

Happy Brain Science

Fostering productivity, creativity & happiness through
the application of cutting-edge brain science.



WHAT IS THE REAL VALUE OF HAPPINESS IN THE WORKPLACE?

TRANSCRIPT

Prioritize People

Thrive From Nine to Five: The Science of Happiness at Work

If you had to boil all the science of happiness down to one word according to Daniel Gilbert, Harvard Professor, that word might be social. We are social creatures. We need each other to be happy. Relationships fuel happiness. Quality, warm relationships fuel happiness perhaps better than anything else you can do. Please, here's the cliché moment where the guy says, "If you only remember one thing I say today, remember this." Warm relationships fuel happiness, so I want you to invest in relationships.

There's good news here, which is you are wired to get along with other human beings. You are wired with what are called mirror neurons. The way mirror neurons work, is like this. If you see me get excited and jump, and throw my fists in the air, you have neurons fire in your brain that would fire if you got excited and jumped and threw your fists in the air. That is, if you got excited and jumped and threw your fists in the air, countless neurons would be firing to make that happen. When you see me do it, a few of those neurons in your brain fire. They are the physiological foundation for empathy, imitation, learning by watching others, and more. Mirror neurons give us what psychologists call "theory of mind." That is, the ability to look at somebody else and imagine what they might be thinking, feeling, intending. Mirror neurons make happiness, unhappiness, and a lot of other emotions and behaviors, contagious.

Image and research from Dr. James Fowler, UC San Diego. All these dots are people. They're mapped according to social relationship, so this is a social graph. Not an online social network graph, but a real-life lines and clusters of people know each other, work together, for example. Yellow dots are happy people. Blue dots are unhappy people, and shades of green are in between, and going to be very hard to see if you're color blind, forgive me. What I hope you can all see pretty easily is how the yellow, happiness, and blue, unhappiness, is not randomly distributed. It clusters, right? Mostly happy, together. Unhappy, together. It's not perfect. This is not an all-powerful effect, but generally speaking, non-random distribution. Happiness spreads happiness. Unhappiness spreads

unhappiness. The point here is if you want to get some happiness at work, give some happiness at work. The happiness you give to other people will literally come back to you through mirror neurons.

This research has found three degrees of separation. That is, your colleague's colleague's friend who you've never met in your life is influencing your happiness. Your colleague's colleague's friend is influencing your colleague's colleague, who influences your colleague, who influences you. The data has also found a surprisingly powerful effect with people that you have almost no relationship with. You might be thinking close friends at work, whatever. This is also neighbors, bus drivers, security guards. When I was working at Intel, we had a security guard that I like to describe as aggressively friendly. That is, I would walk out the JF3 main entrance at the end of my day with thousands of other people, and as I'm almost to the door I would hear, "Hey, have a good night." I'd turn around before I started studying happiness and came across this research, I'd turn around and be like, "Thanks. That's kind of weird. What does that guy want from me? There's thousands of people of going through this door, he has no reason to be friendly for me. Does he need something, or like what?" Cynical, sad interpretation of somebody who is very friendly.

After coming across this research, I realize that that security guard who I hardly know at all, the difference between him saying, "Hey, goodnight. Have a good night." and... It might be the difference between me being nice to my family, and not as nice when I get home. So, think, what are you showing up to work with? Are you spreading, "Hey, good morning." or "Coffee." Whatever you're spreading is going to spread through your network, your real-life network of colleagues. There's some good news here, which this is the only place in the data that I'm familiar with where happiness is more powerful than unhappiness. That as I told you earlier, in a mixed environment if you get mixed news, you focus on what's wrong. Show you a picture of people and everyone's smiling except the one woman in the back, you'd be like, "What's up with her in the back? What's wrong with her?" Here, happiness spreads better than unhappiness through your social network, but they both spread.

One of the most likely indicators that you might quit an organization, is that you sit next to somebody who gives very low scores on organizational health surveys. That is, when the survey comes around and says, "I feel properly recognized for good work." The person next to you is like, "No." "Good ideas are rewarded and encouraged." "No." "We have a leadership that is taking us in a good direction." "No." You are likely to quit because you are catching that bad attitude from the person next to you. Which means for all of you leaders, managing for morale is critical because one bad apple can literally infect a whole team. And the converse is true. One really good, fresh, smiling happy apple can have a positive effect on your whole team, especially all of you in this room. You may have heard the phrase, "The leader sneezes, the team catches a cold." If the leader spreads happiness, the whole team may get happier. So, if want to get some happiness at work, give some happiness at work. Spread some happiness at work. What are some ways of spreading happiness at work for yourself and other people around you? Lots of ways. Again, remember your job here is not to remember everything and act on everything. It's to find what's going to work best for you or people you work with, and choose those few things and how you will apply them.

Starting with your commute. Sorry to tell you this anyone who has a long commute, but when you do that experience sampling, "Bing. What are you doing and how's your mood?" Driving to work in the morning comes out at the bottom of life. There is very little we enjoy less than commuting to work in the morning. Curiously, the drive home doesn't seem to be so bad. We drive home thinking, "I did some good work. I made an excellent improvement to our manufacturing process today." On the way to work, it's like, "Boy, I have a lot to do," and "You're in my way," and "Why is this light red?" It's different every day.

Hack your commute however you can. Choose your audio input carefully, because the world would love to fill you with depressing news on the way to work. Now for some of you that may be just what you want or need. You have to be paying attention to the global economic environment, or it feels engaging to you to be up to speed on the political situ... I'm not here to tell you what to do. I'm here to suggest that you consider what you're listening to, because a really engaging audio book might actually get you into flow while you're driving. Great music might mean that you walk in the door going, "Hey buddy" instead of "Coffee." Choose your input carefully. Choose your mode of transportation carefully because commuting to work in the morning is an unhappy time, and I want you to arrive happier so that you're spreading happiness.

Forgive. So easy to say, and for some of us, so hard to do. I want to be clear and transparent with you, I really stink at forgiving people. I am still trying to completely forgive some very difficult people that I worked with at Intel. I've been gone three and a half years, so I know forgiving is not always easy. You may not be ready to forgive. It's not always appropriate to forgive if somebody is repeatedly violating your rights or something else. It may not be appropriate to forgive, but if you can find it in yourself to forgive, it is you that becomes happier. As somebody wiser than me said, "Trying to punish somebody by holding a grudge, is like trying to kill somebody by taking poison." Only person who really suffers is you.

Despite what you might think from my presence here today presenting the science of happiness, my fridge at home is not covered with cute inspirational fridge magnets. I do not have rainbows, and hot air balloons, and inspirational messages all over my fridge, but I bought myself a fridge magnet about six months ago because I struggle with forgiveness and I really liked what this fridge magnet had to say. It said, "Let go or get dragged."

Be kind. My sense of you all from what I know and have learned is that you're a very kind company. Awesome. Science says being nice to each other, going out of your way to do something unexpected and helpful boosts happiness. Various ways you can find to do this, right? Bring somebody a cup of coffee, help with their project even though you're not assigned to. If you can't find any other way to do it, leave the change in a vending machine or pay for the coffee behind you at a drive-thru window. You may start what's been happening more frequently lately, a pay it forward chain. That is, you arrive at the drive-thru window and you'll say, "I'll pay for mine and the car behind me." They're like, "Great, okay." Next car comes up, says, "What do I owe you?" The person says, "Nothing, the car ahead of you paid." "What? I didn't even know that person. That's awesome. I'll pay for the car

behind me." And 76 cars do it in a row before the chain stops. 76 families go home having a better evening because moods were lifted, because you were kind to other people.

Again, this is not just about spreading happiness in other people. When you give a gift to somebody at work, your mood goes up more than the recipient, according to a recent study by Sonja Lyubomirsky. She has validated the saying that, "It is better to give than to receive." Lots of ways you can give kindness to your colleagues at work.

Celebrate and savor, especially those good things that are wired to just whoosh, go out of your consciousness and out of your memory. You're wired to just let the good stuff go, but you don't want to if you want to be happy. What you want to do, is celebrate and savor good news. We know we need to be there for each other in hard times, right? If Mitch comes to me and tells me some bad news, and I'm like, "Dude, sorry I'm busy. Richard, I got to talk to you about that project." It's not good for our relationship, right? It's even more important to be there in good times than bad times if you want to build quality warm relationships. According to the research, the fastest way for me to build a good relationship with Mitch is to be there when things go right. If he says, "Hey, I've got some good news." Don't say, "That's great. Sorry, I got to go.", but "Dude, what's the good news? How'd it happen? Hey, high-five" if it's your style. Celebrate and savor good news. Active constructive responding builds relationships and happiness for you and the other person or people at the same time.

Fake it till you make it. On your feet, please and pose like a superhero. I'm going to ask you to pose this way for two minutes, so take a pose that you can hold for two minutes. My only requirement is that you pose wide please, take up a lot of space. Excellent. You are all now Harvard undergraduates. Again, I knew you looked smart. Hands up if you have seen Amy Cuddy's TED Talk? Some of you, not surprising, it's the number one TED Talk in the world. Now, what that TED Talk explains is Amy Cuddy's research at Harvard that very roughly goes like this: You are all Harvard undergraduates. You all come into her lab at Harvard, and you are asked to spit into a vile. Sorry that's a little gross, but we need to measure a couple things in your bloodstream. Testosterone, present in women and men and associated with assertiveness, and cortisol, which is a hormone that indicates that you're stressed out and reactive to stress.

Then half of you are told, "Would you please pose wide?" Without any language about strength or superheroes, would you please stand like this, or like this, or like this, for two minutes. The other half of you, please don't do this, are told, "Would you please fold up on yourself?" Get small, maybe touch your neck. And in just two minutes of this small body posture your testosterone, strongly associated with assertiveness, goes down, and your cortisol, indicating you're stressed out and kind of reactive to stress, goes up. Whereas, the opposite happens over here, just by posing wide. Sir, would you please unfold your arms so that you can feel the effect of this? If you choose to pose wide, your testosterone assertiveness goes up and your cortisol stress reactivity goes down in just two minutes. Please hold those poses because it hasn't been two minutes yet, while I tell you that data like this shows up over and over again.

In another experiment, everyone is asked to hold a pen in their mouth, read cartoons, and answer a questionnaire. Half of you are told, "Would you please hold the pen in your lips, and the other half in your teeth?" Without realizing it probably, you all have been simulating a frown. You say, "These cartoons are not funny and my mood is not good. Are we done here?" Those of you, likely without registering it consciously, have been simulating a smile. Even a totally fake smile, not the Duchenne genuine smile with the eyes but just a fake mouth smile, say "I love these Far Side cartoons. They're great, and my mood is excellent. What's next?"

You sit or stand taller, your mood goes up. You walk with a spring in your step, your mood goes up. Women who get Botox injections to remove this worry line I have here from decades of Olympic level worry, feel less anger and depression because they're incapable of making an angry, upset face like this. I am not suggesting Botox injections. What I'm telling you is that we believe our brain feels and decides everything, and then it shows up on our face and body. The data is abundantly clear in experiment after experiment. There is a very active two-way street between your body and your brain. If you act like a happy person, your brain seems to go, "I seem to be really happy about something, I will produce more dopamine and serotonin to go with this good mood I seem to have." You actually end up feeling positive emotions because you're acting like you're feeling positive.