

# Happiness Hygiene

Can a positive outlook become a habit, like brushing your teeth or changing your linen? A renowned US psychologist motivates for cleaning up your act. By Tracy Essers



**WHO HASN'T FOUND** themselves lamenting: “If only I had his car/her figure/their house, then I’d be happy”? In truth, we’ve probably all wasted hours of our lives imagining what it might feel like to hit our lofty external happiness targets. “But in reality, the external world can only predict 10 percent of our happiness, while the vast majority of our long-term happiness is predicted by the way our brain processes the world,” says Shawn Achor, a Harvard psychologist and author of *Before Happiness*. He writes: “It’s not reality that shapes us, but the lens through which we view the world that shapes our reality.” He maintains that happiness is the belief that change is possible – that happiness is, in fact, “the joy one feels striving for one’s potential.” Adopt Achor’s daily, research-based tweaks to prime your mind to be positive:

## NO. 1: CHANGE FOCUS

Every day, write down one positive thing that happened during the previous 24 hours, recommends Achor. “This challenges a negative mind-set,” says Johannesburg-based psychologist Tamara Zanella. “It helps you achieve a more balanced perspective.”

## NO. 2: PRACTICE MAKES POSITIVE

We all have a default attitude setting, says Zanella: “Some people are excited by an obstacle, while others focus on what’s stopping them. But this default can be reset with practice.” Achor’s research has found that it takes just 21 days of practice to master a positive outlook; he recommends that you jot down three new things you’re grateful for every day. “This will help train your brain to actively

look for the positive points in your life. Simply taking note of a friendly cashier, or that you met a difficult deadline, creates a positive-seeking attitude,” says Zanella.

## NO. 3: EXERCISE MINDFULNESS

Crime, unemployment and disease statistics take their toll on our psyche, leaving us in a state of perpetual stress, says Bill Gee, the founder of the Happiness University ([happinessuniversity.org](http://happinessuniversity.org)) and speaker in the field of applied positive psychology. “We have become stress junkies, consuming ourselves with busyness,” he says. This stress causes our bodies to release excess hormones, such as cortisol – thankfully, exercise can help to metabolise these hormones. Achor suggests including a mere 10 minutes of exercise in your day and spending two minutes a day meditating as a way of dealing with “cultural ADHD,” thus aiding your mind’s ability to focus on one thing at a time.

## NO. 4: SHOW APPRECIATION

There’s a fundamental difference between happiness and pleasure, says Gee. “Pleasure will help you feel better now, but it’s fleeting, while happiness is long-lasting and genuine,” he says. One of the best ways to feel happiness? See the good in others. Each morning, as you open your e-mails, send a message to one person in your social circle, praising or thanking them for something they’ve done, recommends Achor. **Q**

## SEE MORE ...

To watch Shawn Achor’s inspiring TED talk, “The Happy Secret to Better Work,” visit [oprahmag.co.za](http://oprahmag.co.za)



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