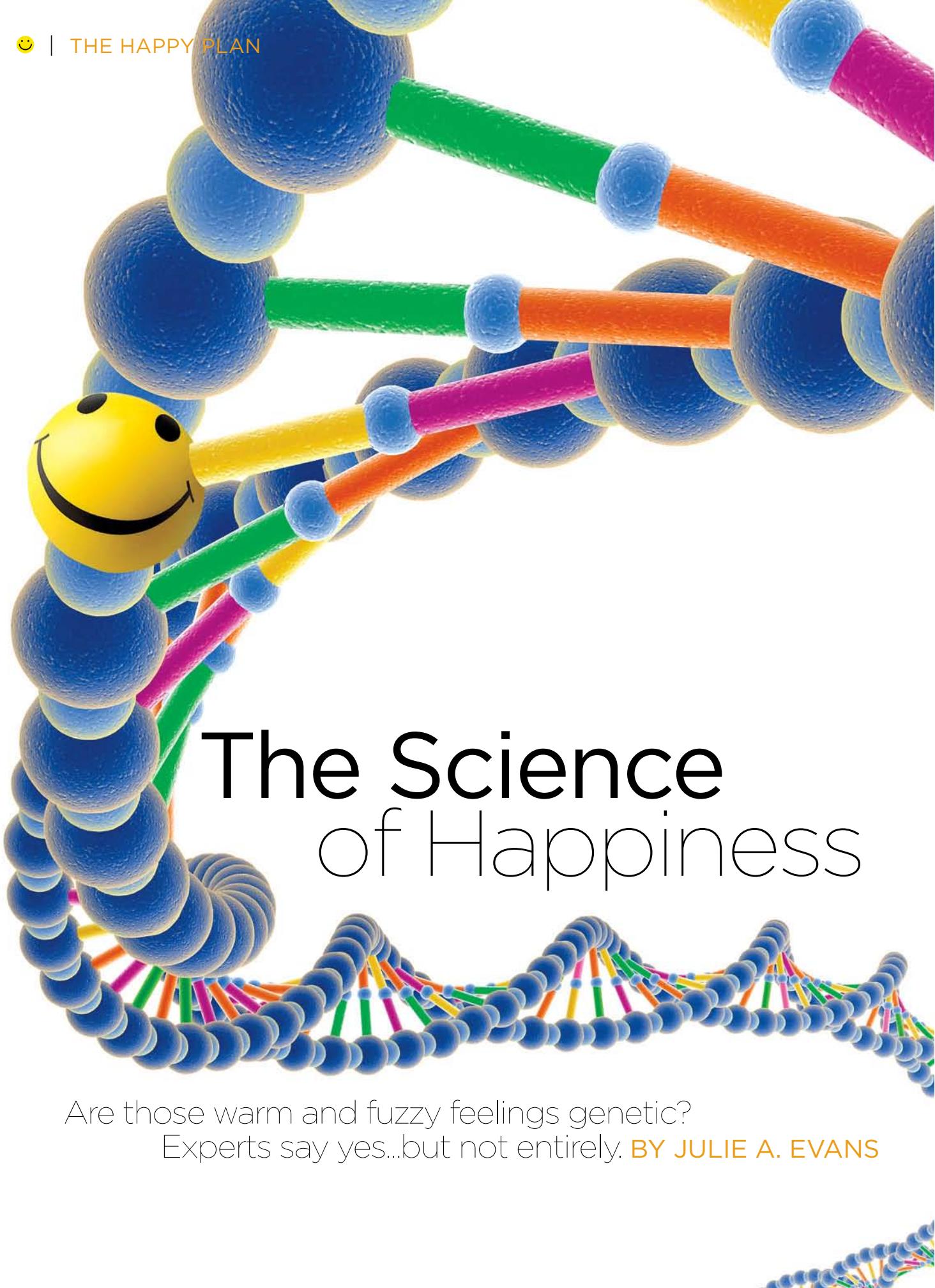


# The Happy Plan

SOME PEOPLE SEEM TO HAVE BEEN BORN HAPPY. They embrace everyone with their smile. They laugh easily. They love life. For others, happiness flits in and out of their lives. Unfortunately, many of us see happiness as something to be pursued, something to be found in the perfect house, the perfect spouse, the perfect job. But we will never find it in those places because happiness lives inside each of us. 😊 Research tells us that indeed we are born with a certain degree of happiness—about 50% is determined by our genetic makeup. But we are responsible for the rest of it. We need to create our happiness. Just as each of us has a genetic predisposition toward a certain weight and must work to achieve and maintain our best weight, so too must we work to achieve and maintain happiness. 😊 In the pages that follow, scientists, experts, and women like you offer proven strategies to help you build your happy life.



# The Science of Happiness

Are those warm and fuzzy feelings genetic?  
Experts say yes...but not entirely. **BY JULIE A. EVANS**

t sounds like an oxymoron: the “science of happiness.” After all, happiness is subjective, right? It’s a state of mind, the joyful way we feel inside when something good happens. Science, on the other hand, is objective. It demands rigorous, peer-reviewed studies and evidence based on facts, not emotions.

As it turns out, happiness is both: You can study this emotion with the objectivity of a scientist. In fact, happiness research has flourished in the past decade, as the emphasis in clinical psychology has shifted away from “mending what’s wrong with people” to “identifying and nurturing what’s right.”

The shift largely can be explained with two words: positive psychology. Founded in part in 1998 by Martin Seligman, PhD, Fox Leadership Professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, the field of positive psychology focuses on the evidence-based study of positive emotions, character strengths, and other characteristics that help people and groups thrive. The field also studies how happiness benefits people in all aspects of their lives. (See “The Side Effects of Being Happy,” at right.)

We asked some leading experts to answer a few questions about the “science of happiness.” Here’s what they had to say:

## Why study happiness?

“The search for happiness is as old as history itself,” writes Darrin M. McMahon, PhD, author of *Happiness: A History*. Today, the study of happiness is based on the belief that taking care of our mental health is just as important as improving our physical health, says James Pawelski, PhD, director of education and senior scholar at the Positive Psychology Center and director of the Master of Applied Positive Psychology program at the University of Pennsylvania. Happiness researchers want to know: Why, if we own so many material goods, are we still so miserable? What are the characteristics of happy people, and can those qualities be learned? And how will our physical health benefit from nurturing our mental health?

## How do you measure happiness?

Researchers typically ask people “How happy are you?” and “How satisfied are you?” and rate the responses. “If you ask ‘Who are the happiest folks you know?’ the people they nominate are those who rate themselves highly on the happiness scale,” says Christopher Peterson, PhD, professor of psychology at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and author of *A Primer in Positive Psychology*.

## Are some people born happier?

Just as some people have to work harder than others to lose weight, some people must work harder at being happy.



## The Side Effects of Being Happy

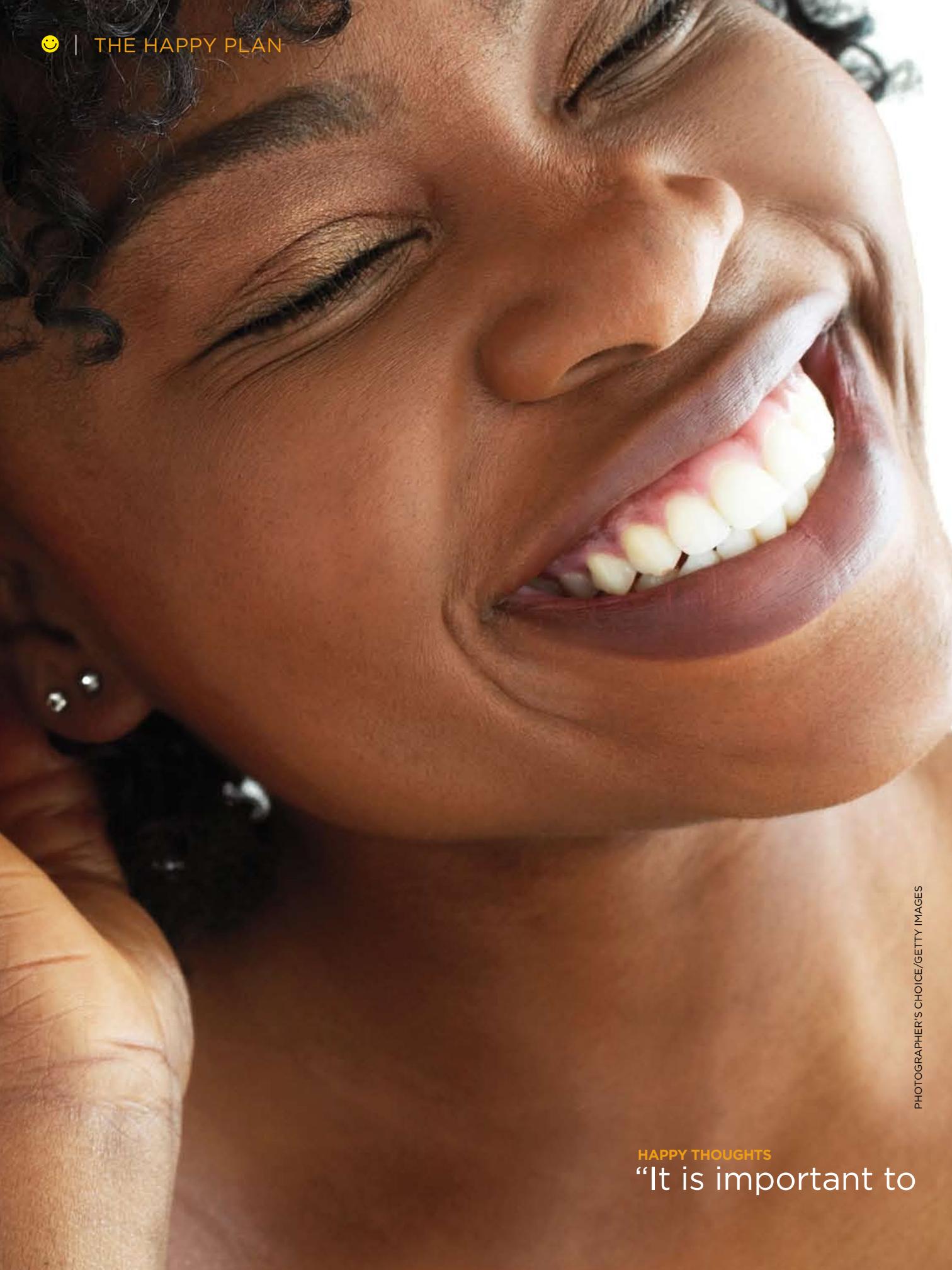
“Happiness doesn’t guarantee success, a happy marriage, good health, and more. But there’s definitely a link,” says Christopher Peterson, PhD, professor of psychology at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and author of *A Primer in Positive*

*Psychology*. Research has found that, in general, happy people...  
 ● are more successful  
 ● enjoy stronger relationships  
 ● get sick less often  
 ● lead more hopeful lives  
 ● bounce back more readily from bad experiences

Research shows that we’re all born with a happiness “set point,” which is a genetically determined baseline for how happy (or grumpy) we are. But set point is only 50% of the happiness equation, explains Sonja Lyubomirsky, PhD, professor of psychology at the University of California at Riverside and author of *The How of Happiness*. Another 10% is determined by circumstances, such as personal appearance and finances. That leaves 40% of happiness that is ours to affect through hard work and motivation.

## How can I live a happier life?

Researchers generally agree that certain qualities and character strengths are predictive of a happier life. Gratitude, optimism, curiosity, and the ability to give and receive love are highly predictive of happy people, says Peterson. Forgiveness, pursuit of meaningful goals, meditation, and hanging out with positive people also lead to greater happiness, research shows. But these characteristics won’t blossom without help from you. “Curves members, in particular, would understand that any goal in life requires a lot of effort and commitment,” says Lyubomirsky. “This applies to your emotional life as much as it applies to your health.” To get started on building your happiness, turn to “Come On, Get Happy!” on the next page.



HAPPY THOUGHTS

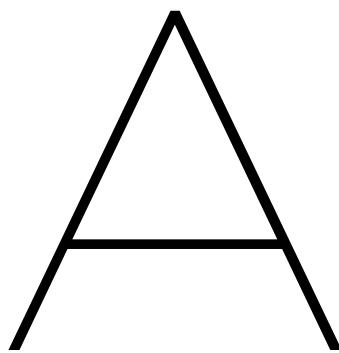
“It is important to

# Come On,

# Get Happy!

Ready to infuse every day with more joy? Here, experts (and members like you) share tips and tricks that will make you smile.

By Julie A. Evans



giant snowflake is painted on the wall at the Curves facility in Streetsboro, Ohio. It's there to remind members of the "snowflake effect": One snowflake doesn't take up much space, but when a whole bunch of them join together, it's a beautiful thing. The same goes for members who visit Curves for their daily workouts, says the club's owner, Heatherlyn Day. "When you smile at one person, she smiles back and then smiles at someone else. Soon, everyone is smiling. You feel happier, but you may not even know why," she says.

Heatherlyn is on to something, say researchers. Studies show that, like a smile, happiness is contagious. In fact, research from Harvard Medical School and the University of California at San Diego suggests that happiness spreads among people up to three degrees removed from one another. In other words, if you are happy, your friend and your friend's friend will be happier as a result. And knowing someone who is happy makes you 15% more likely to be happy yourself. Research also shows that people who have more social connec-

tions lead happier lives—another reason why joining the Curves community may be a happiness booster in itself. (See "The Science of Happiness," page 38, for more info on current research.)

Perhaps the best news is that happiness, like cholesterol, is influenced both by nature (the personalities we're born with) and nurture (how we take care of ourselves). This means anyone can increase her happiness...if she knows how to look for it, work for it, and embrace it. What's more, by doing so, you may even have an easier time reaching your weight-loss goals. According to Bridgette Boudreau, a certified weight-loss coach in Seattle, many women think they'll be happy only after they lose a few pounds, but actually, the reverse is true. "As you become more engaged with other people and activities and your joy increases, food takes a smaller place in your life. The extra weight no longer seems to belong on your body," says Boudreau. "That's one reason I work with clients to start creating joy in their lives right now." Here's how happiness experts say you can do the same in your own life, starting today.

## Go for goals

The happiest people have clear-cut and meaningful goals, says Caroline Adams Miller, author of *Creating Your Best Life*. Goals that come from your own desires and interests are the ones you're most

believe that you are able to make your own **sunshine.**"

—DOREEN RICE, 66, CURVES CLINTON TOWNSHIP SOUTH, MICHIGAN



# Project: Happiness

We have work projects, school projects, and home projects. Why not make happiness your next project? That's what Gretchen Rubin did. For one year, she researched the science of happiness, and then spent another year test-driving her findings. She identified 12 areas (energy, marriage, work, parenthood, leisure, friendship, money, eternity, passion, mindfulness, attitude, and happiness) that were important to her own ideas of happiness. Then she came up with specific resolutions that she plotted on a chart for the year, tackling one area each month. The result: Rubin now leads a happier life, and she has a book and blog to prove it. (Read her blog on [Happiness-project.com](http://Happiness-project.com). Her book, *The Happiness Project*, arrives in bookstores in 2010.)

What did Rubin learn from her yearlong experience? "It's important to make manageable, concrete changes that will bring more joy to your life," she says. "You can't just say 'I want to be happier.' You have to say 'I will join a book club' or 'I will rent and

watch a movie once a week.'"

During marriage month, for example, Rubin resolved to take time to be silly, fight right, stop gossiping, and quit nagging. For energy month, she resolved to get more sleep, take care of her mental to-do list, clear up clutter, exercise, and set aside time for relaxation.

"Everyone can benefit from having a happiness project," says Rubin. "Pick one thing in your life that you want to change, eliminate, or expand, and think of a concrete, manageable action to make it happen."



likely to pursue with vigor. But it's the pursuit of a goal, not the goal itself, that brings joy and promotes feelings of independence, self-confidence, and accomplishment. "Happy people believe they can find the resources to get the job done," says Miller.

**HAPPINESS BOOSTER: FIND SOME GOAL-SETTING SUPPORT.**

"You have to set goals that are outside your comfort zone to reap the greatest rewards," says Miller. Her suggestion: Start a goal-setting group with like-minded, proactive, positive women from diverse backgrounds. In Miller's "More Than a Book" club, for example, nine women meet monthly to share goals and give positive feedback. Each person gets six minutes to state her progress and another six minutes to hear suggestions from the group.

## Move your body

Exercise is nature's antidepressant. It releases brain chemicals such as endorphins and serotonin, which can help you feel happier and less stressed. Research has shown that regular workouts are as effective as an antidepressant for some patients with depression. And the greater the length of the exercise program and the larger the total number of exercise sessions, the greater the decrease in depression—another good reason to aim for the milestone of 1,000 Curves workouts.

**HAPPINESS BOOSTER: PUT CURVES ON YOUR CALENDAR.**

Depressed or not, make sure your workouts don't go by the wayside when life gets hectic, says Susan Hyatt, master certified life coach in Evansville, Indiana. Instead, think of exercise as something of value that you give yourself to boost your overall health, energy, and mood.

## Make time to talk

In today's busy society, you have to go out of your way to nurture relationships. But it's well worth the effort. People who have more friends and a larger social network are happier and more likely to be married or involved in a committed, long-lasting relationship, says Sonja Lyubomirsky, PhD, professor of psychology at the University of California at Riverside and author of *The How of Happiness*. Happiness increases as the relationship deepens.

**HAPPINESS BOOSTER: SCHEDULE TIME WITH YOUR LOVED ONES.**

Set a "date night" every few weeks so that you can enjoy your sweetheart's company without distraction. And each morning, ask him about what he'll be doing that day, then follow up with a "reunion conversation" after work. You can do the same with your kids around the dinner table. And don't forget to make time to connect with your best gal pals at Curves, on the phone, via e-mail, or by sending a card.

**HAPPY THOUGHTS**

"Each day when I get up, I **choose** to be happy



## Be more curious

Happiness is just one of the many benefits of leading a more curious life, says Todd Kashdan, PhD, associate professor of psychology at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, and author of *Curious? Discover the Missing Ingredient to a Fulfilling Life*. “When we’re open to new experiences and relish the unknown, positive events linger and we extract more pleasure and meaning from them,” he says. Curious people also report having more satisfying relationships, and they develop new connections more easily. On the flip side: “Once we think we know something, we stop paying attention. The brain wants to conserve energy and doesn’t care if we’re happy.”

**HAPPINESS BOOSTER: LOOK FOR SOMETHING NEW.** When you’re talking with someone, try to find at least three novel things about him or her during your time together. Is your best friend wearing new earrings? Did she just reveal a hint about what she’d like for Christmas? Does your boss simply love jazz music? The goal is to recognize how complex people really are and to realize how little we actually know about someone. Do the same in familiar

**“Adventure keeps life fresh. I added chickens to our list of pets. They keep me laughing!”**

—JENI GERLACH, 47, HIGHWAY 58 CURVES, CHATTANOOGA, TENNESSEE

settings: For instance, at the grocery store, be on the lookout for new varieties of exotic fruits and vegetables. Or at work, glance around at others’ workspaces for new photos or knickknacks.

## Spread kindness

If you’ve ever been on the receiving end of an unexpected gift, good deed, or kind smile, then you know how good it feels to accept an act of kindness. But it feels even better to be the do-gooder who is cooking dinner and doing laundry for a friend who just got out of the hospital, for example. Offering something that goes above and beyond provides a special boost to our well-being, says Lyubomirsky. »

and then try to build my day around that.”

—KATHY LUPER, 60, CURVES WEDGWOOD, FORT WORTH, TEXAS



## Count your blessings

When Michele Woodward, a master coach in Washington, D.C., learned last December that she had thyroid cancer, she made the conscious choice to count her blessings. It may sound Pollyannaish, Woodward says, but counting blessings really helps shift your attention away from the negatives to focus on the positives.

“I told myself, ‘My mortgage is paid, I have a great team of doctors, my kids are healthy, and I have a great network of family and friends,’” she says. “Focusing on those blessings shifted the whole situation from ‘Woe is me’ to ‘Yes, I have cancer, but aren’t I so fortunate that the best doctors are going to help me figure this out?’”

### HAPPINESS BOOSTER: START KEEPING

**A “BLESSINGS” JOURNAL.** Each day, write a few things you’re grateful for; use the online journal on MyCurves.com if you’d like. Research shows that people who count their blessings tend to be more upbeat, hopeful, and happy (and less consumed by material things) than those who don’t. Curves member Ellie Bernier, 62, of the Rapid City, SD—South Curves, agrees: “Every morning, I write down five things I’m grateful for, things like the beautiful bluebird at the feeder, the scent of lavender from my garden, an e-mail from a faraway friend. Focusing on what’s good in my life gets my day off to a happy start.”

## Silence your inner nag

How we talk to ourselves can have a significant effect on how positive we feel. Do you find yourself saying “I should lose weight” or “I should exercise”? Rephrase these thoughts to be more positive. “‘Should’ is oppressive,” says Woodward. “It implies that someone else is making a choice for

you. There’s a ton of judgment that goes with it.”

**HAPPINESS BOOSTER: REPHRASE YOUR SELF-TALK.** Whenever you catch yourself saying “I should...,” substitute “I choose to....” That simple word shift empowers you and releases you from energy-draining guilt. Examples: “I choose to clean my office,” “I choose to rake the leaves,” or “I choose to eat a healthy lunch.”

## Reconnect with a higher power

Many studies have linked greater happiness to both religious practices (the rituals, beliefs, and practices of an organized religion) and

**HAPPINESS BOOSTER: CHOOSE A CHARITY.** Think ahead and plan future acts of kindness and charity. For example, maybe you want to play the piano once a month for senior citizens, teach people to read, or send encouraging notes to soldiers. Or simply plan to do something nice for the people you meet each day. “I come to Curves with the expectation of giving kindness to the women there,” says Jean Murphy, 56, who does the circuit in Livermore, California. “I can be a listening ear for someone’s struggles, I can share words of encouragement, or I can listen to another woman’s delights and share her happiness.”

### HAPPY THOUGHTS

“Taking care of myself makes me happy. And

“Since returning to church, I’ve found an **inner peace** that sets a glow in me now more than ever before.”

—CAROL RAMOS, 40,  
CURVES LOGAN SQUARE, CHICAGO



spirituality (an inner belief system that gives you strength and comfort). People who are religious also have an easier time coping with life’s curveballs. And one study found that women who stopped attending religious services experienced more anxiety than those who maintained attendance.

**HAPPINESS BOOSTER: REKINDLE YOUR FAITH.** If you don’t have a place of worship, make it a goal to find one in the next month or two. Ask friends and family members where they go, or check out [Worshipquest.org](http://Worshipquest.org) and other similar Internet sites. If you simply haven’t been making time to attend services at your current place of worship, write it on your calendar, just as you do doctors’ appointments. Also schedule 15 minutes each day for prayer.

## Live in the moment

Have you ever become “lost” in what you’re doing? Athletes call it being “in the zone.” Artists say they’re “immersed in the creative process.” But you don’t have to be an artist or an athlete to experience this wonderful feeling, which psychologists call “flow”—another key part of the happiness equation.

**HAPPINESS BOOSTER: GO FOR MORE “FLOW.”** Flow occurs when you’re facing clear goals that you know how to achieve without thinking too much. Flow also happens when you tackle a task that’s a bit challenging (neither too easy nor too frustrating). Think about what puts you “in the zone,” whether it’s knitting, dancing, reading, playing an instrument, running, singing, or doing a task at work. Then try to schedule more of those activities each day. Need help? Check out the book *Finding Flow*, by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.

## Savor life’s joys

Anticipate, savor, express, and reflect. These are the four stages of happiness, according to Gretchen Rubin, author of *The Happiness Project* (see box on page 42). Savoring is often overlooked in our busy lives, but it’s the difference between mindlessly scarfing a piece of chocolate and slowly relishing its rich flavor, aroma, and texture.

**HAPPINESS BOOSTER: TUNE IN.** Whether you’re on an outing with your family, a trek through the woods, or a mundane walk to the mailbox, pay attention to your surroundings so that you can recall them later with pleasure. Ask yourself, “What do I see? What do I hear? What do I smell? What do I taste? What do I feel?”

## The Curves Connection

“When I’m at Curves, I feel truly happy. It’s often the best thing I’ve done for myself that day!” says Renee Lewin, 62, who attends Curves Oceanside in Oceanside, NY. As you read through the rest of this special “happiness” section, you’ll understand why. Much of what happens in the circuit has been found to make us happier, such as exercising and spending time with friends (two tips on page 42).

While you are at Curves, why not make a concerted effort to “exercise your

happiness muscle” even more with these tips:

- When you come into Curves, see if you can find something new on the bulletin board.
- When you’re at a Recovery Station, think of things you’re grateful for or say a silent prayer.
- When you greet the women at Curves, try to spread kindness, sharing a compliment, a joke, or a few words of motivation.
- When you’re stretching before you leave the club, focus in on how alive your body feels. Praise yourself for the good work you’ve done.

when I am happy, I am a better wife and mother.”

—KELLY KIRBY, 34, CURVES NEW GLASGOW, NOVA SCOTIA

# Unexpected Blessings

Cindy Wilcox started Curves to change her numbers... and wound up changing her life. **BY HALSEY ANDERSON**

**In March 2006, Cindy Wilcox**—a director at Village Presbyterian Church in Prairie Village, Kansas—joined the Curves in Mission, Kansas, with a very specific, well, *mission* in mind. “I joined Curves to achieve the following three health goals: lose 25 pounds, improve my cholesterol, and lower my blood pressure.” Over the years, she did just that...and much more. “I lost 29 pounds, and my blood pressure and cholesterol numbers are ‘great,’ according to my doctor,” she says. “But that was just the tip of the iceberg.”

For one thing, since joining Curves, Cindy, 52, experienced a boost in her mood. For many years, Cindy has struggled with depression and has taken medication for it. “Since starting at Curves, I have been able to cut my antidepressant medication in half, which was a gift I had not expected.” But it’s one that she says didn’t surprise her doctor one bit. “It’s amazing how good exercise makes me feel,” adds Cindy. Her Curves workouts also helped her through the sorrow of losing her best friend, Catherine, to ovarian cancer in September 2008. “My session at Curves each day became a time of meditation for me. It was the key to working through my grief.”

Cindy’s newfound Curves “family of friends” has also been a wealth of support in other ways. “The whole staff has really nurtured me,” says Cindy. “[Curves owner] Marcia Bishop has been a guiding light on my path. And I work out with the same group of ‘girls’ every morning at 7 a.m. If one of us doesn’t show up, the Curves staff will call to check on her. We all truly care for each other.”

Curves also helped Cindy discover a passion for healthy foods. Though she was initially skeptical about being able to change her eating habits, Cindy soon discovered a new “secret vice,” as she calls it: “I love to find high-quality food that is healthy and tastes delicious,” she laughs. “And my favorite treats are Skinny Cow



desserts!” Each week, Cindy does a special “circuit” outside of Curves, visiting two different grocery stores to satisfy her healthy “cravings.” “I don’t deprive myself,” Cindy adds. “I’ve just changed my eating habits to include lots of whole grains, vegetables, and fruits. And I don’t buy anything without reading the label.”

With her life today filled with blessings—both planned and unexpected—Cindy’s attitude is certainly one of gratitude. “I am deeply grateful for my family, my friends, and my faith. I’m grateful for everything in my life.”

## When Happiness Is in Hiding

Happiness feels good, but we can’t be happy all the time. Permit yourself to feel sad now and again, says Darrin M. McMahon, PhD, author of *Happiness: A History*. “We tend to compound our sadness by ‘guilting’ ourselves for feeling sad,” he says.

Still, if none of the happiness tips in this article

are resonating with you or you’re experiencing persistent sadness, physical symptoms (such as sleep problems, changes in appetite, or pain that doesn’t respond to treatment), consider whether your feelings may be a sign of something deeper, such as depression. “There are

many types of depression,” says Cara Gardenswartz, PhD, a psychologist in Beverly Hills, California. Some women experience occasional depressive episodes, and others exhibit a lower level of depression for a long period of time. Childbirth, infertility, menopause, job stress, money problems, or

caregiving can all trigger depression. Episodes can even be brought on by “positive” life changes. Or perhaps you have unresolved issues that a therapist can help you work through. Whatever the reason is, be sure to seek help. We all deserve to be happy.

—JULIE A. EVANS