

Everyone wants to be happy, right? But if you're having trouble defining this sought-after state – let alone achieving it – you're not alone. We put five experts in a room with **Libbi Gorr** to talk it over.

If you're happy and you know it...

Libbi Gorr: Tim, as director of the Happiness Institute, do you think we're meant to be happy all the time?

Dr Timothy Sharp: As an idealist, that would be wonderful. As a realist who comes from a clinical-psychology background, I know that's not necessarily the case. Many in our society suffer from depression and anxiety in various forms. However, I do think there's significant room for improvement and I'm confident if we start to do more of what we do, then more people can experience more happiness.

Gorr: Professor Robert Spillane?

Professor Robert Spillane: No, not at all. Albert Ellis is one of the better-known cognitive behaviour therapists and was often interpreted as a happiness person. But I could never see him as very happy. He admitted in the end that life is not about happiness at all, it's about power. Which is really just a psychologist picking up on Nietzsche's philosophy. Power really is what it was all about.

Matt Church: I'd suggest everybody wants to be at peace. Everything we do and everything we construct psychologically is about getting back to peace.

Spillane: People who value happiness are decadent and, if I could take Matt Church on, I think if peace is the goal, then you're ready for death. If you look at the world's religions and other philosophical systems, happiness doesn't feature anywhere near as much.

Sharp: What about Buddhism?

Spillane: I wouldn't call moving into nirvana "happy". It's driveless. I can't think of anything more boring than being at peace.

Gorr: I tend to think Buddha was a little passive-aggressive. He'd just sit there.

Spillane: In fact, I prefer Schopenhauer.

Church: Name-dropper.

Spillane: He said happiness and pleasure were really just the absence of pain. Part of the problem with therapy is that people want happiness, which they'll never get. If they want peace, well, they should be going to a religious person. Therapists fall into the trap, as we've just heard, of trying to promote it.

Dr Sarah Edelman: Lots of studies show people can be happier. You can teach strategies, get them to write gratitudes every day and get them to challenge some of their thoughts. They do, in the short term, show improvements but most research shows people tend to return to baseline. It's like theories about weight, that we have a tendency to return to the way we are. Can you create long-term changes in the way people feel? I think it's still a moot point.

Ros Tasker: I don't agree. There's a point where you either go back or you move through. It takes courage to really be who you are.

Gorr: You can change your life?

Tasker: I believe you can.

Spillane: This is such a little religious group, isn't it? Peace, serenity, happiness. But I did let one thing go unchallenged when I used the word power. I meant self-overcoming. To keep overcoming yourself is bloody hard work. As you get more power, you might feel happy. My argument was: happiness isn't a goal.

Tasker: It is not a destination – it's the experience that takes you there.

Edelman: And how you view the experience, which comes back to your point about being optimistic versus pessimistic, seeing it as a valuable thing versus seeing it as, "Oh, woe is me."

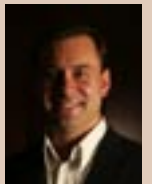
Gorr: Can negative thinking be transferred culturally from parent to child and therefore perpetuated?

Edelman: You are partly your learning experiences. Biological predisposition also has a significant effect on a tendency towards anxiety, to focus on threat and to be melancholy. About 50 per cent of one's disposition to happiness is biologically based.

Church: You have choices about how to manipulate your biology. Most of those choices are in a pill. That's because people are ignorant to the alternatives. The type of food you eat, sleeping patterns. The human body can't work in an office under fluorescent lighting and expect a quality deep sleep. Computer screens, bright illumination of our houses – these things affect the body's chemistry. →

The panel

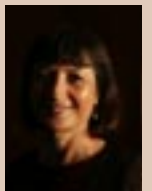
Matt Church is the author of *Adrenalin Junkies*, *Serotonin Seekers* and *Highlife 24/7* and is an expert on work-and-life integration. He believes every feeling we have is driven by a chemical made by our bodies.



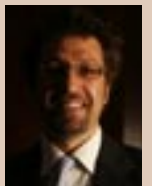
Ros Tasker runs empowerment workshops and private consultations combining touch therapy with coaching. She believes all answers come from within and helps people use the thinking, feeling and knowing components of their bodies.



Dr Sarah Edelman is a practising psychologist and author of *Change Your Thinking*, which provides practical strategies for challenging negative and self-defeating thinking patterns using cognitive behaviour therapy.



Dr Timothy Sharp is author of *The Happiness Handbook* and the founder of the Happiness Institute, which is based in Sydney and offers happiness coaching, courses and corporate programs.



Professor Robert Spillane teaches philosophy and psychology to business management students at Sydney's Macquarie Graduate School of Management at Macquarie University.





People are exhausted... The first thing to address is lifestyle issues.

Happy days (clockwise from below author Matt Church with host Libbi Gorr; philosophy lecturer Robert Spillane (left) and the Happiness Institute's Timothy Sharp; therapist and consultant Ros Tasker..





Tim Sharp and psychologist Sarah Edelman..

It's hard work for a lot of people, particularly if you don't have a happy disposition.

Sharp: When I'm talking about happiness, I'm talking about a meaningful, satisfying existence, which includes some bad times. The issue of choice is important. Every minute of every day, we can make another choice. And doing so is a skill we can learn. The more you practise, the better you get, the better choices you make and the better your life can be.

Tasker: For me, happiness is about accepting myself. I do energy work with clients. I have them on the table where I do massage, where they access a deeper part of themselves that perhaps isn't present when they've got all this stuff going through their heads. The touch allows them to access themselves in a deeper way. That allows them to make some different choices – about work, about relationships.

Edelman: I want to qualify the argument that we have choices and we can choose to be happy. It's hard work for a lot of people, particularly if you don't have a happy disposition. There's a process, skills you can learn, lifestyle choices you can make. You can't just attend a seminar or make the decision: "From today I'm going to be happy."

Tasker: Everyone needs a starting point and that's a starting point, that first choice.

Edelman: A major block is poor self-esteem. There are a lot of simplistic ideas about repeat affirmations. Look in the mirror, say, "I love myself, I approve of myself". If you say it a hundred times a day, it'll make a difference. Self-esteem is essential to happiness [but] it takes work to feel good about yourself.



So many different things to do, you might have to make them all fit.

