

BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



Finding Happiness Makes a Difference and Brain Health Matters

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is working to develop brain healthy communities, creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health, optimizing brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Today we are celebrating the International Day of Happiness and its implications for promoting and protecting brain health.

How did you celebrate International Day of Happiness on March 21? The day was created by the United Nations General Assembly to recognize that happiness is a fundamental goal and an important indicator of our progress as a society. Happiness may not be the first thing we think of when we reflect on this past year, yet there are ways to find happiness even during difficult times. The key is in training our brains to look beyond the things that are robbing us of the peace and joy that make us happy.

It has been suggested that happiness is a choice — we choose to be happy — but our happiness is also related to the choices we make. The [Harvard Study of Adult Development](#) began following more than 700 men in 1938. In addition to collecting medical data, blood samples, and brain scans, every two years the researchers interviewed the participants and asked questions about their work and home lives and mental and emotional wellness. As the participants of the study aged, researchers found two traits that were associated with increased levels of happiness.

- **Letting go.** The study participants who were happier over time began to focus more on what they thought was important. They no longer found it necessary to “sweat the small stuff.” They were better at letting go of past failures and unhealthy relationships, while paying more attention to the things that made them happy.
- **Staying connected.** The study found a strong connection between participants’ happiness and close relationships with a spouse, family, and friends. Loneliness can be a brain health risk factor while personal connections can be a brain health protective factor, creating mental and emotional stimulation.

One way to stay focused on living a brain happy and healthy life is by practicing mindfulness. Mindfulness purposely focuses our attention on the present moment. It can increase our positive emotions, levels of happiness, and overall well-being. Mindfulness doesn't mean eliminating fear or blocking out the negative things happening around us. It's a state of being that makes it OK to be happy and achieve success despite those things. It is a set of skills and an orientation to life that involves monitoring and accepting what is happening in the present moment.

One of the greatest things about happiness is that it seems to be contagious. When there are large numbers of happy people, it makes entire communities, and even entire countries, a happier place to live. If we want to feel better and improve our brain health, we can start by focusing on the things that bring us happiness.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO PROTECT YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

It's no surprise that money and material gains will not make you happy, but researchers suggest the pathway to happiness includes feeling good, doing good, and engaging fully. The BHI and [Harvard Health](#) suggest these ways to increase your happiness.

- **Get involved.** Finding a sense of purpose can improve your mood. Volunteer opportunities abound on the Suncoast: find something about which you are passionate. Search [VolunteerMatch](#) by zip code for opportunities in your community.
- **Go back to your childhood.** What made you happy when you were young? Sports? Art? Music? Get back to that activity you associate with being happy.
- **Buy time.** Money may not buy happiness, but it can buy time. Instead of investing in "things," spend your money on services like lawn care, grocery delivery and housekeeping that give you more time to connect with friends and family and do the things that bring you joy.
- **Get moving.** Exercise boosts the production endorphins, the brain chemicals that help ease pain and create a sense of well-being. And if you feel happy, you are more likely to exercise, which makes you feel happy, and if you feel happy...it's a never-ending cycle, but a good one.
- **Get help when you need it.** Sometimes there is just too much going on in your life for you to feel truly happy—and that's the time to get some help. Find a therapist who can help you deal with your feelings or join a support group. Connecting with other people who are facing similar issues can help remind you that you are not alone in your struggle.
- **BE BRAIN HEALTHY and adopt a lifestyle** that includes thoughts, behaviors, emotions, responses and language that promote:
 - Stress resilience
 - Nutrition
 - Physical activity
 - Sleep
 - Social connection
 - Emotional wellbeing
 - Meaning and Purpose
 - Cognitive stimulation and creativity

- Engaging with nature
- General health
- Positive impacts

About the Brain Health Initiative (www.brainhealthinitiative.org)

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is a cutting-edge, new approach to protecting brain health, optimizing brain performance, and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI is a collaborative effort with Massachusetts General Hospital, a Harvard Medical School Teaching Hospital, to build brain healthy communities through education, collaboration, research, innovation, and action, with a specific focus on *brain health promotion, prevention, early detection, evidence-based intervention and optimization of performance*. The BHI is creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the ***Be Brain Healthy*** movement, ***because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference***. To view all Brain Health Boosts [click here](#).