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## Nine Tips for Investing in Happiness

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If you want to be happier, forget spending dollars -- and focus on how you spend your time.

Sure, a bigger house and a fancier car might briefly put a smile on your face.

Yet academic studies suggest that simply amassing more stuff won't bring a permanent increase in your happiness.

So what will? I dug through some of the work done by economists and psychologists, and came up with these nine tips.

- **1** Make time for friends. According to a 2006 report by the Pew Research Center in Washington, 43% of married people say they are "very happy," versus 24% for those who aren't.

"Married people spend less time alone," notes David Schkade, a management professor at the University of California at San Diego. "There are parts of your brain that are stimulated by the presence of other people. You're more active and energetic and engaged."

For the same reason, seeing good friends on a regular basis can also bolster happiness.

"The data is coming in thick and fast on the value of friendships," says Andrew Oswald, an economics professor at Warwick University in England.

"The data suggest that making your friends a priority will have more bang for your buck than making your next promotion a priority," he notes.

- **2** Forget the pay raise. While regularly hitting the town with friends will likely increase your happiness, you probably won't get the same boost from spending hours at the mall.

True, you are initially thrilled when you buy that new dress or that flat-screen television. But the thrill quickly fades and you start hankering after something else.

The same thing happens when you get a pay raise. Soon enough, you are taking the extra money for granted and you're feeling dissatisfied again. Experts refer to this as "hedonic adaptation" or the "hedonic treadmill."

- **3** Don't trade up. Research indicates that, once folks achieve a fairly basic standard of living, it takes a lot of additional money to bring about even a small increase in reported happiness.

Yet your income and wealth could still loom large -- if you start comparing yourself with those around you. For instance, if you moved to a neighborhood you can barely afford, you would likely be disgruntled.

The reason: You will be surrounded by wealthy families, and that will be a constant reminder of your relative financial standing.

"If you can look out your window and see neighbors with lower incomes, you'll be happier," Prof. Oswald says. "People are very keen to move into the elite neighborhoods. They don't realize that they won't be as happy as they expect. That's the curse of being human."

- **4** Keep your commute short. Moving into a ritzy neighborhood would be even more harmful to your happiness if it means a longer commute.

It turns out that commuting is one of life's least pleasurable activities. While we're usually pretty good at adapting to hardships, it's hard to adjust to commuting because it is so unpredictable. One day, you will breeze into work. The next day, you will sit steaming in traffic for 45 minutes.

To make matters worse, a longer commute means less time for leisure. And the research says we enjoy leisure more than work.

- **5** Count your blessings. Your pleasure from your new house and your latest pay raise may subside. But you may be able to revive some of the good feelings by taking a few minutes to count your blessings.

Remember how wealthy neighbors can make you feel poor? What matters is what you focus on. Instead of obsessing over your neighbors' riches, try focusing on the riches you have -- and that will likely make you feel happier.

- **6** Enjoy a good meal. In surveys, eating ranks as one of our favorite pastimes.

"It's a relatively pleasant activity and it satisfies a basic need," Prof. Schkade notes. "But if you aren't focused on it, you won't enjoy it as much. This is why the French enjoy their food more. They are less likely to eat alone and they are less likely to be doing something else at the same time."

- **7** Challenge yourself. Leisure is more pleasurable than work. But you should also think about how you spend your leisure time.

After a long day at the office, you might be inclined to stagger home and collapse in front of your new flat-screen television. But in fact, the research suggests you'll be happier if you are more active.

Suppose you start a new exercise program. The key: Set goals that are challenging yet achievable, because you will enjoy the sense of progress.

Also look to change your exercise program occasionally, so the pleasure you receive doesn't start

to fade.

As an added bonus, regular exercise will leave you healthier, and that should further increase your happiness. According to the Pew Research Center report, a mere 6% of those who describe their health as excellent also say they are "not too happy." By contrast, among those who say their health is poor, 55% report that they are "not too happy."

- **8** Volunteer. If you want to help yourself, try helping others -- by engaging in charitable activities.

"Not only does it make you feel valuable, but also you see other people doing good deeds, and that makes you feel better," Prof. Schkade says. "It makes you realize the world can be a good place."

- **9** Give it time. Surveys have found that reported happiness tends to be U-shaped through life, with folks becoming increasingly grumpy as they approach their 40s and then recovering from there.

Maybe our happiness gradually declines as we fail to fulfill our youthful ambitions, only to revive once we accept our lot in life. Alternatively, maybe this midlife unhappiness reflects the time pressures faced by those in their 40s, as they juggle work and family.

But whatever the reason, you are likely to grow happier as you grow older. Not sure any of the first eight tips will do the trick? Maybe you just need to give it time.