

Meet the 'happiness professor': This man's 20 tips to everyday happiness could change your life

18 March 2018

From a cheerful commute to grins at the gym, Tom Ough spends a fun-filled day with the 'professor of happiness'

How happy were you yesterday? Six out of 10? Seven? Eight? Put a number to it and keep that number in mind. We'll come back to it...

"Good to meet you!" says Paul Dolan as he barrels into the room. Instantly recognisable by his white-framed glasses, he's about 6ft 3in, very muscular – he shakes my hand enthusiastically – and grinning the kind of white-toothed, wide-mouthed grin that tells me he's a nine, 10, 11 out of happy. You could heat a solar system with the wattage of his smile. You could light a ballroom with the twinkle in his eye. We're meeting at a central London gym owned by the London School of Economics, where he holds a professorship, and within moments he's mercilessly teasing me about the size of my arms. In a friendly, happy way, of course.

Prof Dolan is a health economist turned behavioural scientist whose rigorous work on happiness has made him a government policy adviser and a bestselling author. His work has also earned him the goofy nickname "Professor Happy", and a week before that most sacred of days, the UN-accredited International Day of Happiness that falls on Tuesday March 20, he is going to teach me how to find happiness within the confines of my normal, boring, medium-happy life.

Everyday happiness is the chief and perhaps only concern of his book *Happiness by Design*, whose main points are (i) that moment-to-moment happiness is much more important than our narrativised evaluations of our life satisfaction; (ii) that happiness is made of pleasure and purpose, both of which we need in varying amounts; (iii) that experiences only make us happy if we are paying attention to them.

All this is partly why our Day of Fun is starting in a gym. "From the first day I lifted a dumb-bell," he wrote in the book, "weight training has been a pleasurable activity for me. Over time, it has additionally become a purposeful one, as I begin to treat my diet and exercise as a project."

Exercise, as we all know, is good for our mental health. I usually potter about in gyms on my own, thinking of myself as an amateur untainted by professionalism, a gentleman gym-goer. But doing it with Prof Dolan, who could juggle with weights I'd strain to pick up, makes the session more purposeful and consequently more enjoyable. He shows me where I've been going wrong with bicep curls all this time, and coaches me through a series of reps.

This is how he usually starts his day, and how many of us would start our days if we could be bothered. "It's not a question of time," he says, "it's about prioritisation." The painless inculcation of good habits was the focus of Prof Dolan's work with the Government's "nudge" unit, and once we've finished, he shows me the calendar on his phone: a rainbow of appointments every day, but always with time blocked out for exercise.

"The behaviour leads to the attitude," he tells me, "not the other way round. I became the kind of person who goes to the gym because I was doing it regularly. Which is completely different to how psychological theory has been constructed for decades, with the idea that intention leads to actions."

Prof Dolan pulls on a thick hoody and we walk back to his office via Lincoln's Inn Fields. "Nature, music, hanging out with friends and helping other people – those four things are unequivocally good for you," he says. We've ticked one off already, it was literally a walk in the park. His speech (garrulous, often joshing) is peppered with reference to scientific findings. "We all have biophilia. Even if you think you don't like being in nature, you do. Even a plant in the office makes people happier."

He's full of these tips, but, as he explains in his office, he's more interested in the ideas behind them. The office, like its owner, isn't donnish in the slightest. It has few books (the professor does his reading at home), no desk (he works with a laptop in a chair overlooking the field), and an exercise bench. True to his ethos, Prof Dolan has created an environment that helps him cultivate good habits. This has a lot to do with his argument that living our lives according

to other people's expectations is a recipe for unhappiness. "We spend too much time locating ourselves in big evaluative spaces, and not enough time in the granular experiential space."

This kind of thinking won him the label of "the man who'll make you quit your job." That's not what the book said, Prof Dolan protests, although he cackles at the memory of being told ahead of a corporate speech not to talk about job satisfaction (he disobeyed). Thinking about "granular experiential space", an overworked financier might realise that although she is proud of her position and salary, her pride rarely crosses her mind. Instead, her moment-to-moment experience is dominated by her tiredness, her long commute, her frustration with co-workers.

"What matters is the allocation of attention," says Prof Dolan, "all those things that matter to you as you live and breathe your life, not when you reflect upon it in some big story." All this has led him down some unpopular philosophical avenues. He adores his two children but quotes research showing that having offspring tends not to make people happier. He doesn't believe there's inherent value in things like truth or beauty, arguing that they only matter if they're beneficial to people in some way. He believes in quitting things that don't make us happy, recommending that cinemagoers walk out if they're not enjoying a film, and he doesn't take his family on long holidays because "they're basically childcare somewhere else."

More controversially, he doesn't read novels. People thought it meant he didn't read books, he says. "I read a lot of non-fiction," he clarifies with a chuckle.

Our day continues with a trip to a coffee shop. Takeaway coffee is often seen by hair-shirted personal finance types as frivolous, but Prof Dolan points out that some chatter with the barista and the pleasure of the ritual can often make the coffee good value. We sit and talk some more; what's changed since his first book, he says (there's another on the way) is that technology has divested us further of our capacity to pay attention. Cycling between apps is 'really depressing' he says.

He realises his phone is on the table, contrary to his instructions to make technology a faff to access. "Even the presence of my phone is acting as a barrier to us properly connecting," he says, putting it away. Then again, he accepts that technology can make life more interesting. We can be listening to music while commuting, for instance. Or, um, read a book.

The idea of using music to allay boredom isn't new, but Prof Dolan's work is convincing. After we went our separate ways with a cheery farewell, I invited some friends for a phoneless dinner in which everyone mucked in with the cooking. And – what do you know? – when I demanded of my guests whether they were having a good time, they all said yes!

On that subject: how happy is Prof Dolan? 8.5/10, he'd told me in the coffee shop. "I'm lucky to be resilient," he said, explaining that, despite volitional work we can do to make ourselves happier, "there's a huge amount of individual variation that's just innate."

But the innate stuff isn't everything. What was your answer to "How happy were you yesterday"? Write the answer down, try Prof Dolan's advice, and ask yourself the same question in a week, or a month, or a year. If the number has ticked upwards, then he may well be that rarest of creatures: a self-help guru worth listening to.

Happiness by Design: Finding Pleasure and Purpose in Everyday Life by Paul Dolan (published by Penguin) is available for £9.99 plus p&p from books.telegraph.co.uk

How to be happy: Paul Dolan's top tips for everyday enjoyment

- **At home**
 - You are less happy if you spend all your time clock-watching, so try to **allow some flexibility** in your diary; eg schedule in some free time around seeing your friends and family
 - **Emotions are contagious.** There is probably a closer correspondence than you realise between your mood and the moods of those around you. So, elevate your mood and you will elevate theirs – make them happy and you will feel good, too.
 - **Evaluate the health and viability of relationships** by their consequences for pleasure and purpose over time, not by the narratives surrounding them. If spending time with a long-term friend – or even a

partner – only ever makes you feel miserable, then you should think about whether that's a relationship worth hanging on to.

- You will enjoy your leisure time and socialising much more when you are fully engaged. **Put your phone away** and make it clear that you are not contactable in the evenings. Your attention to your family will pay dividends in happiness.

- **At work**

- Instead of using the lavatory across the corridor at work, start using the one at the other end of your floor. It will force you to walk across the office floor, making it more likely you'll casually **socialise** with others.
- Multitasking is taxing for the brain because switching your attention requires additional energy. This diminishes your capacity to feel purposeful in your work, and so makes you less happy. **Set windows for email-checking and work offline when possible.**
- **Laughter** has been proven again and again to reduce stress, loneliness and pain, and to promote relaxation and physical recovery. Stock up on your favourite comedies and watch them before difficult events such as job interviews – and afterwards if the interview goes badly...
- Being outside, or even just **seeing nature** at work, is good for us. Prisoners whose cells have a view make fewer visits to their prison's healthcare facilities than those who don't have a view; hospital patients who have a view recover quicker than those who don't. Get out of the office if you can; if not, bring in a plant or a fish tank.

- **At play**

- Simply talking about experiential purchases – **experiences**, such as days out and meals, rather than objects – can make us happier. Enjoy your holiday before you've even left (but don't bang on about it too much).
- Studies show that **smiling** can cause happiness as well as be a consequence of it. Even a false smile, such as one contrived by holding a pen sideways between your teeth, can make you feel happier.
- The rise of the smartphone means that even pleasurable activities such as socialising require solutions to overcome distraction. I recommend the **phone-stacking game** – everyone at the table adds their phone to a pile, and if anyone takes theirs back before the end of the meal, they have to pick up everyone's bill.
- **Try something new.** The worst that can happen is you don't like it and don't do it again. And you might just find yourself a new hobby or interest.
People are bad at giving up on things they don't enjoy, because time and money feel like investments. Often money has been paid upfront. If you're not enjoying a film at the cinema, **leave rather than staying for the sake of it**; the same goes for dull jobs.

When spending money

- Think about how your long-term goals benefit you now. The benefits of saving for your retirement come not only from being secure in your old age, but from **feeling secure about your old age** in the years that approach it.
- **"Pay now, enjoy later"** is a good happiness-enhancing principle. Indulgence is more enjoyable when we've already footed the bill: this is partly why many of us prefer all-inclusive holidays. You could allocate yourself some "me money" each month and spend it with less guilt than you might otherwise.

How to be happy: Prof Dolan's guide to turning his tips into habits

Prime yourself

Intentions explain, at most, about a quarter of the variation in health behaviours such as exercise. This leaves three quarters that are triggered by specific contexts – such as an easily accessible gym or a walk home that doesn't pass a fast-food restaurant. Even the smell of citrus air-freshener has been shown to make us more

likely to clean up. These triggers appear to work even if we know they're triggers, so use them to your advantage.

Create defaults

Going with the flow is much easier than using finite willpower. Change your home page to something other than Facebook. Put exercise in your calendar. Set up regular times to see friends rather than organising meetups one-by-one.

Make commitments

We are more consistent with our public promises. Tell a friend you will stop smoking and you are more likely to do so. Divide your goals into bite-sized commitments and consider introducing tangible losses and rewards: a study showed that smokers who wanted to quit were much more likely to be successful if, by staying off cigarettes, they won back a deposit.

Use social norms

The presence of friends and family in our lives not only makes us happier, but also affects our behaviour. Surround yourself with people whose company you enjoy, and whose habits you'd like to imitate. I have a weight-training buddy, for instance, and he keeps me motivated to train harder.

Design your habits

Draw on cognitive behavioural therapy. Rehearse in your head how you will respond to potentially tempting or triggering scenarios: if x , then y . For example, if you find yourself wanting a cigarette, you could make yourself a cup of tea. Don't expect future benefits to consistently motivate your habits. If you want to be healthier, find an exercise you enjoy – it's much easier to stick to.

How to be happy: Overcoming common misconceptions

Keep a diary

We often misjudge our enjoyment of activities. Plot a diary of what you did yesterday. For each activity, record what it was, who you did it with, how long it took, the pleasure it gave you (out of 10) and the purpose you felt while doing it (again, out of 10). This diary will draw your attention to any misconceptions you have about how you use your time. Maybe you don't enjoy a TV show anymore. Maybe you took the bus instead of the train, and the extra time it took was outweighed by enjoying it more.

The pleasure-purpose principle

People often choose one kind of happiness over another in a way that is unbalanced and ultimately makes them unhappy. Remember the pleasure-purpose principle: we enjoy things that are relaxing and fun, such as watching TV, and we enjoy things that feel worthwhile, such as working and learning. We need a balance of both in our lives.

Volunteer

We often underestimate how much we will enjoy doing things for other people, whether that's volunteering, caring or giving gifts. In fact, it is very good for our happiness. Think you're too busy? Giving time away has been shown to make you feel less pressed.

Act now

Don't cling to the mistaken belief that you can recoup a present lack of happiness in the future. People often make this error in pursuing unfulfilling careers. If you want to be happier, take steps towards it now.
