

Six tips to leading a happier life

Following our final Invested in the Future event, about the **Future of Happiness** <<https://www.sanlam.co.uk/knowledge-hub/insights/video/future-of-happiness-event>>, we caught up with Miriam Akhtar to understand more about the science behind well-being and the ways in which we can apply these principles to our own lives in order to experience a more meaningful, satisfying existence.

Who wouldn't, if offered the opportunity by a genie, ask for lasting happiness as one of their top three wishes? The measure of that emotion, however, is harder to quantify. At our recent event, Miriam Akhtar, **positive psychologist and author** <<http://www.positivepsychologytraining.co.uk/>> of *The Little Book of Happiness*, explained to us the two main branches of happiness: hedonic well-being and eudaimonic well-being. The first refers to those fleeting moments of joy, that, while wonderful and valuable, aren't necessarily lasting. Eudaimonic well-being, on the other hand, is about realising our potential: playing to our strengths, doing something that gives us a sense of meaning.

It is this latter branch that plays the most critical role in paving the way to sustainable, authentic happiness. Miriam shared with us her top tips for pursuing eudaimonic happiness in an effort to lead a happier, more fulfilling life.

1. Self-medication is a good thing

Miriam's own journey to the study of positive psychology is an interesting and pertinent example of doing something for yourself to find happiness. During a 20-year career in the broadcast media, she found herself producing a programme on the science of happiness. The concept stuck with her. "By that stage, in my early 40s, I'd had a number of episodes of depression", she shares. "When I learned that there was a master's programme in the science of happiness starting up, I decided to join it. I think I was secretly trying to self-medicate my way out of these periods of lowness".

It's easy to focus too much on the 'medical' aspect of the term, but self-medicating doesn't have to refer to pharmaceuticals or substances. Miriam reminds us that there are many options for healing oneself: while she found her wellbeing through using these scientifically-grounded strategies, someone else could 'medicate' via physical exercise, or practising mindfulness. "These are evidence-based practices that raise your level of well-being, and effectively act as natural antidepressants".

2. Discover a sense of purpose

Pursuing a new career led Miriam to a new sense of purpose: becoming an expert in the field and author. Often, purpose comes naturally to us in life: for example, she says, "We generally *find* purpose in positive events, such as becoming a parent. We connect the event to a set of pre-existing beliefs so there is a feeling of things turning out exactly the way they were meant to be". But there is another side to this coin: in fact, it has been scientifically proven that people can actually benefit from adversity, a phenomenon known as 'post-traumatic growth'. It is in those less-than-ideal situations that we have an opportunity to *construct* meaning, as a way of making sense of what's happened. "If we're able to find a positive in the negative, then our level of well-being can grow", Miriam explains.

3. Give your brain a sense of certainty

We all know that money doesn't buy happiness, but, Miriam specifies, "it does give you choices. It can facilitate options in life". Studies have shown that the 'happiest' nations on Earth tend to be among the wealthiest (places like Scandinavia, for example). Interestingly, though, this sense of satisfaction seems to come not from the amount of money in someone's bank account, but more from a feeling of financial security. Research we conducted here at Sanlam recently revealed that people who have developed a financial plan tend to be happier, as they

feel more in control of their future well-being. As Miriam says: “The brain likes certainty”.

4. Don't chase happiness

Here we go back to the concept of hedonic versus eudemonic happiness. “Eudemonic well-being is like a staircase. It keeps going up. Whereas hedonic well-being is like a treadmill: you go around and around, and eventually it stops delivering for you”. While there are certainly psychological benefits to hedonic experiences, those frequent experiences of positive emotion –it is having a sense of purpose alongside the fun times that bring true happiness. “Short-term pleasures, like savouring a gourmet meal, can give you that momentary high”, says Miriam. “But the actual pursuit of happiness can be self-defeating. Rather, invest in a sense of purpose and enjoy the positive feelings that emerge from it”.

5. Consider an ‘encore career’

A trend emerging in the USA is that of ‘encore careers’, a phenomenon of people embarking on second careers that give them a sense of meaning and purpose in the second half of their lives. The desire to do something that makes a difference, often aligns with retirement. This is when people have time to ask themselves, *What do I want to leave the world when I'm gone?* “You might want to explore something that you found intrinsically interesting and felt motivated to pursue in earlier life. A good way to start is by volunteering to see if it gives you that deeper sense of meaning”, suggests Miriam. “There is a strength that emerges in mid-life. It's called ‘generativity’; this is about wanting to guide younger generations and have a positive legacy. And the benefits of applying this strength can be long-lasting, literally: psychologists have found evidence that people with a strong sense of meaning live longer.”

6. Always remember that ‘other people matter’

This final point, stresses Miriam, is the most important. People are essential to our well-being. “There have been studies of the happiest people on the planet. And what they have in common is that they have good, close relationships and active social lives. Our well-being, our happiness, is very much about people”. This is true even of the most introverted among us. We all have a need for a sense of connection and belonging.

This point is particularly poignant in the wake of lockdowns and isolation as a result of the pandemic. “I think people have had time to think about what they really want from their lives” Miriam theorises. “The future is going to be much more about living a life of meaning and purpose”.

People have become used to spending more time with their families. There is going to be a shift toward really having that sense of living what matters to us”.