“A cheerful heart is a good medicine.” This quote, from the Book of Proverbs (17:22), just might say it all. Happiness is good for us. It brings us physical, mental, and emotional health.

Most of us would probably agree. We know there’s something about being happy that’s worthwhile.

But what does it mean to be happy? That question might not be so easy to answer. In fact, happiness is hard to define.

But one thing for sure, we know it when we “feel” it.

Something inside us tells us when we’re feeling happy. We can sense it. Think about this for a minute. How often do you feel happy? What percentage of the time? Studies tell us that the average American feels happy about 54% of the time, feels neutral about 25% of the time, and unhappy about 21% of the time.

Is there a magical amount of happiness that will bring us the benefits of good health? Well, that’s another question and we’re just starting to get some answers. In the past few years, psychologists have begun to study positive emotions such as happiness. By comparison, for the past hundred years, they have studied the negative stuff, the various problems we have with our minds and emotions.

Dr. Martin Seligman, in his book *Authentic Happiness*, summarizes research indicating that people who are happy:

- Do better in social relationships
- Use their intelligence more efficiently
- Are more optimistic
- Have better physical health
- Are more creative

Let’s take a closer look at these.
Social Relationships

Happiness promotes social relations and inspires people to have more social contact. This seems pretty obvious. Most studies that have been done focus on sadness, which shows the opposite, that people tend to “wall off” from others. But when you study positive people, they rate high on having good relationships with themselves and with others. They enjoy better romantic relationships as well.

Also, happy people in general have more empathy. They care more about others.

Intelligence

Happy people are not any smarter, on the average, than those who are sad, but happy people have the ability to use their intelligence more effectively. Some studies suggest that people who are feeling happy can learn better in many situations, and are faster and more accurate in coming up with appropriate answers to complex problems.

Optimism

First of all, it’s interesting that happy people experience about the same amounts of negative and positive life events as sad people. But studies show that happy people dwelled on the positive more often.

People who are positive remember the good events in their lives more readily, while they tend to remember fewer of the unhappy times. As you might expect, people who are unhappy see life more negatively. They see more problems in the world around them. Yet, interestingly, they are usually more accurate in their memory. This is one circumstance where being more accurate and realistic is not necessarily better.

Similarly, when confronted with a problem, happy people believe they will soon regain control of their lives while unhappy people are more skeptical. This is another sign of the optimism associated with happiness.

Physical Health

Studies show that happy people have better health habits. They have lower blood pressure and their immune systems are more resistant.

In a broad-based study of adults aged 65 and older, it was shown that positive emotion was a strong predictor of how long people lived. Happy people in the study were half as likely to die and half as likely to become disabled as compared to people who were generally sad.

There’s another fascinating and perhaps unusual scientific finding. Those who live happy lives have a greater tolerance for physical pain than those who are sad.
Creativity

Happiness correlates with a greater capacity for creative thinking. If we’re generally happy, we tend to be more creative and also have a better knack for strategic planning.

On the other hand, when critical thinking is required, we do better when we remain bland emotionally, more serious and less happy. Being sad or even uptight doesn’t interfere with doing taxes, developing a budget, or making a decision about which car to buy.

So happiness has its benefits. It’s not everything in life but if there were a way to boost our happiness, it would be worth considering, right?

In my next column, I’ll discuss more of Dr. Seligman's book, focusing on how we can boost the level of happiness in our lives. If you want to get a head start on this topic, check out the book. It's fascinating!

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