# 5 simple, science-backed activities that boost happiness

## ASU positive psychology researchers share tips to help you thrive

By Monique Clement, ASU News
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Want to feel happier? That “treat yourself” self-care strategy may not help as much as you think. Happiness may be more about connecting with other people.

“What a lot of research is now showing is that when we orient ourselves outwards to other people, that leads to greater increases in happiness,” says Katherine Nelson-Coffey, an associate professor of psychology in the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences, part of the New College of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences at Arizona State University.

She says social connection is one of the strongest predictors of happiness and well-being — in the moment and over time. Activities that bring people together strengthen relationships and decrease loneliness, which boosts well-being.

### Students: Add some happiness to your class schedule

Looking to thrive while meeting your General Studies Gold requirements in spring 2027? Sign up for PSY 213: ABCs of Happiness. Psychology students can also take PSY 335: Positive Psychology and PSY 336: Flourishing Across Contexts.

These findings come from a newer field called positive psychology. Traditional psychology often focuses on overcoming problems such as mental illness. But researchers like Nelson-Coffey and her husband, John Coffey, also an associate professor of psychology at ASU, explore the other side of mental health.

ASU also offers bachelor's and master's degrees in positive psychology — including online delivery options — as well as a graduate certificate.

"There's a lot more to helping people than just getting them back to a baseline, and that baseline does not constitute thriving," Coffey says.

Nelson-Coffey adds, "This is where positive psychology can come in and offer insights for how we get people from that kind of zero point (the absence of mental illness) to the thriving, flourishing good life."

Coffey and Nelson-Coffey study people who are naturally very happy and what they do. Then they assign groups of people to try those activities and measure their emotions and well-being.

For this year's World Mental Health Day on Oct. 10, try out five simple activities backed by positive psychology research to build more happiness into your life.

## 1. Perform at least three small acts of kindness in one day

Nelson-Coffey conducted a study that randomly assigned people to do acts of kindness for others, the world or themselves, or do a neutral control activity. She found that people who performed acts of kindness for others or the world had a greater increase in positive emotions than those who did acts for themselves or the neutral activity.

Ideally, it's best to do several acts in one day.

"Studies suggest that doing three to five acts of kindness all in one day is more effective than spreading them out across the week," Nelson-Coffey says, although researchers don't know why yet.

Choose a few simple ways to show kindness to others when the opportunity arises:

- Hold the door open for someone.
- Give another driver space to merge in front of you.
- Offer someone a sincere compliment.
- Check in on a friend or family member with a text message.
- Strike up a conversation with a stranger.
- Recognize someone for doing a good job.

“Having pleasant interactions, even with strangers, has a lot of value that we may be losing in a digitized society,” Coffey says. “Those micro interactions may add up more than we expect them to.”

## 2. Write a gratitude letter

Chances are, someone has shown you kindness, too. Think of someone who has made a positive impact on you. Write them a short letter or a brief message in a thank-you card.

“Writing to them about the small ways they make you feel cherished, protected and accepted can be really beneficial,” Nelson-Coffey says.

She says you do not have to deliver the message to see a benefit — but it would be an act of kindness and relationship booster if you do.

If you prefer talking to writing, research shows gratitude conversations can also have similar benefits.

## 3. Savor your past experiences

Reflect on a previous positive experience and try to relive it in your mind. Nelson-Coffey says the practice works even better if you can savor a past social interaction.

“This is called relational savoring, and that’s more beneficial than just savoring individual experiences,” she says.

Coffey says adding people who matter to us to the practice gives us a double benefit of savoring and connection.

Think of a recent experience you enjoyed with someone. Spend a few minutes remembering where you were, what you did and how you felt.

## 4. Think positively about the future

A simple journaling activity can promote optimism, hope and positive expectations. Visualize the future life you want. Write about what it looks like, what you’re doing, how you spend your time and more.

Nelson-Coffey says this activity has a greater impact on happiness if you imagine a future with another person instead of focusing only on personal goals.

In one study, she and former graduate student Kayla Stevenson tasked people with envisioning a future focused on the relationship with their partner or personal achievements.

“We found that, again, the relational condition outperformed the personal condition,” Nelson-Coffey says. “We see across the board the value of focusing on close relationships or any relationships.”

You can picture your future relationship with a family member, friend or your community — not just a romantic partner. Help yourself see this future by creating a visual collage or playlist of songs that reflect your goals.

## 5. Act extroverted, even if you're an introvert

These tips may sound like they're for extroverts, or people who are energized by social interactions. But Nelson-Coffey says that's a misconception. Introverts who thrive on alone time can benefit too.

"Acting extroverted actually boosts positive emotions — and it does so equally for people who actually are extroverted and for people who are introverted," she says.

She points to findings by Nicholas Epley, a behavioral science professor at the University of Chicago, in his book, "A Little More Social." Epley conducted field experiments where he asked people on the subway how much they would enjoy talking to a stranger during the ride. Most people thought it would be terrible. He asked them to do it anyway.

"Across numerous experiments like this in different settings, people always report the actual experience is more enjoyable than their expectation," says Nelson-Coffey, who sees herself somewhere between introverted and extroverted. "That's a helpful reminder that I try to keep for myself … that helps me get over myself a little bit."

But if your social battery is feeling low, you can also try individual activities that build happiness and well-being:

- Practice mindfulness and meditation exercises.
- Keep a gratitude journal.
- Be as kind to yourself as you are to others, even when you make a mistake.
- Engage deeply with your hobbies or read a book to get into a flow state.
- Spend time in nature.
- Take a walk or short exercise break.

## Fit these activities into your existing routines

Nelson-Coffey says Lahnna Catalino, a psychology professor at Scripps College, has a strategy for prioritizing positive experiences like these during your existing routines.

For example, plan to take a few extra minutes when you arrive at work or class to say hello to people.

If you tend to doomscroll on your phone before bed, use some of that time to savor past experiences instead.

The Nelson-Coffey family builds some of these activities, like reflecting on positive experiences, into their kids' bedtime routine.

If you don't think you have time for 10 to 20 minutes of happiness-building activities, Coffey says to take a closer look at your schedule.

"People are averaging three to six hours a day on their phone," he says. "If you give up 20 minutes of that time, what could you do with that?"

## Build happiness over time

Start practicing these happiness-building social activities and you'll likely notice the balance of your emotions shift in a positive direction.

It's important to remember the human experience involves feeling a whole range of emotions. Even the happiest people feel sadness and other "negative" emotions alongside positive ones.

Sometimes unhappiness comes from bigger factors — like health and safety issues as well as societal stresses — that can't be totally erased by small acts of gratitude or kindness. Nelson-Coffey says happiness is influenced by positive experiences as well as personality traits and the communities and institutions that shape people's lives.

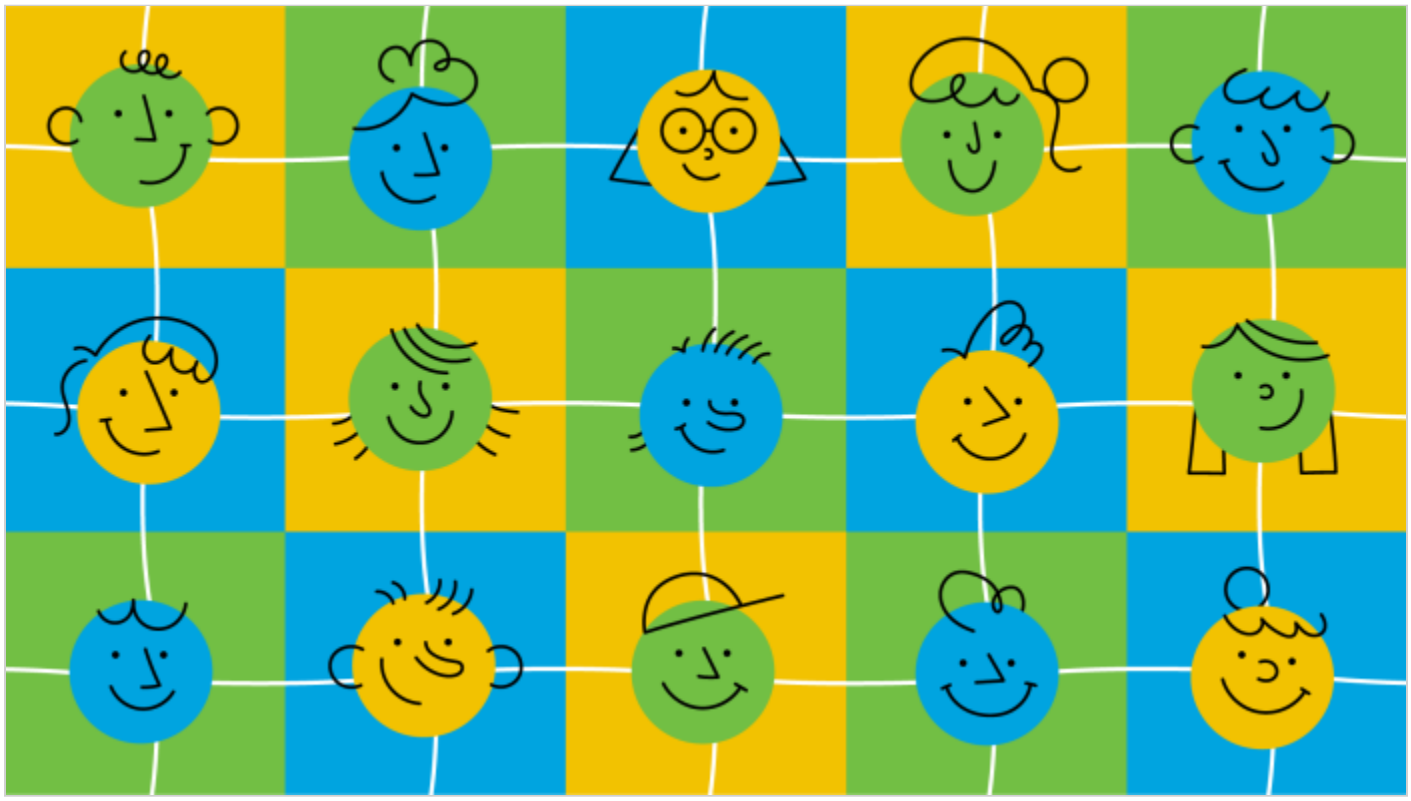
The researchers also recommend not aiming for every day to be a perfect 10 out of 10. Overall, they say happiness and well-being come from having more frequent positive emotions than negative emotions. Those positive emotions could simply be feeling calm or relaxed rather than feeling joyful or excited.

Coffey says building happiness is a journey and grows over time. Doing an act of kindness or gratitude activity and expecting immediate happiness may only lead to disappointment. Instead, use them as part of an ongoing strategy to build well-being. You may also find your thinking and behavior shift, such as having a greater appreciation for the little things in life.

"I think of these activities as ways of feeling a little happier every day," Nelson-Coffey says, "and over time, that can grow into something meaningful."

*This story originally appeared on ASU News.*

# Main image



Social connection is one of the strongest predictors of happiness and well-being. ASU positive psychology research shows that simple social habits, such as kindness, gratitude and savoring shared experiences, can help people build happiness over time. Graphic by Andy Keena/ASU