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## Better Body Better Living

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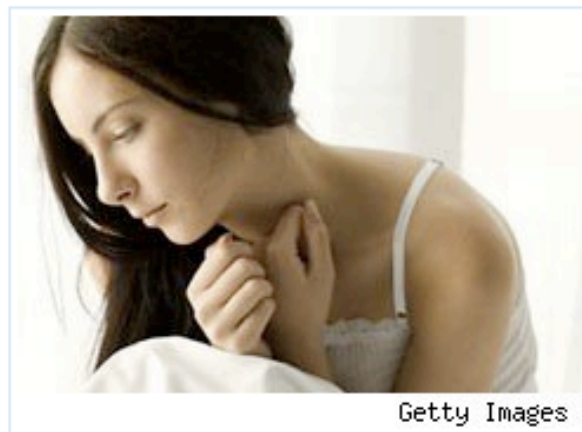
## Happiness Roadblocks

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By [Stephanie Tweto Jacob](#) Sep 27th 2010 4:30PM



Aristotle said fulfillment and contentment are pathways to happiness. Those enjoyable-sounding trails, however, are often muddled by roadblocks, says M.J. Ryan, executive coach and author of "[The Happiness Makeover](#)." The good news is you can learn to navigate the obstacles. "Studies show that, on average, around 50 percent of happiness can be cultivated in ourselves and 50 percent is innate," she says. "Some people have a higher or lower set

point than others, but everyone can learn to be happier by actions that they take."

It does take work – you're essentially retraining thought processes that have been around as long as you have. "You're not going to change from a pessimist to an optimist over night," cautions Ryan. "But even someone who is chemically depressed can feel less [depressed](#)."

The first step is to know what may be standing in your way and then learn how to reroute yourself. Here, some of the most common roadblocks to happiness and a guide for getting around them.

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### **Expecting the worst all the time.**

Does the phrase "if I expect the worst, then I won't be let down" cross your mind on a regular basis? Imagining a bad outcome elicits negative emotions like worry and fear that, in turn, ignite the [stress](#) response that floods our bodies with [cortisone](#) and adrenaline, says Ryan. When that stress response is chronically turned on, it not only wears down your body's immune system, but it also zaps your chance of experiencing a positive feeling, like happiness. "You can't have a negative emotion and a positive emotion simultaneously," says Ryan. "It's physiologically not possible."

All you're doing by worrying or anticipating something that isn't happening (and may never happen) "is keeping the stress response turned on way high and not enjoying whatever you could enjoy in that moment," says Ryan. Essentially, you're cheating yourself out of happiness.

### **Passing the buck.**

If you feel you deserve to be happy and your [insert kid, parent, spouse, job, car or new pair of shoes here] is supposed to make you happy, keep reading. "There's absolutely positive proof that that's just not true," says Ryan. "For a moment something else can actually boost us up, but it's only a matter of time before we're looking for the next thing." It's an insatiable cycle that won't result in long-term happiness.

Not convinced? Think of it conversely. "We always used to believe that if terrible things happened, we'd be miserable forever, right? In fact, people who've had terrible things happen dip down for a while, but eventually they return to the level of happiness they had before," Ryan says. "Happiness isn't about our circumstances as much as we think it is."

Rather, your happiness is your own responsibility. Try turning your focus within: What are the gifts that I have, who am I and what do I have uniquely to offer, and when I go and offer that, I feel better and happier. "That's essentially what Aristotle meant by fulfillment," says Ryan. "It has nothing to do with anyone else or anything."

### **Thinking life should be perfect – and yours isn't.**

For starters, the world isn't perfect. So you're fighting a losing battle if you think yours can be. If you're always in a state of discontent – reveling in what's wrong with, or missing from or undesirable about your life, you're probably not thinking about what is actually good about it. "Ask yourself three questions at the end of the day," says Ryan. "What am I thankful for today? What did I enjoy today? And what am I satisfied about today? And you can't say 'nothing.' You have to come up with something."

The point is to focus on what you do have – be it pets, [relationships](#), experiences, favorite places – so you don't have to think about what you don't have. "It shines a flashlight of awareness about what's good and whole and enjoyable in our lives rather than the want, want, want. I want this; I don't have that."

Research has even shown that a regular practice of gratitude – simply asking yourself questions like those above – has been found to decrease [depression](#), even in severely depressed people.

**Not thinking of others. Ever.**

It turns out being generous can make you happier. You don't have to have a million dollars to donate to the charity of your choice to reap the benefits, either. People who simply do five small random acts of kindness – putting a quarter in someone else's parking meter or opening the door for someone – have been found to be happier than those who don't, says Ryan. "In doing these things, we activate the part of our brains that give us a little endorphin boost so we feel better."

**Expecting life to be fair.**

Life isn't fair. And fretting about the lack of fairness that exists essentially leads to comparing yourself, your life or your situation to someone else's and then feeling worse about yourself, your life or your situation. The trick isn't to stop comparing, says Ryan, because there's a part of the brain that can't help but compare – it's to compare well. In other words, try what's called a downward comparison. For example, if being treated unfairly by a friend or spouse or boss has you upset, try thinking, "Well, at least I'm not [going hungry]." It helps you understand that, relatively speaking, your situation may not be so bad. "Your brain is going to compare, so you might as well have it compare in the direction that's going to make you happier, rather than miserable," says Ryan. "You will actually feel better."

Bonus: It may also make you more giving. "People who downward compare are more generous than others because they recognize their relative well-offness and then want to help others as a result," says Ryan.

**The bottom line.**

The trick with all of these is to catch yourself on the negative-thinking road and make a choice to think about it differently instead. "You want to build the positive habits like a road that exists alongside the negative ones," Ryan says. "It's there – your stress, worry, anger – whatever it is, but you're building another way of looking at life, approaching life, dealing with people. It's substituting those thoughts for more wholesome thoughts."

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