

Cheer up - you can learn to be happy

Greg Morago, Houston Chronicle

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First the good news: Overall, we're a pretty happy society.

Now the bad: Some of us aren't feeling the love.

A recent study by the University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center finds 14 percent of Americans reporting they are "not too happy," the highest percentage in the survey since 1972. Though the remainder of the respondents to the General Social Survey, to be released this month, said they are "very happy" (32 percent) or "pretty happy" (54 percent), the "not too happy" contingent caught the eyes of those who study happiness.

You don't need to be in Mensa to figure out why a growing population considers itself to be down in the dumps. Everywhere you look there are more signs of trauma in the American economy: job losses, home foreclosures, bank failures.

"Those are salient, vivid changes. People are very sensitive to changes in their lives," said Sonja Lyubomirsky, a professor of psychology at UC Riverside and author of the book "The How of Happiness." "It's not surprising at all that our happiness would be affected."

Tom Smith, director of the National Opinion Research Center, cautioned against making a correlation between the "not too happy" spike and the poor economy.

"It is not a direct correlation to the recession," Smith said, adding that having more money doesn't necessarily make for a happier person. (Being married, however, does: It's the single biggest predictor of happiness.)

Be that as it may, it's tempting to see the economic downturn as a reason for what may be a growing segment of less happy Americans.

"There's an increase of discontent, uncertainty, anxiety and anger that's a product of the recent changes in the economy," said W. Doyle Gentry, a clinical psychologist and author of "Happiness for Dummies."

But, he added, a rise in the number of people who describe themselves as "not very happy" (such as those in the survey) does not mean they are necessarily unhappy people.

"Part of what's going on has to do with semantics," Gentry said. "Happiness is a state of mind that is independent of other states of mind like anger, anxiety and so forth. People tend to think if I'm not happy, then I'm unhappy."

That more people may be less happy today isn't necessarily an indication that we are living in an unhappy society, Lyubomirsky said. Why? Because we adapt, she said.

"There's a phenomenon called hedonic adaptation. It basically means that people adapt and get used to things," she said. "Let's say you suddenly have less spending power. You feel less wealthy because you have less money in the bank. That's going to make you unhappy. What happens is that you get used to that. Our daily life is not determined by the size of our savings account. We'll adapt to almost everything."

We even have the power to make ourselves happy, said life coach Laura Berman Fortgang. Simple things such as getting more exercise and sunlight can help.

Lyubomirsky agreed, preferring (as happy people are wont to do) to look on the bright side of the survey - more than 8 in 10 of us are at least "pretty happy."

"On average, people are happy. Look how many people are still happy," she said. "A lot of happiness is under our control."

Happiness, she even suggested, is contagious. And she's right.

A study released in the British Medical Journal in December concluded that happiness spreads readily through social networks of family members, friends and neighbors. The study found that knowing someone who is happy makes you 15.3 percent more likely to be happy yourself.

In other words: Smile and the whole world smiles with you. Or, as the Partridge family implored, "C'mon get happy."

"Happiness is not something that finds you or falls out of the sky. You have to work at it. You have to work at it more now than when times are good," Gentry said. "Put on a happy face. When people smile, it causes other people to smile. It's a contagious thing."

And a learned thing. We can get happy, Gentry said, if we put our minds to it.

"That's where America distinguishes itself. We're the most optimistic culture in the world. Americans remain largely upbeat," he said. "Yes, it's harder to be upbeat now. But people are still trying to put their best foot forward. And that's how we're going to get out of this. We're going to 'behave' our way to a better time."

5 ways to get happy right now

- 1. Make 'em laugh:** Nothing's better for the spirit than a good yuk. Tell a joke or play a joke. Get a gut buster going.
- 2. Color your world . . . YELLOW:** Banana and daffodil hues are like instant sunshine. Yellow is a visual pick-me-up.
- 3. Hang time is good:** Get with your friends for a movie
- 4. Get horizontal:** Studies suggest that the more sex you have, the happier you are.
- 5. Start making scents:** Good smells can trigger good moods. Try a new perfume. Buy some flowers for your desk. Wake up and smell the coffee.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/02/10/DD4815PTK5.DTL>

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