

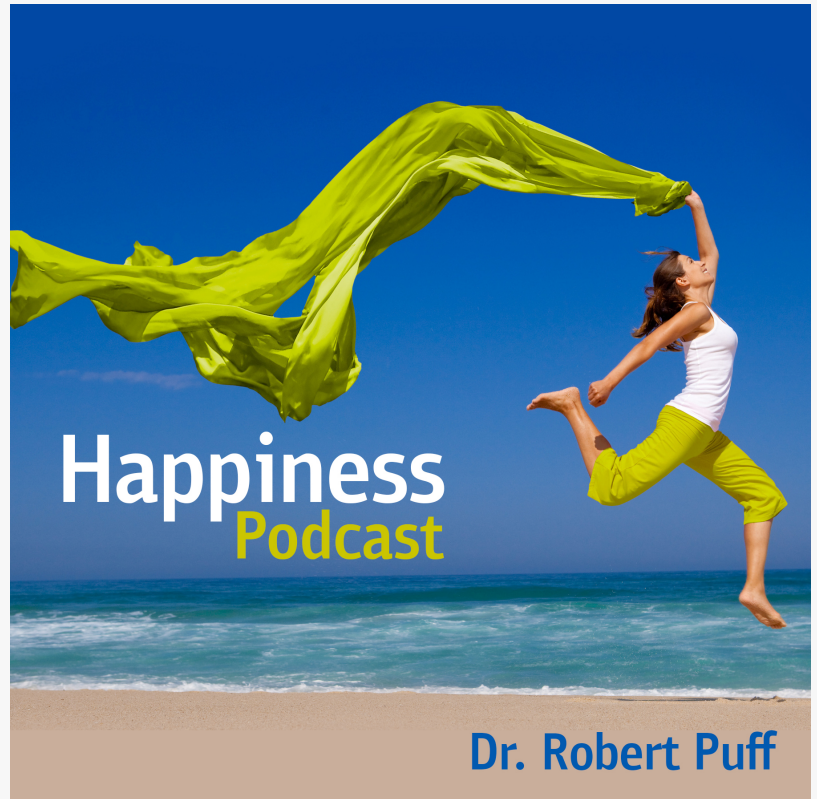
Getting Back to Happiness

On our daily journey towards creating happiness in our lives, we get off course and suffer. How do we find ways to get back on and stay on track?

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If you want to be at optimal health, you need to become fit.

If you want to be at optimal [happiness](#), you also need to be fit, but in a slightly different way.

Statistics tell us that Americans have a weight problem. One-third of all Americans are severely obese, by the numbers, and another one-third are classified as overweight. A full two-thirds of us should work on our physical fitness.



Happiness Podcast

But I'm not a dietitian, and I'm not a personal trainer. My field is happiness.

The thing is, I have observed that our nation's unhappiness problem is even more severe than our national struggle with the scale. If we were to gauge citizens' level of happiness fitness instead of its physical fitness, we would likely recognize we have an even larger crisis on our hands.

What I'm offering here is a metaphor, but a very useful one — I'm looking at happiness as it compares to our epidemic of overweight. Although health and fitness contribute to our level of happiness — to how we feel, and to what activities we can participate in with vigor — it would be a mistake to link these ideas too tightly. People of all shapes and sizes have happiness as their birthright.

But what we do to lose weight is very similar to what we do to become emotionally fit, in that

there are three steps we have to follow to obtain fitness:

1. Exercise
2. Make healthy food choices
3. Get back on track

Weight loss is a mighty struggle for people who have that as their goal, and regardless of the method one chooses, it's an arduous path. People who haven't tried to lose weight may think that some of the available surgeries (gastric band, gastric bypass, etc.) are an easy fix for obesity, but these procedures can be risky, and they also require changes to diet, proving that there is no true shortcut to fitness. Persistence is the only way to achieve any kind of fitness, including physical and emotional varieties.



Dr. Robert Puff, Ph.D.

Let's take a closer look at three steps to weight loss as we think of how they are also the three steps to emotional fitness, or happiness:

Exercise

We all know the role exercise plays in weight loss. It's a way to burn calories and to burn fat. We must burn about 3,500 calories to lose a pound of fat. According to the Mayo Clinic, that means that if we burn 500 calories each day beyond what our body requires to function, we should lose about a pound per week. (Research has shown that weight loss is a bit more complicated than this, but this basic understanding is a good starting point for our discussion.)

Normal life functions burn a certain number of calories each day. Beyond the calories required to breathe, sit, stand, walk around the house, and watch TV, exercise burns additional calories, and for this reason it's a go-to strategy for losing body fat. If you weigh 155 pounds, walking can burn around 167 calories in 30 minutes. Jogging or running can burn 372 calories in the same 30 minutes. There are many lists available that spell out the calorie-burning value of multiple types of exercise, from swimming to yoga to sex. (It turns out that we don't have to suffer to exercise!)

When we are thinking of emotional fitness instead of weight loss, there are also ways we can "exercise," each with varying degrees of effectiveness as well.

It's really about what we do throughout the day to flex our happiness muscles. Do we treat others with kindness? If someone tries to cut us off in traffic, do we scream at them, or do we slow down and let them in? Are our interactions with others uplifting to them, or do we try to cut them down? Are our thoughts, words, and actions good for our soul or bad for our soul?

And we must look further than our actions and words to our life situation. Are our relationships building us up, or are they tearing us down? And in our work lives, have we found purpose and meaning, or do we hate every moment as we focus on negativity at the office?

We can exercise where our emotional state is concerned. If we want to be happy — the emotional equivalent of the physical concept of fitness — there are many exercises we can try. Here are a few:

- We can meditate. Meditation is a powerful tool for focusing on the still, quiet voice within while cutting through the often-negative din of the day.
- We can exercise (literally). It turns out that the value of exercise is not metaphorical; moving our bodies can release endorphins to make us feel better.
- We can go out in nature. Being in the grandeur of nature can help us to put pettiness aside and consider our larger purpose in the universe.
- We can spend time with people who sustain us. Think of how you feel when you spend time with people who have gentle, peaceful souls, and you'll recognize how this is a perfect "exercise" to lead to happiness.

When we engage in literal exercise, particularly when we are no longer used to doing so, it may hurt a little bit, but afterwards, it feels so good. The same is true with happiness, and those ways in which we can actively participate to improve our lives.

It is so important to be proactive about our emotional fitness. For each activity we engage in, we need to ask ourselves a simple question: Is this something that is adding to my contentment, or is it tearing me down?

Each action we take in life can be scrutinized in this way. Over the years, I have worked with so many people who have longed for improved happiness, and my advice has been pretty consistent. I tell them to meditate, to get out in nature, to take time to consider the beauty of a sunset.

It's no surprise to me that I have never had anyone come back to me and say how terrible their experience was when they followed my advice. Instead, they always come back and say, "That was wonderful!"

It might be easy to take in a sunset (though hard for some who are trapped in a fast-paced, frenetic life to make time for it). Meditation is somewhat different in this regard. Meditating can be a challenge for those who are new to it. In time, though, it begins to make sense. We realize

there may be some good in meditating — we feel it inside — so we decide to keep working on it; we just have to get used to it, exactly like exercise.

If we haven't exercised in years, it's going to be uncomfortable at first, and if we've never consciously meditated, that will feel hard, too. Soon enough, though, it will start to feel good, and we'll want to do it on a regular basis.

Making healthy food choices

When we want to lose weight, another strategy we try is making better food choices. Someone with a desire to lose weight will try to limit the calories they take in, since the more we take in, the more we have to burn in order to start working on reducing our fat stores. Remember, it's necessary to burn 3,500 extra calories to lose a pound of fat, so if we consume an 1,100-calorie value meal at a fast-food chain, we've expended half of our daily calorie budget, and we're nowhere near halfway done with eating for the day!

The basic idea about weight loss — that we must burn extra calories to dissolve fat — suggests that people who want to be fit should eat foods that count. Whole grains have more bang for their buck than white bread does, for just one example.

Most people understand the concept of consuming good, intentional calories for maximum health and weight-loss potential. Remember, though, that we're dealing with a metaphor comparing the process of losing weight to the process of gaining happiness.

Whether we're trying to lose weight or gain happiness, we need to scrutinize what we take in all day long. Are we eating high-carb junk food? Likewise, are we exposing ourselves to the equivalent of junk food in our daily influences?

It's not good for us to spend hours watching the news, especially when our world is in so much crisis. After watching hours of news, we start to feel horrible inside.

And what else are we mentally consuming? Are we watching television shows that include the sort of troubling content that infects our dreams? Are we spending time arguing with strangers on social media so that when we finally leave our computers, we feel beaten up and misunderstood?

When we offer our minds a steady diet of troubling or negative content, is it any wonder we're out of shape when it comes to our personal contentment? Whatever we consume, our body processes, and it suffuses our entire body before we finally expel it.

The truly unfortunate part of this is that our bodies get used to what we offer it, whether it's unwholesome food or negative content. I have a friend who gets up every single day at 5 a.m. and turns on a television news analysis show that is two hours of nothing but negative political

commentary on the current occupant of the White House? While it's good to be informed about the world, even to my friend, that feels like overkill — but she can't seem to tear herself away. It's like an all-you-can-eat buffet of negativity.

Have you ever had an ear worm? You walk into the pharmacy, and the music on the overhead speaker includes a song you never really liked, despite its catchiness. Three hours later, you find yourself humming it in traffic. It's stuck inside your head, and you're going to have to deal with it until it finally unhooks itself and moves on.

Whatever we feed our minds keeps playing and goes on and on. In this way, whatever we expose ourselves to affects us and sticks, perhaps on a deeper level than we recognize.

What are we feeding our minds? We can tell by how we feel. If we feed ourselves happiness, peace, kindness, and beauty, we can anticipate a beautiful life. For everything we expose ourselves to, we must ask ourselves, "Is this feeding my soul?"

Get back on track

Everybody who has ever thought about losing weight understands the straightforward concepts of diet and exercise. There is a third aspect to weight loss that is discussed far less often, but it is probably the biggest key to achieving weight-loss goals. That is the concept of not giving up.

Persistence is critically important in weight loss. We might diet and exercise regularly, but then one day we give in to pressure or desire. We might thoughtlessly consume food that we know has less value and extra calories, or we might skip exercising. It's actually quite normal to take a day off from time to time; with exercise, for example, a break is sometimes necessary for muscles to stretch and heal.

But a successful weight-loss plan means that we come back from our break and we try again.

Many people who embark on a weight-loss journey have days or weeks of success with their eating and exercise plans, and they may even lose some of the weight they want to get rid of. Ultimately, though, they may find that they take a break for a day, and that day off turns into a week off, and suddenly they're no longer doing what they set out to do at all. They've given up, not intentionally, but through attrition — a gradual lessening of their efforts — or by stopping cold.

A successful fitness regimen requires that we come back to it after an off day. The truth is, a diet or exercise plan can get hard, and we just say, "Screw it." Instead, we could offer ourselves another message: "I had an off day, but I'm going to jump back in and keep trying."

With focused attention on our fitness, we may get into quite good shape, and the same is true with happiness. Our happiness diet can be really good — but then we get off of it. We may find

ourselves complaining too much or working too hard or being around people who tear us down.

When we find that we have fallen off of our happiness plan, do we just give up? I hope not. I hope we choose the superior option, which is to say, "I can do this. Today is a new day. This moment is a new moment. I'm going to work toward embracing my happiness."

What we need to do is to decide once again that we are going to do the things that feed our soul. We can intentionally choose those actions and influences that will create peace and happiness for us. If we're not sure what to do, we can try things like listening to the [Happiness Podcast](#), or reading books about people who are getting things right in terms of their own satisfaction. We can take on habits, like meditation, that help us to find contentment and peace in each moment of life.

And when we get off track, we can recognize that each day is a new chance to start again and to get things right.

I find that it is helpful to keep a list handy to offer options of things that are good for me — things like uplifting books, positive entertainment, or uplifting activities to do with positive people. When we hit a bump in the happiness road, we can consult our list and try one of those activities to get ourselves moving steadily in the right direction once again.

Even though we don't know what the future holds, we can keep choosing the more positive path to get back on track with our happiness diet. Let this be our mantra: "I will keep working toward finding contentment and happiness in life." And if we keep making the choices that are good for our soul, we'll get there.

About the Happiness Podcast

If you would like to learn more, the latest episode of the Happiness Podcast, hosted and created by [Dr. Robert Puff](#), is now available. It is titled, "#287 Happiness – Getting Back to Happiness" and can be listened to at:

<https://www.happinesspodcast.org/287-happiness-getting-back-to-happiness/>

Links to listen to the Happiness Podcast:

<http://smarturl.it/HappinessPodcast>

The Happiness Podcast has over 250 episodes, with over 8 million downloads.

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