The 12 Steps to Happiness

*This self help tip sheet was adapted from George W Burns and Helen Street (Ph.D), “Standing without Shoes”, Pearson Education Australia Pty Ltd 2003

This “12 Step” program is intended to provide you with suggestions and inspiration about what you might be able to do to increase the levels of happiness in your life. Make each step personal and unique to you – they are not a “recipe” that must be followed by everyone in the same way. You don’t need to do all the steps at once – you might already be practicing some of the steps in your life right now and might only need to work on those you don’t practice.

Step One: Be Active

- That is – doing something rather than nothing.
- The something can be something very gentle or simple (meditation, going to an art gallery, signing up for a class in photography) or something very intense and vigorous (an aerobics class, bushwalking, skydiving!)
- Exercise is always a great option (research has shown that it can keep us emotionally healthy as well as physically healthy).

Step Two: Be Outgoing

- Remember that humans are social beings – interacting with others contributes to a good quality of life.
- Ask yourself – am I happy with the social interactions I am experiencing in my life? If yes – great! If not, how can I increase or improve my social interactions?
- Ideas might include inviting friends over for a get together, making an effort to make conversation with the person who sits next to you in class or the café you always go to, organise an outing with work colleagues or just try to make eye contact and smile at fellow passengers on the train, people in the lift etc. and see what happens!

Step Three: Be Flexible

- Being flexible allows us to adapt better to the challenges that life throws at us. Realising that there are other ways to deal with the situations that arise or even just being willing to try a new way increases our chances of coping and therefore of being happier.
- Practice being flexible in what you do. Practice this flexibility even with the small things - being willing to try a meal you’ve never tried before or a new brand of toothpaste, a new route to a friend’s house or tackling a task at work differently.
- Practice being flexible in how you think. Tune into your thoughts and ask yourself “is there another way of thinking about this?”.
Step Four: Be Passionate

- Find an activity that ignites enthusiasm and passion – something that you can find yourself looking forward to, that can add colour and a bright spot to the landscape of your life.
- Ask yourself “is there something I’ve always wanted to do, but put off or not made time for?” Think about changing that!
- If you are not sure about what might ignite that passion or enthusiasm, make it a mission to notice which ideas, events, places or stories grab your attention and interest, that you find yourself thinking or dreaming about. There might be some clues there to help you find something you can be passionate about!
- Some examples might be a new recreational activity, changing jobs or careers, travelling, reading, joining a choir – the sky is the limit!

Step Five: Be Compassionate

- Being kind, compassionate or caring towards someone not only helps that someone but can also help you, the giver, to feel good. Being caring and compassionate also contributes to the “good vibes” out in the world.
- Practice “Random Acts of Kindness” – let someone go first in the queue at the supermarket, offer someone your seat on a train or let a car with its blinker on into your lane, make a cake and take it to your neighbour – it could be anything.
- Observe how it affects them, how it makes you feel and whether it enhances your relationships with the people in your life who you are kind and compassionate towards.

Step Six: Be Focussed

- That is, practice being “in the moment”, being mindful or involved in what you are doing in the here and now.
- Try to reduce rumination, try to let go of worries because worrying about something doesn’t really change the outcome anyway! Try to notice when you are worrying overly about the small things and challenge yourself to think differently about them.
- Redirect your focus and energy back to the moment – the more you practice, the easier it gets. Tune into what is happening, what do you see, hear, taste, smell, sense, feel in the moment to bring you back there if you find yourself drifting off into “worry land”!

Step Seven: Be Positive

- You will probably not be surprised to learn that pessimism is linked closely to depression and optimism to happiness.
- Learning to lean towards optimism is an important step in the ongoing quest for happiness.
- This doesn’t necessarily mean becoming “Pollyanna” or refusing to acknowledge that bad things do happen, but rather try to address the balance – do you always look for an notice the negatives? Do you ever try looking for the positives? Think about this phrase – You see what you look for. Change your “tuning” so that you actively search for examples of when things are good or go right as well as noticing when they don’t.
Step Eight: Be Aware of Possibilities

- Wherever possible, expand your range of choices – create new ones, explore the options that are already "out there" for you. The more choices you have, the more likely you are to feel in control of what is happening in your life.
- Learn to recognise what you can and can’t control and focus your energies on the things you can control, the choices you can make.
- Focus on your self talk – if you notice yourself saying “I have to..” or “I have no choice”, take a moment to think about whether there are other options. Ask yourself what you can do rather than what you can’t do.

Step Nine: Be a Problem Solver

- Happy people in general tend to be good problem solvers, possibly because they also feel that they have choices and therefore some control over what is happening in their lives.
- To be a good problem solver, start by asking yourself: “What do I want to do about this?”
- Then ask: “How can I put this into action?”
- And finally: “When can I put this into action?”
- Remember that having a plan is great but the most important part is putting it into action!

Step Ten: Be a Sensory Seeker

- Increased stimulation and novelty in life leads to greater enjoyment. We receive this stimulation through our five senses.
- Ask yourself – is life stimulating or boring for you? What could you do to increase the level of excitement?
- Try something in each sensory area: look for the colours in the day, the pleasurable sounds in your life, the fragrances in your garden, the tastes you love, the textures you enjoy touching. Noticing the small things can increase the sense of stimulation in your life as well as the enjoyment!

Step Eleven: Be Connected

- Feeling connected to a community is one of the most important aspects of well being. Those who feel part of a community report less depression and greater levels of happiness.
- Similarly, those who have a sense of spirituality – the notion that there is something bigger than themselves that they are a part of (doesn’t necessarily mean being part of a religion) are less depressed and happier.
- Ask yourself which connections (with people, animals, nature and/or spirituality) enhance your well being. Seek out more of those that are beneficial and deepen the connection – make the time to connect.

Step Twelve: Behave in a Happy Manner

- A large part of happiness is about being able to walk the walk. Even if you don’t feel happy within, try acting like a happy person does. You might be surprised to learn that reality then does catch up with the “fantasy”!
• Choose a happy person that you see as a role model. What do they do? Observe their behaviour and see if you can emulate it.

• What tells you they are happy? Is it in the way they act, the way they think, the way they interact in their relationships with others, in their sense of playfulness, laughter, smiles? Can you try to copy some of these? Which ones fit and work for you? Keep on with those!

Putting the steps into action

• Now here comes the challenge – which of these steps will you put into action and how?
• Can you choose around 7 of them?
• Practice one each day in the next week. It might help to make a list and put it up somewhere prominent where you will see it and remember it each day.
• At the end of the day, review how much practicing that step has made a difference to your day. Assess again at the end of the week.
• When you are assessing the impact of practicing the steps, explore how they may have empowered you; which ones have been most helpful; the changes that they made; which ones are worth doing more of in the future?

Assistance in this area and many others can be obtained from the RMIT Student Counselling Service. The RMIT Counselling Service offers free and confidential counselling to all RMIT students. Counsellors may help you to explore your concerns, both personal and academic.

The RMIT Counselling Service can be contacted at 9925-4365 between 9am and 5pm.