

Happy Lawyer Happy Life

The Course Week Two



The Science of Happiness

Being happy is a feeling. Measuring or assessing that feeling might seem impossible, but over the past decade, we have seen an explosion of science exploring happiness.

This research is coming from two main areas:

Neuroscience – Through brain imaging and monitoring, neuroscientists have been able to explore the physical impact of happiness and other emotions on our brains and bodies. The new knowledge provides scientific answers when it comes to concepts many of us have just accepted or assumed to be true. For example, those of us who enjoy exercise just ‘know’ that it makes us feel better. The beauty of neuroscience is that we now have brain scans that show us why. This is a fast-developing area and makes for fascinating reading.

Psychology – There are different areas of psychology that have looked at happiness, but it is the cognitive and social psychologists, often referred to as the positive psychologists, that I find most helpful when it comes to understanding happiness. Much of the psychology in this area focuses on how specific ways of thinking and acting affect our happiness.

A Summary of the Brain & Happiness

This week, before going any further, you should read pages 49 to 64 of my book, Happy Lawyer Happy Life to better understand the science of happiness. And don't forget to watch the Youtube link I sent you too! Here is a bit of a quick summary for you-

There are 3 main parts of the brain that have a significant role to play in our happiness-

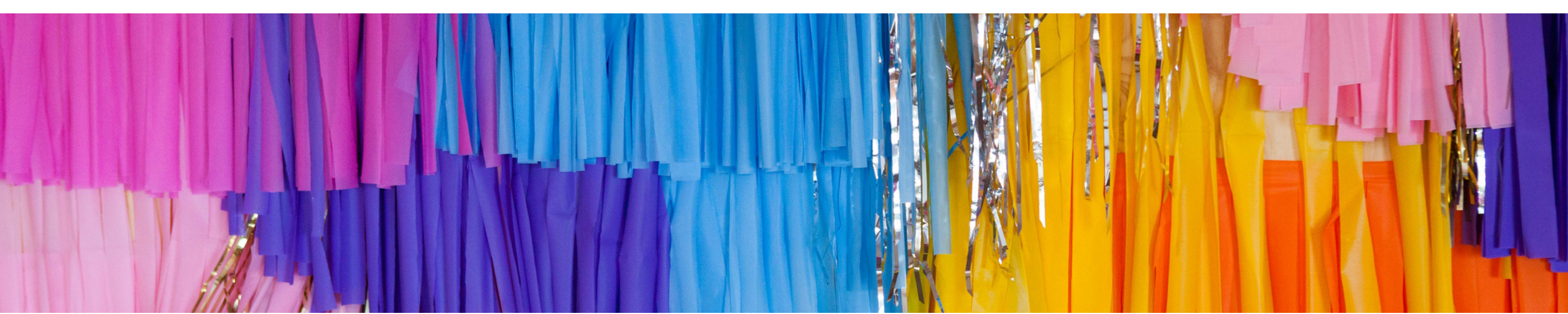
1. The Brain Stem- best known for those 'flight and fight responses'

2. The Limbic System- the brains emotional centre that has a huge role to play in managing stress and therefore happiness. 2 important parts are-

a. The Amygdala, the part of our brain responsible for fear, pleasure and empathy. It is part of the brain that we don't want to be operating from too much if we are trying to 'think clearly' which we lawyers need to do all of the time! 'Amygdala Hijack' means we are not thinking clearly and instead are having a highly emotional stress response.

b. The Hippocampus, the part of the brain responsible for memory and learning so a really important part for us lawyers! We want to make sure we have a well functioning hippocampus at all times! Research is showing continued exposure to stress (so for many just being a lawyer!) shrinks our hippocampus. However mindfulness, meditation and physical exercise have all been shown to 'grow' our hippocampus so we all need to do more of that!

3. The Cortex- the outer part of our brain is our 'reasoned, rational and logical thought centre' of the brain. The pre-frontal cortex is the part of the cortex responsible for processing our emotion (along with the limbic system). The left side is more active when we are having positive emotions while the right side is more active when we are having 'not so positive or unhappy emotions'! We can increase the activity of the right side through changing our thoughts- being mindful, practising meditation, doing fun things, hanging out with people we love or just doing things you really enjoy will all help to increase the activity of the brains 'happiness centre'.



Brain Chemicals- a summary!

There are a few brain chemicals that are important to remember when it comes to happiness-

Dopamine- a drug of reward! We get hits of dopamine in our system (which make us feel great!) when we achieve things- hence the advantages in setting and achieving goals on a short and long term basis.

Serotonin- our natural mood balancer! We can create more of it thanks to exercise, sunshine and a healthy diet... need I say more!

Oxytocin- the 'trust builder' we can increase our oxytocin levels through a bit of hugging or gift giving!

Endorphins- The natural good juice! They alleviate stress, anxiety and pain so we all want lots of this stuff! You can help your body create more of them through exercise or laughing.

Cortisol- The stress chemical- we don't want too much of it in our system but too little is a problem too! A healthy diet, regular exercise and meditation are all said to help us regulate cortisol levels in our bodies.

What are your 'Ah Ha' moments?

Thinking about the science of happiness, what are your 'ah ha' moments- those realisations when it comes to your own happiness?

What changes can you make?

Thinking about your daily and weekly routine, what changes might you need to make to give you brain and body (aka YOU!) the best chance at happiness?

[illegible]

A Smartie Challenge for you!



Aside from a healthy diet and exercise (which we will be looking at in depth next week) how you think is one of the biggest contributors to your happiness. So this week I am encouraging you to have a go at my 'SMARTIE CHALLENGE'- and yes there is chocolate!

So to do this one you will need 2 jars on your desk (or at home) and a big bag of smarties. One is the negative jar and one is the positive. Now, let me be clear, you can't eat the smarties as we go unless they end up in the positive jar!

So the challenge works like this: Every time you find yourself being negative, get drawn into a negative conversation (you know, the ones where you and your friends just complain about all the things that are wrong in life or generally gossip about others), or are just whingeing because you can, you are to take two smarties out of the bag and add them to the negative jar before putting that lid back on tight. You can't eat them – they are not yours! Each time you see, do, hear or think of something positive, fun, happy or joyous, take four smarties out of the bag and pop them in the positive jar. You can snack from the positive jar if you really need to, but I encourage you to try to hold off for the week and see if you can't fill it.

I am all about accountability, so if you are willing to give this challenge a go, I encourage you to bring in a friend or colleague or your partner as well. Make them do the same thing. Each of you is to hold the other accountable and ensure you are filling your jars correctly and not snacking as you go.

Share images of your jars and your progress in our Facebook Group too and let's see if we cant cultivate a whole lot of happiness (while enjoying some chocolate along the way!)
Do it for a week and see what happens!

Week 2 Summary

My 'Ah-Ha' moments when it comes to the Science of Happiness were-

Taking into account the science, the things I will change each day are

Taking into account the science, the things I will change each week are

Taking into account the science, the things I will change each month are

Taking into account the science, the things I will change this year are

And the Smartie challenge made me realise....

Happiness is...