

Full text of psychologist Katarina Blom's talk titled "You Don't Find Happiness, You Create It" at TEDxGöteborg conference. In inspiring talk, Katarina lets you in on a few secrets of the mind and how you can cultivate happiness by befriending your brain.

Listen to the MP3 Audio here: [You Don't Find Happiness, You Create It by Katarina Blom at TEDxGöteborg](#)

TRANSCRIPT:

Hello, everyone.

I would like us to begin with a short exercise.

So can everybody place their hands like this? Reach out your hands. Thank you and I will count to three.

And when I say three, I want you to clap your hands, OK? 1...2...3...

So, I did this to show you that we don't always do, as other people tell us to do. **We rather do as other people do.** And this is important when it comes to creating wellbeing in ourselves and in others.

I'm a psychologist, and I train organizations, teams and individuals in creating happiness and well-being. And a couple of years back, I co-authored a book on the Science of Happiness.

But when the book was published, I was actually in the middle of a life-crisis. I'd just broken up with the person who I thought I'd spend my life with. I had no place to live, and no job.

And I think this is a very common human experience. We all face problems. We end up in crisis, sometimes, and we struggle.

But at the same time, I think most of us we long for that other the kind of life that entails meaning and connection and happiness. But it's kind of difficult to live this life to always be there in this happy place.

And today, I want to show you why your brain is not always on your side when it comes to creating happiness. But also, what we can do to counter this.

And it's not going to be by just positive thinking. This takes **positive action**. Because happiness is a skill. We all can train and work on.

I want us to start here: **how it's not just about positive thinking?**

So let's begin with this. Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you're really worried about something and you kept worrying even though you knew that worrying won't change the situation or help the situation anyway? And nevertheless, you just kept on worrying. Hands up. Right? We're all doing this.

And if we could have total mind power, and just switched over toward these happy thoughts, we'd just have done that and get on with our lives. But that doesn't really happen. That's it

And did you know that, about **half of the time that you've been listening to this speech, your mind has probably been wandering off thinking about other things?**

According to a study by **Daniel Gilbert** and **Matthew Killingsworth**: *our minds wander 46.9% of the time we spend awake*. So our thoughts are automatic, they have a life of their own. And to create happiness by just controlled positive thinking. I think it's hard, if not even possible, impossible.

And I think it's time that we start talking more about this: **How can we**

take positive action, actually making the change in our lives?

Because if I would ask you to keep your focus on your breath, don't think about anything else for five minutes, I doubt that anyone in this room would be able to do that.

But if I would ask you to please raise your hand like this for five minutes, I think we all would be better able to achieve this.

So it's really difficult to control our thoughts, and we have a better chance of controlling our actions, our behavior. **Therefore, wellbeing is better built by positive action and not positive thinking.**

Also, we tend to look at ourselves as if we're these objective, rational beings that perceive situations in this objective manner and we process information, almost like a computer. We just take information in.

But in reality, we're far from objective. And that's actually a good thing. Because if we would truly be able to process and perceive reality in all its nuanced complexity, we would be rather lost, it would be an overwhelming experience.

So therefore, our brains have evolved several cognitive biases that helps us categorize and prioritize and sort information, making it more easy for us to navigate. But these cognitive biases, this sorting and prioritizing is really affecting how we perceive life, how we perceive different situations.

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And I'd like us to explore this further in a little **thought experiment**. So, I invite you all to think back at the last time that you had evaluated conversation with your boss or manager. And I'm quite sure that you got to hear a lot of good things, things like how you contribute to the

workplace.

But I'm also quite sure that you got to hear something that you can improve with yourself, with your performance. And once you leave this conversation, what do you think that your brain thinks is the most prioritized information? All the things that you're really good? Or the one thing that you should be improving?

Well, if you're somewhat like me, it would definitely be the latter. And this doesn't really have anything to do with how my brain works. This is actually a pattern that's been shown among people.

For example, Teresa Amabile is a professor at Harvard Business School. She did a **diary study** where she got to read people's diaries to explore how they experience everyday life. And she saw a pattern that the negative effect of a setback was more than twice as strong as the positive effect of a success.

And the same thing goes with money, that we feel way worse about losing an amount of money than we feel happy about gaining the same amount.

And if you would receive a compliment from a co-worker, and then a complaint from another coworker, these two comments don't neutralize each other. The complaint would definitely leave a stronger emotional mark. So now we need to ask ourselves, why?

WHY DO WE CARRY THIS EMOTIONAL ASYMMETRY?

Why do we have this preparedness to experience unpleasant and negative emotions? And to understand that we need to understand the context, the environment where our brain has been evolving for so many years.

Today, several studies say that we have evolved a negativity bias, which helps our attention to be drawn to unpleasant or possibly threatening

information. And this was really good back then and there, when we were at the savannah, fighting for survival every day.

But today, here and now, this definitely affects how we perceive our life, how we perceive our relations, our workplace, our own performance, and ourselves.

So to simplify this a bit, one could almost say that your brain is concerned that you survive throughout this day. It's less concerned that you're a happy survivor.

So by now we can understand that it's not strange that all of us sometimes feel anxious or tense, or we worry. In one sense, we were built for this. But most of us, we long for this other kind of life with the meaning and the connection and the happiness.

And I'm not sure that we can have one thing without the other. But there are definitely things and ways how we can cultivate happiness and build wellbeing. But this comes with good news, and bad.

The good news is that happiness is not something you find outside of yourself, and it's not something you have or don't have. It's a skill that we all can work on.

But the problem is that we just don't do it. And this definitely applies for myself. This is the worst part of having written a book on happiness, because whenever I'm having a bad day, there's always someone who can do like: *haven't you read your own book, Katarina, you should know better.*

So I've learned that not even experts on happiness know how to turn knowledge into action. And this is one of the reasons why me and a friend, we started a psychological gym, where organizations and the teams and individuals could come and train these skills in order to create more

happiness and wellbeing.

Because we want to make psychological training as common as physical training. Because today, we know so many things about how to eat properly and how to exercise to sustain a physical health.

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But what would be the psychological version of a green smoothie?
Or of doing 50 sit-ups? Is there really such a thing?

And I would say, yes, definitely. There are a lot of different exercises and things we can do, building healthy habits for ourselves. And I would like to present an example of this.

So once you finished listening to this speech, when you're leaving this room later tonight, I'd like you to bring out your smartphone and text a kind, appreciative gratitude text to someone that you care for. And maybe you can just notice how that fits.

And this is a good example of an exercise that I often do with leaders and teams. And just a couple of weeks back, I did this at the two day leadership conference. And later, I found out that one of the participants had texted his wife, writing: *I love you very, very, very much*, which made the wife think: *What are you doing at that leadership conference?*

And just texting one person at one time won't change the world in any way. But turning this into a healthy habit over time can have a large impact.

And to dedicate this habit to caring for your relationships might be one of the most powerful actions that you can take when it comes to happiness. So this might be the green smoothie that you've all been waiting for.

According to several studies, having functioning relationships is as important if not even more important, as exercising well and having a good diet. And this can even help us live longer.

In a study from Harvard University, which began already back in 1938, researchers followed over 700 people to understand what it is that makes us flourish as people. So they followed these participants for decades.

And in 2012, the results came. The researchers found that happiness doesn't come from wealth, doesn't come from fame or working hard. It comes from relationships. And it's not about the number of friends that you have, or whether or not you're in a committed relationship with a partner.

They found that it's the quality of the relationship that counts, being able to be vulnerable, listening and sharing what's close to your heart. That's what matters.

And by now, we know that forming good healthy habits when it comes to physical training or having a good diet, it takes dedication, it takes commitment. And I think we should approach psychological habits in the same way, and especially when it comes to relationships.

So by now, we know that the brain has this tendency to highlight the negative, and that this is really tricky to revoke just by positive thinking. It takes positive action.

But some actions are more powerful than others, when it comes to happiness. And investing your time and heart into the relationships around you, no matter if it's at work or with neighbors or with family or friends, this might be one of the most powerful things that you can do for yourself.

And I'd like us to do this one more time. So can everyone reach out their hands? And I'm going to count to three. And when I say three, I want you

to clap your hands. Okay. 1...2...3.... Yay. Great.

So, we learn by watching others' behavior. You've just seen me do this two times, and already so many people change their behavior.

So the more you can turn this talk interaction by being more understanding and caring, not just towards others, but also towards yourself, I think that others will follow your example and do as you do.

And the people outside of this building, they won't know what just happened. They won't know what changed. But we know that it was here, in this talk, that everything started.

Thank you.

Resources for Further Reading:

[What Makes A Good Life? Lessons From the Longest Study On Happiness by Robert Waldinger](#)

[Dan Gilbert: Happiness: What Your Mother Didn't Tell You \(Transcript\)](#)

[Tiny Surprises for Happiness and Health: \(Full Transcript\)](#)

[Breathing Happiness: Emma Seppälä at TEDxSacramento \(Transcript\)](#)

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