

By dwelling less on stress and reflecting on the positives, BBC Future's guide to happiness will help you to feel less overwhelmed by world events.

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With the unfolding global coronavirus pandemic leading to people being confined to their homes, borders being shut and economic instability, it can be hard not to feel overwhelmed by the state of the world at the moment. The good news? Even in times of stress and anxiety, you can take proactive steps to lift your mood.

The science of emotions is incredibly complicated, but it is also well-studied. Over the years, BBC Future has interviewed dozens of world-leading experts in psychology who shared with us practical, everyday tips for coping better with stress. We recently trawled through the research. Here are some of the top tips we found – some of which may surprise you.

1. Distract yourself.

It's easy to run over and over the topic that's stressing us out, whether that's the new coronavirus outbreak, the state of the climate or something else. But stopping people from ruminating on a recent stressful event – by offering a distraction – can lower their blood pressure back to normal levels quicker than offering no distraction.

2. If you meditate, be aware that it might not work for everyone.

In times like these, many people might find meditation and mindfulness helpful. But others might not – for precisely the reason above. For some people, practicing stillness might simply invite rumination. It can be difficult not to think about stressful events when trying to clear our minds. This may be why evidence for the benefits of mindfulness and meditation is patchy. For those people, a more compelling distraction than meditation might be required.

3. Reframe the situation.

How we interpret our emotions is largely down to how they're framed – in other words, the context. While talking about his 2017 book *Happy*, Derren Brown gives the example of a tennis player going into a match thinking “I must win”. If they set an expectation that winning is everything, if they start to lose, they feel like an abject failure. This is a trap perfectionists tend to fall into, and it's why perfectionists tend to respond with more guilt, shame and anger when they feel they aren't succeeding. They may even be more likely to give up.

The player who goes into a match thinking “I will play the best I can”, however, believes that they are less hurt by losing, so long as they are doing their best. The signs of failure are interpreted differently by both players based on the expectations that they set for themselves.

It's worth thinking about how you can apply this in your daily life: can each moment or day be about doing the best you can in a stressful situation (“I will practice proper hygiene and social distancing”), rather than focusing on an outcome out of your control (“I will not and cannot get sick”)?

That control part is key. Stressful situations are often beyond our control, and we create anxiety and worry when we try to control what we can't. Focusing on what can be controlled, on the other hand, can decrease feelings of anxiety.

4. Don't obsess over being positive or happy.

This one may seem counterintuitive: it can be a bad idea to chase positive emotions. Actively pursuing happiness can lead to the reverse effect. For one thing, the more we focus on our own happiness, the less we focus on the happiness of the people around us, which has been shown to contribute to feelings of isolation and disconnection. There is also a link between searching for happiness and feeling that time is slipping away.

And again, if you're focused on an outcome like “I must feel happy”, you may feel worse about yourself if you don't succeed – even though it's perfectly natural to have a more difficult time feeling happy in stressful times.

We can improve our mood by focusing on the small things that bring happiness to us each day

5. Focus on the small things.

It may be wise, then, to spend less time trying to become happy, and focus more on the little things that make us happy.

In her book *Ten Minutes to Happiness*, Sandi Mann, a lecturer at the University of Central Lancashire, advocates keeping a daily journal. Her strategy is based on “positive psychology” – a well-established area of psychology that suggests we can improve our mood by focusing on the small things that bring happiness to us each day. Mann says that answering the following six questions, a task that should only take 10 minutes, can help us to find more happiness in life.

1. What experiences, however mundane, gave you pleasure?
2. What praise and feedback did you receive?
3. What were the moments of pure good fortune?
4. What were your achievements, however small?
5. What made you feel grateful?
6. How did you express kindness?

The benefits of keeping a short journal like this are two-fold. When we write, it helps to remind us of the small things that brought us happiness. It also provides us with an archive of everything that has made us happy in the past, which we can reflect on at a later date.



People wave next to a banner reading Tutto Andra Bene (Credit: Getty Images)

6. Clean up – maybe.

Should you find yourself quarantined, take this opportunity to clean your house. "Kondo-ing" your home has been shown to carry many benefits. Clutter makes it harder for us to focus on tasks, so should you find yourself working from home, a quick tidy up might help you to get your jobs done. A messy bedroom has been linked with difficulty sleeping, and messy kitchens with making poor health choices, like reaching for junk food. If you are going to be spending more time in the house, it will be worth your while getting your living spaces in order.

However, de-cluttering is not for everyone. Hoarders use physical objects to reinforce feelings of comfort and security. For those people, tidying up activates the brain's pain-processing regions.

7. Balance your social media consumption.

Social media might appear to be filled with bad news, but for many it is also a key way to stay updated and connected with friends and loved ones. Keeping your phone out of your bedroom, or self-imposing screen-free time, can help you to balance the negativity with the benefits social media brings.

8. Get out of town.

If you live in a city, another option might be to leave it behind for a short while – only if you can do so while maintaining safe social distancing and safeguarding your, and others', health.

People in cities suffer from disproportionately high rates of mood disorders. Meanwhile, views of water and blue skies can undo the effects of ill moods. As little as "a 20 to 30% increase in blue space visibility could shift someone from moderate distress into a lower category", suggests one paper from 2016.

Interestingly, the effect is not seen with green space, so the seaside will be better for you than the country.

So the next time you find yourself worrying about the world, consider taking some of these steps instead of ruminating, refreshing your social media feeds or, perhaps for some, even meditating. Remember: emotions are what we make of them.

<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200317-covid-19-how-to-stay-happy-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak>