>

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/09/scientific-proof-that-you\\_n\\_4384433.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/09/scientific-proof-that-you_n_4384433.html)

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/andrew-weil-md/tips-for-a-happier-life\\_b\\_1071805.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/andrew-weil-md/tips-for-a-happier-life_b_1071805.html)