

A Stanford psychologist says these 6 things are the keys to happiness and success

Tanya Lewis, Business Insider



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If you want to be successful, you should work as hard as possible and suffer, right? Or so we're told.

But that notion is completely wrong, according to psychologist Emma Seppala, science director of the Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education at Stanford University.

As Seppala explains in her new book "[The Happiness Track: How to Apply the Science of Happiness to Accelerate Your Success](#)," being successful and being happy are not mutually exclusive.

"We have this misconception that in order to be successful, we have to postpone or sacrifice our happiness now," Seppala told Business Insider.

Seppala has scoured the research and identified six things that she says are key to being happy and successful:

1. Live in the moment



(Business

(Insider)

In today's working world, we're encouraged to work nonstop in order to stay on top of everything. We're also constantly checking things off our to-do lists. But research suggests that when we're focused on the present, we're much more productive and more charismatic.

The Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes the experience of being intensely focused on something while enjoying what you're doing as the ["flow" state](#). His research suggests that whether you're an Olympic athlete or a mathematician, you are at your best when you're in flow.

2. Be resilient

When we're constantly working ourselves to the bone and feeling stressed, it activates our sympathetic nervous system, also known as the "fight or flight" response. [Studies show](#) that while short-term stress can be good for you, long-term stress is terrible for your health.

But if we can train ourselves to be more resilient to the setbacks in our lives, we're more likely to bounce back from them, [a 2004 study suggests](#). The study found that resilient people were able to recover faster (as measured by their heart rate and blood pressure) when they used positive emotions to respond to a stressful experience.

3. Keep calm (and carry on)



(AMC)

When you're constantly in overdrive, it can lead to burnout, which as much as half of the American workforce experiences, Seppala said. But if you take time to be calm, it can help you manage your energy.

In 2014, Seppala and her colleagues conducted [a small study](#) of 21 veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Half of them were assigned to do breathing meditation, and the other half received no intervention. The group that did the meditation reported lower PTSD symptoms and anxiety a month and even a year later.

Seppala told us that breathing exercises are an "absolutely critical" part of her own life, too.

4. Do more of nothing

In Western society, we have this ingrained notion that we need to constantly be doing something, or we're not being productive. But in fact, research suggests that we are most creative when we're not at our peak alertness.

In one [2011 study](#), researchers gave 428 students questionnaires to determine whether they were a morning person or an evening person, and then gave them logic problems in either the morning or late afternoon. Surprisingly, they found that morning people scored highest in the late afternoon, whereas evening people scored highest in the morning.

The findings suggest that we're at our mental best when we're not especially alert or focused. So if we want to be creative, we need to give ourselves more time off.

Even in our leisure time, we tend to go full bore. In surveys, when Americans are asked to define happiness, they often use words like excitement, elation, and thrill, whereas people in East Asian countries use words like peacefulness, serenity, and calm.

Seppala recommends building downtime into your workday by alternating high-intensity activities like preparing a presentation or attending a board meeting with low-intensity tasks like organizing your desk or files. And when possible, it's a good idea to "unplug" from work completely, she said.

5. Be good to yourself



(REUTERS/Phil Noble)

We tend to assume that because we're good at some things and bad at others, we should stick to our strengths. But that's a fallacy, Seppala said.

Research suggests that a fear of failure can lead you to [choke up](#), make you more likely to give up, lead to poor decisions such as [cheating on tests](#) or [making questionable investments](#). It may also make it harder to pursue the career you want.

Instead, Seppala said, you should be kind to yourself, remember that everyone makes mistakes, and observe your negative thoughts from a distance without letting yourself really dwell on them.

6. Be compassionate to others

Finally, we often assume that we should be looking out for ourselves first and foremost. But in fact, research suggests that you're better off nurturing supportive relationships with others. If you have good relationships with your boss, colleagues, or employees, you're more likely to inspire loyalty, which in turn makes everyone more productive, Seppala said.

And you can actually train yourself to be compassionate, Seppala and her colleagues have found. People who underwent a nine-session training program at Stanford's Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education had [lower stress](#), were [more empathetic](#), were [more likely to help others](#), and were [more resilient](#) to the suffering of others.

"If you have supportive relationships with others, you end up doing well in the long run," Seppala said.