

**DANIEL G. AMEN, MD**

*#1 NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**30**



**HAPPIER IN  
30 DAYS**

A QUICK START TO A  
HAPPIER, HEALTHIER YOU

**30% HAPPIER  
IN 30 DAYS**



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*30% Happier in 30 Days: A Quick Start to a Happier, Healthier You*

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# Contents

**Introduction:** The Seven Secrets to Happiness No One Is Talking About **1**

- Day 1** Your Brain on Happiness **11**
- Day 2** Know Your Brain Type **16**
- Day 3** 11 Essential Strategies to Optimize Your Brain **23**
- Day 4** Natural Ways to Feel Good **32**
- Day 5** Happy Foods vs. Sad Foods **36**
- Day 6** Controlling Your Negative Thoughts **44**
- Day 7** Focus on Behaviors You Like **48**
- Day 8** Micro-Moments of Happiness **52**
- Day 9** At the Core of Your Happiness **57**
- Day 10** Know Your Purpose in Six Questions **60**
- Day 11** Tame Your Inner Dragons **65**
- Day 12** A Little TLC Goes a Long Way **70**
- Day 13** Don't Let ANTs Ruin Your Picnic **74**
- Day 14** Laughter Is the Best Medicine **79**
- Day 15** Good Nights = Happier Days **84**

- Day 16** Where Your Mind Goes,  
Your Mood Follows **87**
- Day 17** Create Your Own Safe Haven **92**
- Day 18** Look for the Positive **95**
- Day 19** Practice Loving-Kindness **100**
- Day 20** The Power of Gratitude **103**
- Day 21** Live in the Moment **106**
- Day 22** Accentuate the Positive **111**
- Day 23** Eliminate the Negative **115**
- Day 24** Just Breathe **123**
- Day 25** It's All Relative **128**
- Day 26** Don't Worry, Be Hygge **146**
- Day 27** Get Happy the Nor Way! **152**
- Day 28** That's the Spirit! **156**
- Day 29** Love—Your Secret Weapon **161**
- Day 30** The Most Important Question to  
Ask Yourself **166**

About the Author **171**

Notes **177**

## INTRODUCTION

# THE SEVEN SECRETS TO HAPPINESS NO ONE IS TALKING ABOUT

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*“Thirty days ago I was so miserable, so hopeless, and so depressed! This has literally transformed my life and made my life not only bearable but JOYFUL.”*

30-DAY HAPPINESS CHALLENGE PARTICIPANT

CONTRARY TO WHAT MOST people believe, happiness is not reserved for the rich, famous, fortunate, or beautiful. As a psychiatrist, I’ve treated many of these people, and they are some of the unhappiest people I know. You don’t have to win the genetic lottery to be blessed with a happy disposition, and you aren’t doomed to always feel down when life doesn’t go your way.

For decades, social scientists have been searching for the roots of happiness. Based on their research, it is generally accepted that happiness is about 40 percent genetic, 10 percent



your situation in life or what happens to you, and 50 percent habits and mindset. This means you have a higher degree of control over happiness than most people think.

In 2021, in the wake of the pandemic, I launched an online 30-Day Happiness Challenge that attracted an astounding 32,000 participants. I asked them to take the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire, a well-respected assessment that provides a score on a scale of 1 to 6.<sup>1</sup> (You can take the quiz at [www.amenuniversity.com/oxford](http://www.amenuniversity.com/oxford).)

On each day of the challenge, I shared science-backed tips and strategies that ramp up happiness and positivity. I wanted to see how much the participants could improve over the course of the challenge, so people took the quiz twice, once at the beginning of the program and once at the end. The average happiness score for participants on day 1 was 3.58, which correlates to being “not particularly happy.” Among people who completed the course, the average score on day 30 had jumped to 4.36, a 22 percent improvement, which correlates with being “rather happy; pretty happy”! Even more

impressive, their self-reported happiness levels increased by 32 percent. And they did it in just about 10 to 15 minutes a day. This shows that not only can you develop happiness, but also that you can do it quickly.

Why should we focus on being happy? Extensive research has shown that happiness is associated with a lower heart rate, lower blood pressure, and overall heart health. Happier people get fewer infections, have lower cortisol levels (the hormone of stress), and have fewer aches and pains. Happy people tend to live longer, have better relationships, and be more successful in their careers. Plus happiness is contagious because happier people tend to make others happier.<sup>2</sup>

Researchers typically report happiness being associated with novelty, fun experiences, positive relationships, laughter, gratitude, anticipation, helping others, staying away from comparisons, meditation, nature, living in the moment (rather than the past with regret or the future with fear), productive work, a sense of purpose, spiritual beliefs, and wanting what you have as opposed to wanting more. Yet most happiness research

completely misses seven important aspects. I call them the seven secrets to happiness that no one is talking about.

**Secret 1: Know your brain type.** Taking a one-size-fits-all approach to people with any mental health issue based solely on their symptoms invites failure and frustration. In 1991, I started looking at the brain with SPECT (single photon emission computed tomography) imaging. SPECT looks at how the brain functions and basically tells us three things about brain activity: if it is healthy, underactive, or overactive.

- If the brain showed full, even, symmetrical activity overall, we called it **Balanced**.
- If the front part of the brain was sleepy or lower in activity compared to others, the person was more likely to be creative, impulsive, and **Spontaneous**.
- If the front part of the brain was much more active than average, the person tended to worry and be more **Persistent**.

- If the emotional or limbic brain was more active than average, the person tended to be more vulnerable to sadness and be more **Sensitive**.
- If the amygdala and basal ganglia were more active than average, the person tended to be more anxious and **Cautious**.

Understanding your type of brain is critical to understanding who you are, how you think, how you act, how you interact with other humans' brains, and what makes you happy.

**Secret 2: Optimize the physical functioning of your brain.** Your brain is the organ of happiness. With a healthy brain, you are happier (because you've made better decisions), healthier (also better decisions), wealthier (better decisions), and more successful in relationships, work, and everything else you do. The quality of your decisions (a brain function) is the common denominator of happiness and success in every area of life, so if you want to be happy, it is critical to assess and optimize the physical functioning of your brain.

**Secret 3: Nourish your unique brain.** New research suggests we can produce up to 700 new brain cells a day if we put them in a nourishing environment (meaning good nutrition, omega-3 fatty acids, oxygen, blood flow, and stimulation).<sup>3</sup> If we nourish our brain and body, the hippocampi can grow stronger. We have two hippocampi, one in our left temporal lobe and another in our right temporal lobe. They are critical for learning, memory, and mood (happiness). With a few basic nutrients and targeted supplements, you can improve the health of your brain and support the brain chemicals involved in your happiness.

**Secret 4: Choose foods you love that love you back.** It is becoming abundantly clear that if you want to feel good, you need to eat well. In a 2017 study, researchers found that when people with moderate to severe depression received nutritional counseling and ate a more healthful diet for 12 weeks, their symptoms improved significantly. In fact, depressive symptoms got so much better that over 32 percent of the participants no longer qualified as having a mood disorder.<sup>4</sup> Based on these results, the research team

suggested that dietary changes could be an effective treatment strategy for depression.

**Secret 5: Master your mind and gain psychological distance from the noise in your head.** Your mind can be a troublemaker. Thoughts and feelings come from many sources, such as the news, music, social media, personal experiences, memories, genetic tendencies, and much, much more. The good news is you are *not* your mind. That is why your ability to separate from, manage, and not be a victim of your mind is essential to feeling happy.

**Secret 6: Notice what you like about others more than what you don't.** I know you've heard the phrase "It takes two to make a relationship better." That's just not my experience as a psychiatrist. When I teach my patients how powerful they are—how they can influence their loved one's behavior—they realize they have the power to make their relationships better or worse, and so can you!

**Secret 7: Live each day based on your clearly defined values, purpose, and goals.** Over the

years, I've seen many patients who feel disconnected and insignificant. They lack a sense of meaning and purpose. They lack a relationship with God or something bigger than themselves. Having a deep sense of meaning and purpose gives you a reason to get up in the morning, and focusing on doing what you love to do is a sure-fire way to make you happier.

Now that you know the seven secrets of happiness, let's get serious about helping you become and stay happier. Let me begin by assuring you that none of what I have written about in this book is complicated or hard. That said, as you work through the program, you'll have good days and bad days, ups and downs. Don't let the down days discourage you. Learn from them so you can make better decisions in the future.

Nothing is more important to your health and happiness than the quality of the decisions you make, and consistently making high-quality decisions will give you a high-quality life. So post these seven secrets where you can see them every day. If your mood lags or unhappiness starts to

creep into your mind, ask yourself what you can do to make it better.

You can do this! Just go to [www.amenuniversity.com/oxford](http://www.amenuniversity.com/oxford), take the assessment, and get ready to become a happier, healthier you!



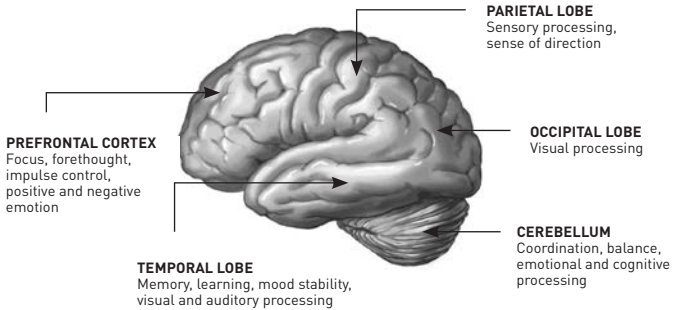


DAY 1

## YOUR BRAIN ON HAPPINESS

YOUR BRAIN IS THE ORGAN of happiness. Your brain is the organ of liking, wanting, and learning—all essential ingredients that go into happiness. Your brain is also the organ of sadness, anxiety, panic, anger, and storing past emotional trauma—the enemies of happiness. Deciding to assess and optimize the three pounds of tissue between your ears is the first foundational decision to a happier life. Yet most people never think about their brains, which is a huge mistake because success and happiness start in the physical functioning of the brain. But with a better brain comes a better, happier, and more successful life. That said, let's take a quick tour of your brain.

## YOUR BRAIN: A QUICK TOUR



Your brain houses a primitive section, responsible for the activities essential for survival. Neuroscientists call this the “reptilian brain,” and it includes the brain stem and cerebellum, which control breathing, heart rate, body temperature, balance, and coordination. The brain stem and cerebellum play a critical role in happiness, as they are also involved in processing speed and producing some of the chemicals, such as dopamine and serotonin, that are involved in mood, motivation, and learning.

The human brain also has a limbic, or emotional, brain that is situated around the brain stem and cerebellum. This brain region colors our emotions as positive or negative and

is involved with our basic needs for survival, including bonding, nesting, and emotions. The limbic brain records memories of what sustains or threatens our survival and is responsible for our urges and cravings (our wants and desires) and how pleasurable something is (our likes). The limbic brain exerts a strong, often unconscious, influence on our behavior.

Limbic brain structures include:

- **Hippocampus:** mood and the formation of new memories
- **Amygdala:** emotions, including fear, as well as signaling the presence of food, sexual partners, rivals, or children in distress
- **Hypothalamus:** helps control body temperature, appetite, sexual behavior, and emotions
- **Basal ganglia:** motivation, pleasure, smoothing motor movements
- **Anterior cingulate gyrus:** attention shifting and error detection

Finally, the brain has one other area known as the cerebral cortex. This part of the brain is

involved in creating and understanding language, abstract thought, imagination, and culture. It has endless learning possibilities and creates the story of why we are happy or sad, which may or may not have anything to do with the truth.

Information from the world enters your brain through your senses and goes to the limbic brain, where it is tagged as meaningful, safe, or dangerous; then it travels to the back part of the brain (temporal, parietal, and occipital lobes), where it is initially processed and compared with past experience; then it travels to the front part of the brain for you to evaluate and decide if you will act on it. Information in the brain travels up to 270 miles per hour, and the transmission of information from the outside world to your conscious awareness happens almost instantaneously.

Happiness relies on quieting the misery-producing areas of the brain. In particular, this means calming activity in the amygdala, an area that registers fear, and the insular cortex, a region located between the frontal and temporal lobes that is more active when people feel angst or unhappiness.

For example, news outlets repeatedly and purposely pour toxic thoughts into our brains, making

us see terror or disaster around every corner. Seeing repeated scary images activates our brains' primitive fear circuits (in the amygdala). Unless you purposefully monitor your news intake, these companies succeed in raising your stress hormones, which you now know shrink the major mood and memory centers in your brain.

Granted, we do need *some* anxiety to be happy. Appropriate anxiety helps us make better decisions. It prevents us from running into the street as children, risking broken bodies, and running headlong into toxic relationships as adults, risking broken hearts.

But if you want to lower your stress level, start monitoring the amount of time you spend watching the news. Just a few minutes of negative news in the morning can lower your happiness later in the day by 27 percent,<sup>5</sup> so instead of turning on the TV or scrolling through your smartphone for the latest news the second you wake up, try spending a few quiet moments meditating or in prayer. Tell yourself, *Today is going to be a great day*, then lace up your sneakers and go for a brisk walk to get your blood circulating. Trust me, your brain will thank you for it!