

NO LIMITS



# Myths of Happiness

BY GILLIAN MANDICH

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Hair and makeup: Two Chicks & Some Lipstick





Even though advertising and marketing may lead us to think that the right job, a bigger home or the perfect spouse is the ticket to happiness, it turns out these ideas can actually lead us to unhappiness. Research shows that there can be a gap between what we believe makes us happy and what brings us true happiness.

Although platitudes on bumper stickers or Instagram quote cards may sound nice, their ideas can become lodged in our minds without being substantiated in science. Misconceptions about happiness can stop us from getting what we want because they hide helpful truths. Understanding these common misconceptions—and learning from them—can help us cultivate more happiness in our lives.

### **In life, the goal is to be happy and not to be sad.**

**TRUTH:** There are only two types of people who don't experience painful emotions such as sadness, anxiety, anger, envy or disappointment: psychopaths and the deceased. The fact that we experience painful emotions is a good thing because it means we're alive!

The truth is that happiness comes part and parcel with sadness. Happiness and sadness aren't opposites—they're simply different emotions. It's completely normal to be a happy person and feel sad sometimes.

The goal of life is not to eliminate sadness. Research shows that, paradoxically, when we give ourselves permission to feel anxiety, anger or sadness, we often end up experiencing more happiness. Allowing ourselves a full range of emotions is what will help lead us to the happiest and most fulfilled lives.

**TRY THIS:** You can't suppress the experience of painful emotions, so don't even bother trying to push them away or bottle them up. Give yourself permission to have feelings of sadness, anxiety, anger or envy, but don't

allow yourself to marinate in them for extended periods of time. Whatever emotions come up for you, aim to feel them fully—then, let them go. By doing this, they can loosen their grip on you.

## I'll be happy when (fill in the blank).

**TRUTH:** Happiness isn't a destination, nor is it a permanent state of mind. Happiness is an emotional state, and emotions are transitory; they can fluctuate depending on our thoughts and mood on any given day.

Although happiness isn't permanent, research suggests that lasting happiness is attainable if we're prepared to do the work. Much like with sustained weight loss or fitness, becoming lastingly happier demands effort and commitment every day.

**TRY THIS:** There are many things in your life you can't control, and some things you can. One of the most important you can learn to control is your mind. Try to train your brain to focus on the present moment because lasting happiness happens in the now. Looking to the past or the future takes you out of the moment and out of happiness. When you notice your mind wander, try to bring it back to the now by looking around and noticing the things you appreciate, are grateful for or that make you happy.

## Once you put a ring on it, you live happily ever after.

**TRUTH:** While it's true that there's often a boost in happiness when you get married, it doesn't last very long. Several studies have found that marriage has a surprisingly small impact on long-term happiness, and after the fun and

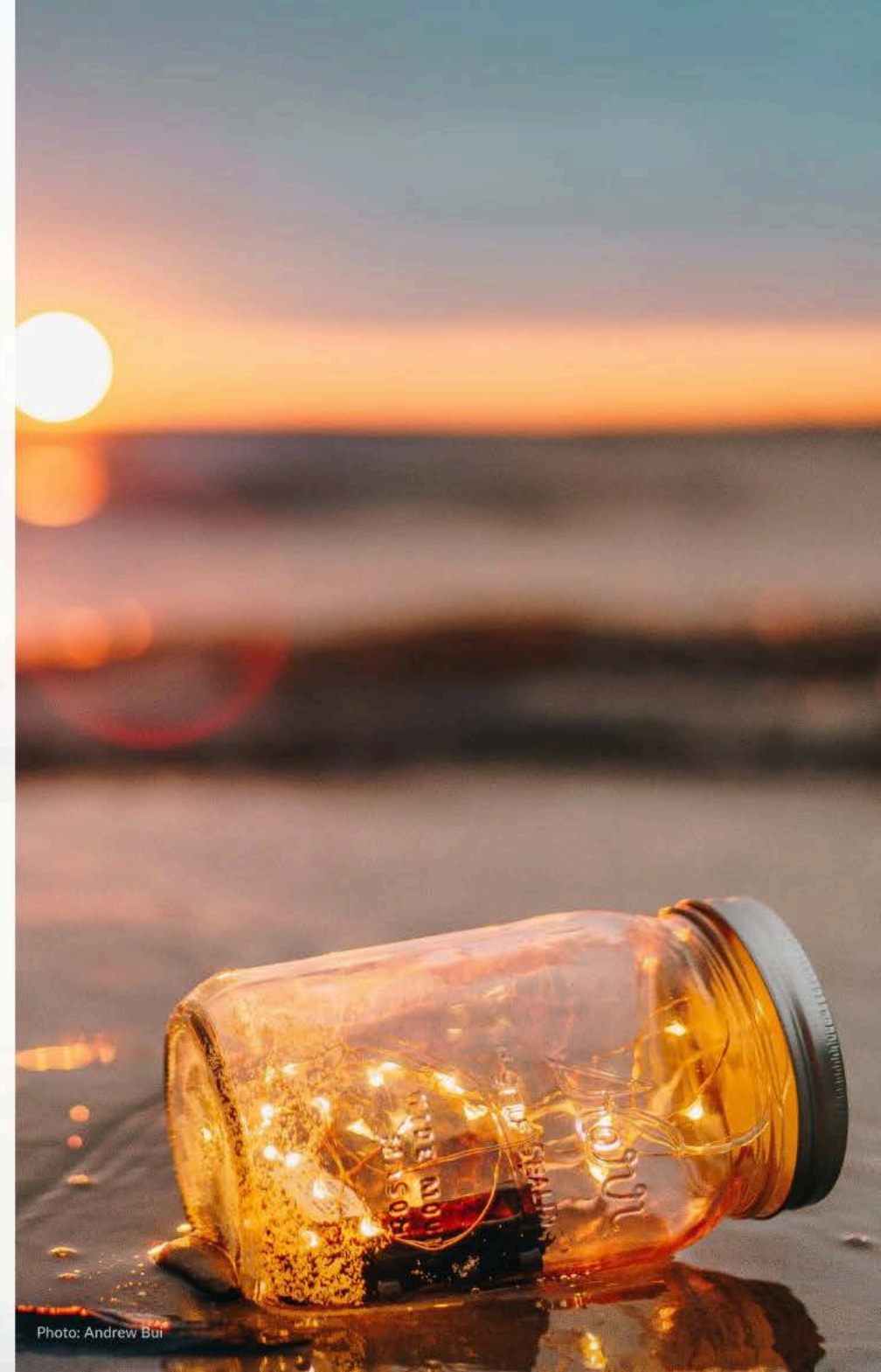
excitement of a wedding wears off, most newlyweds revert to their happiness levels before their engagement.

It turns out it's not simply marriage that makes people happy. If a couple isn't happy going into their marriage, chances are the union isn't going to be their golden ticket. Also, staying in an unhappy marriage because you think it'll make you happier is a myth. Research has shown that people who are in unhappy marriages experience a spike in their happiness once the marriage is dissolved.

**TRY THIS:** Marriage or not, focus on your own happiness and the happiness of your partner. One way to do this is to celebrate the good. Research indicates that the most intimate and trusting relationships are distinguished by how partners respond to good news, not by how they react to disappointing or bad news. For example, if your partner shares that he got a big promotion, be sure to celebrate with enthusiastic joy; talk about the great things about the promotion and how it will benefit your relationship. And if your partner shares that he got a new job that requires him to work weekends, try to highlight the good things that'll come from the new job as much as possible, and give less attention to the downsides.

## Landing your dream job is your ticket to happiness.

**TRUTH:** There's absolutely nothing wrong with aspiring to do things we love; after all, who doesn't want a career that pays the bills and is fulfilling? The problem is that having an idealized view of what constitutes a perfect job can wind up leading us away from work we love, instead of toward it, when our expectations don't match reality.



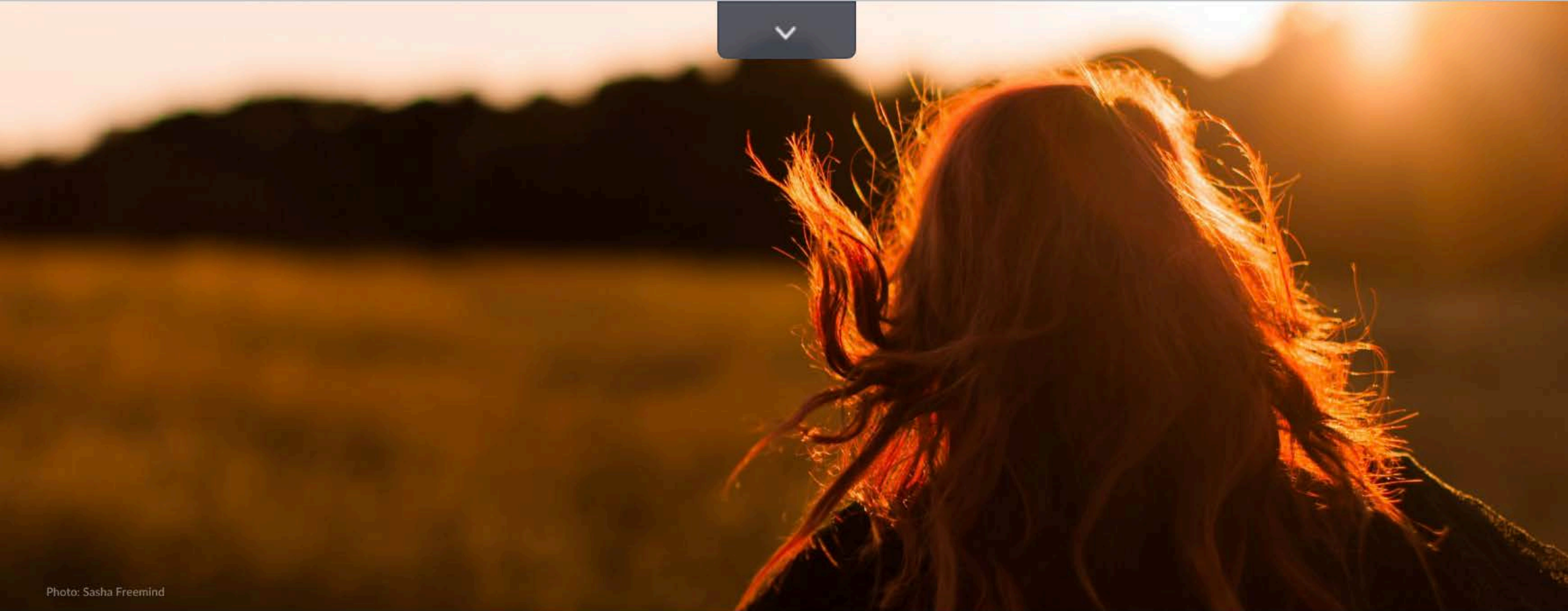


Photo: Sasha Freemind

People adapt to all experiences, so any happiness from a new work environment will likely fade over time. Also, we're constantly growing and changing, and sometimes, so are our interests. A dream job isn't an exact destination, either; rather, it's constantly evolving, just like you. What we think our ideal is when we're in our 20s may be very different than when we're in our 30s or 40s.

**TRY THIS:** Remember that passion won't always pay the bills—and that's OK! The key to finding your dream job is being able to distinguish the achievable from the fairy tale and recognizing what it means to you to be fulfilled from a practical (not just a passionate) standpoint. Be open to new things and embrace the many opportunities you encounter.

This will help you to be sure that you don't pass up worthwhile work in hopeless pursuit of an elusive ideal.

### **A bigger house means a bigger smile.**

**TRUTH:** According to the science of happiness, the reality is that whether it be a dream home or something else, many of us are waiting for happiness. We fervently (and erroneously) believe that, if we're not happy now, we will be happy when we get that house...or find Mr. Right... or strike it rich or...

More space doesn't necessarily lead to more happiness. One U.S. study found that, since the 1980s, the amount of space per person has grown by about 40 percent (to more than 900 square feet) for people living

in detached houses, yet satisfaction has stayed the same. Also, if that mega-square-foot home means you have to take out a barely affordable mortgage, it may not give you as much pleasure as you'd hope. Research shows that eliminating negative experiences (like worry associated with debt) makes us three to five times happier than creating a positive experience (like splurging on something).

**TRY THIS:** Science shows that expectations are frequently toxic and erroneous because they may lead to letdown or even depression. Try not to focus too much on the salient high points (for example, moving day or a vacation) and instead focus on and celebrate day-to-day events, which have a more profound effect on overall happiness.

Whether you've ever fallen for any of these myths or not, when it comes to happiness, remember that it starts from within. You are your best teacher, and you are the only one who truly knows what makes you happy—not any advertisement, job, relationship, person or thing. Happiness isn't a destination; it's a byproduct of a life well lived. It's like a muscle you build over time, and so no matter how happy or unhappy you are right now, you absolutely have the potential to be happier. By educating yourself about happiness and making time each day to do small things that make you feel good, you can be certain that the cumulative effects will add up to a happier life.



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