

Episode: Increasing Your Happiness With Brain Chemicals



With Natalie Bacon, JD, CFP[®], Certified Life Coach

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Welcome to the Design Your Dream Life podcast where it's all about designing your life on your terms and now your host, Natalie Bacon.

Hello. Hello, Hello. I am just so excited for this episode. I can hardly stand it. This is something that I have been researching and reading so much about lately and I'm really, really looking forward to delivering it to you. It is How To Increase Your Happiness With Your Brain Chemicals. This is something that I am diving into more in my own research and in my own learning. And I think that the whole purpose behind learning all of this is so that you can understand how your brain works so that you can optimize it and you can create more of the life that you want. So in this episode we're going to talk about how happiness is chemically created in your brain, and I think it's going to help you create more of it as well as not be so hard on yourself when you're not happy.

Now, I highly, highly recommend reading the book Habits of a Happy Brain by Loretta Breuning. It is an amazing book. I've listened to it three times and I probably will listen to it more. Some of this stuff gets kind of scientific and there's so many details that for me at least it's like when I listened to it once, it's just not enough. I'm like, what happened? You know what's going on?

Often I am walking around Chicago listening and who knows if I'm in the middle of a street or there's a stoplight or something. Some reason that my, you know, attention is taken away from what I'm listening to so I highly suggest not only that you read or listen to it but that you do it multiple times because I think it's so, so valuable. A lot of what I'm going to teach in this episode comes from that book as well as all of the other research I did.

If you are listening to this, you can go over to the show notes and actually click on the blog posts that I wrote in connection with this episode as well and I will link to the other resources, the other articles that helped me come up with all of this content for you. And if you are not in the Personal Development Free Course, you really need to get in it right now. It's completely free. It's five lessons of personal development work and it's gonna really help you understand this at a better level so that you can take it and apply it to your life, which is the whole point. And that is at NatalieBacon.com/personal-development-course and there are dashes in there. So it's personal-development-course. Super fun. I love hearing from the students in there. So if you are in that course, send me an email, let me know how it's going.

All right, let's get to the good stuff. I want to start off with talking a little bit about the brain and I'm not going to get into a lot of the science behind it other than what I think is really, really useful for you to use and implement. And at the end of this episode I am going to tie it all together and give you eight habits that you can actually start using in your day to day life, which I think are only going to make sense if I give you all the background first. I can give you those habits and if you look at the blog posts, you can kind of scroll down and just see them. However, it's not going to really make sense to you unless you understand these chemicals and kind of what's going on in your brain. So let's start by talking about your primitive brain.

It's something that I teach in my personal development course. Personal Development For Her. Personal development is all about creating the growth that you want for yourself. It's about

Episode: Increasing Your Happiness With Brain Chemicals

creating the future you want. It's about living your life in the way that you want and becoming who you want to be and all of that good stuff.

Well, your brain is at the heart of all of that and you have to learn how to rewire your brain in order to create the new results. And that is because your brain will create how you think and feel and from how you think and feel is how you'll act. And then those actions will get you the results. So that's why so many people can have the steps to do something but won't do it. Right? It's like I always talk about if I gave the steps to start an online business to a hundred people, I would get a hundred different results.

Right? Even though they were the same steps. And that's because we all have different brains. So you inherited a survival brain and your brain came from people who have literally survived, right? So I think that this is just amazing in and of itself. I think when you think about all of the challenges of the past, like it's kind of crazy that you're here and that I'm here.

It's like our brain made it through our ancestors up to this point, and it's kind of just incredible in and of itself. And you may not think that you are focused on survival, but this part of your brain, your mammal brain, your primitive brain is really focused on survival. It's always scanning for potential threats. It just wants to keep you alive and consciously in this year in modern society, you know you're not going to die from being excluded from the group or not being invited to the party, but your mammal brain, your primitive brain thinks that you are, because back in the day you were excluded and isolated. It often meant death, right?

It was a real threat in evolution. It is not easy to survive, so your brain will reward you with happy chemicals when you do something that promotes your survival and when you do something that jeopardizes it, you're going to get the painful chemicals, which are not really gonna talk about today. We're just going to stick to the happy chemicals. So each of those happy chemicals, right? It has a feeling and it kind of has a job to do.

And when you do something, it will reward you because it thinks that you are going to survive. This is all in your mammal brain and technically it's your limbic system, which is surrounded by what I like to call the most human part of your brain, which is the size of your prefrontal cortex. And they work together along with all the other parts of your brain.

But for purposes here and for what I teach, I love kind of breaking it up into two parts. You have your prefrontal cortex, that is where you're setting goals and you're thinking clearly and you're very rational, right? It's very different than all of the other animals compared to your primitive brain that is fight or flight that is wired for survival. So they're working together and over time as you experience life, your cortex is forming pathways to make sense of everything you're experiencing. So when you do this, you make sense of the world, you make up stories and you can redirect your thoughts and you can create new thoughts and that sparks you into action. And you can also have the urge to want to do something and then stop yourself from doing it, right? You know this, maybe you have the urge to drink alcohol and you decide you're not going to drink alcohol.

Episode: Increasing Your Happiness With Brain Chemicals

Okay? Something like that can be in any area of your life and you're using your prefrontal cortex, but know that your brain, your primitive brain is always seeking pleasure. So you're going to seek something else that feels good. And that's why it's so important to learn how to feel your feelings and experience your feelings without acting necessarily. Because if you don't, you might just redirect that.

So instead of always, um, going through the glass of wine, maybe you redirect and you seek the cookies or something like that. Whatever it is, your brain is always seeking that pleasure. And this is actually rooted in your brain's desire to survive, but it's rooted in it. Meaning it's not hard wired. And this is really, really great news. It means that you can change your brain, right? You're not born as a human being, being scared of bears, for example.

You're born and then you have experiences and your brain forms these pathways that you know indicate whether you should be afraid of bears or not, right? It's like you're learning. And fun fact that I learned in all of my research is that your main core circuits are built by age seven which is just crazy from birth to age seven your brain does most of its wiring and you can continue to change and rewire your brain as an adult.

However, it's so much harder because you have to prove your old pathways untrue. And I do this all the time in my life and I'm kind of just used to it being hard. So I don't want that to discourage you. I just want you to be aware that this is why it's so easy for a child to learn a second language. And for you it seems impossible, right?

It's like you can rewire your own brain. You can do this through new experiences, through repetition. And through creating the right emotions. But you have to do it intentionally. And it does take a little more work than say if you're a child or even an adolescence, there's another opportunity for you to do that in your brain as well a lot more easily than when you're an adult.

So when we're talking about brain chemicals that create happiness, I want to talk about four specific chemicals. And I'm not talking about philosophical happiness. Now. I'm talking literally about the chemicals that are happening in your brain. And this actually might be a little bit hard for you to see in yourself, but I really think that when you start to pay attention to it, you can see it pretty easily and other people, which can kind of be fun as well. And then you'll start to notice it more in yourself as you kind of keep these in mind.

So happiness in your mammal brain comes from four chemicals and they turn on when your brain sees something that promotes your survival and each produces a slightly different good feeling. And the four chemicals are dopamine, oxytocin, serotonin, and endorphins.

So we're going to talk about all four. I'm going to break it down for you so you know what each of the four chemicals is. And then after we go through what those chemicals are, I am going to give you different habits that you can start that will help you increase each of those chemicals and you may notice that you prefer one of the chemicals to another. And if that's the case, I highly suggest actually implementing a habit in one of the other areas.

Episode: Increasing Your Happiness With Brain Chemicals

So for example, I love dopamine and just just like natural to me. So dopamine is one of the kind of goal setting chemicals. It's like you love to set goals and achieve goals. So for me it's like I don't really need to implement a lot of dopamine habits to increase that cause it is flowing. But there are other chemicals that we'll talk about that for me it would probably be more useful for me to implement a habit there such as um, you know, serotonin. Maybe like feeling safe when you're not in control and keeping my house a mess, something like that. Anyways, I will go through all of those after we go through each of the four chemicals, but just know that they're dopamine, oxytocin, serotonin, and endorphin.

So dopamine is finding things that meet your needs. It's like I did it. It's the joy of finding what you seek and it's what motivates you to get what you need. Even if it takes a lot of effort, it encourages you to seek and achieve rewards and this is why we're always seeking the next thing. Have you ever noticed that where you're like, you want something and then you get it and then there's no more dopamine and you're like, Oh, I thought I wanted this so bad. It's like then you're onto the next thing and that's totally normal. This is just your brain using dopamine for survival even though we are in modern society and don't really need this versus survival in the way that we used to, but it makes sense and this is why you don't have to be so hard on yourself. It's just your brain creating the motivation to get you to the next level in your life.

Now be careful here because some people will seek false pleasure as the reward instead of like goals or next level achievement. So you'll see this a lot with drugs or with alcohol or with food, right? You get that dopamine hit. So what I want you to do is notice where you're focusing on getting your dopamine from. Are you focusing on directing it toward getting what you want, like setting your goals? Or is it focused on that next glass of wine? This is really, really interesting. It's that same chemical in your brain. If you're focused on your goals, it's going to take you much further.

The second chemical is oxytocin. And oxytocin is when you're feeling safe with others. It's that bonding. It's the wanting to be a part of the group. It's what motivates you to trust others and feel safe in companionship. Now remember, isolation often meant death in the, in the past through our evolution. So we've been vulnerable when we've been outside the group and now that's not the case.

But we still have that, you know, pre-programmed brain, which is going to seek the oxytocin. So just notice when you're seeking oxytocin and thinking that you're going to be isolated. If you separate yourself from the group. Of course it's really great to be a part of a group but you just gotta be careful. I see this a lot with my students and clients. They will want to be a part of the group at the expense of their own growth.

Someone I was coaching recently really wanted to be a part of this group. It was her and another two girls and they all kind of started at the same level in their career and in their business and really this person who I was coaching was going in a different direction and she was growing much more quickly. Right? She's going to dopamine from achieving her goals, but she was low on oxytocin right and she was feeling like something was definitely wrong because she was being a little bit separated from the group. And noticed that this chemical being low like you can

Episode: Increasing Your Happiness With Brain Chemicals

find in other ways, but it's also just not a problem and it's okay and you can kind of just notice that if this is happening to you, it's like, Oh, this is what's happening.

My brain thinks I'm going to die if I'm isolated from this group and it doesn't feel good, but it's okay because it's, you know, 2019 and it's, totally fine. I'm not going to die if I move on to another group. Your brain just doesn't know this.

Just notice when you're doing this and notice that it's a problem if you go along with group, think in pure pressure over going with what you actually want and believe is true for you. And if you ever do that, it's because oxytocin is important to you. And that's why. So again, I think there's just this awareness that you can bring with you and not be so hard on yourself when this is happening and you're like, Oh, of course my brain's doing this. It's oxytocin.

Okay, the next chemical is serotonin, and serotonin is the feeling of being respected by others. It's the security of social importance. It's the chemical that motivates you to get respect and it's what expands your mating opportunities and protects your offspring. And all mammals are like this and you can't avoid it. It's like I always hear, and of course myself included will say things like, Oh, I don't care about status and all of that.

And it's like you can think that from your prefrontal, but your mammal brain is not on the same page as you. And that's okay. And you can be compassionate with yourself instead of being hard on yourself. And this is why you want to feel special. And this is why you compare yourself to others. And this is why you want to fight. And this is why you want to win. When you feel like you're losing and that other people have won, you feel inferior and that is depleting serotonin in your brain.

When you feel superior, you're getting a serotonin hit and that feels good, and what I suggest is to not be hard on yourself, right? Don't be arrogant and like rub it in, but just notice, Oh, of course this feels good to win. Of course I'm influencing others. It's totally fine. This is just the serotonin and it feels really good and my brain is triggering this because it thinks that this is necessary for survival.

When you feel like you've been heard, when you feel like you're winning, when you feel special, your serotonin is flowing. Many people will actually give up before they even win because they have the sense of feeling guilty, wanting to compete or win, and this is just social programming and it's totally fine. It's part of being part of the herd, right? The group, but just know that this is what's happening and that know that you don't need to feel guilty or that if you do feel guilty, it's totally fine.

You'll see this on a broader social scale with bullying and with competitiveness and with politics, right? It's like kids and adults, we're all the same. It's like the human experience. All of these social justice fights, it's all about serotonin. K, I think this is so useful because what I see is that we all want to fight for, not all of us, right? A lot of us want to fight for fairness and justice, but also if you know this part of the brain, right? If you know this work that I'm teaching, you'll start to see that, Oh, we just want all of us to stick together who believe in justice and fairness, and we want to connect in that way and we want to fight against the people who don't believe that, and

Episode: Increasing Your Happiness With Brain Chemicals

what that is is coming from, it's coming from serotonin and our mammal brain just wants to help us survive and make sure that we stay alive.

Okay. The last brain chemical that I want to talk about is endorphin, and this is the feeling that masks pain. It motivates you to ignore pain so that you can escape harm when you're injured and endorphin evolved to help you stay alive. Right? It's like the story that you hear about on the news of the mom, like lifting the car or something crazy that you normally just couldn't do. It's a very temporary experience and it can also happen after things that aren't necessarily something we'd think of as painful, but that for sure are painful to our bodies such as extreme exercise. And this is also why some people inflict pain intentionally. It's actually the seeking of endorphins.

Okay? So that is the summary of the four chemicals that will increase your happiness in your brain. It's dopamine, oxytocin, serotonin, and endorphins. And the way that your brain has been wired is such that it wants to make sure you survive.

Your brain was inherited from all of the humans who survived. So you have this mammal, part of your brain that wants to continue to make sure that you survive. And the way that it will do that is by triggering these happy chemicals and making sure that it produces the chemicals that make you feel bad when you are jeopardizing your own survival.

Now I want to give you these habits that you can start today that will increase your happiness in a real practical way and I think that like I mentioned before, if you know that you typically seek one of these or you have an overflow of one, then I would encourage you to practice a habit in one of the other chemicals. So for me, like I said, I really don't need to implement any more dopamine habits. I would probably benefit more from one of the others like oxytocin or serotonin.

And I think that you can do these every day, you know forever, but some of them you might just want to do for at least 30 days. That's what I say in the book, *Habits of a Happy Brain*, she talks a lot about doing it for 45 days until you can actually see a result. Even if, and especially if it's kind of painful for you to do at first, and that's kind of why she gives those guidelines. It's like you're not going to see the result until you do it for a long time.

All right, let's start with dopamine. So the two habits that you can start, if you want to increase your dopamine chemicals are to celebrate small wins and to work on your goal. So celebrating small wins. I want you to do this once per day. It's like the saying of, you know, I did it.

So when you look for something small to be just really pleased with, and I want you to linger in your wins, right? You're not going to have really big wins every single day like running the marathon and graduating from school or you know, launching your business. But you will be able to find one little win once per day. And if you do that and you focus on that, right, you will linger in your wins instead of what we all do, which is linger in our losses. And this will help you celebrate small steps and it will trigger more dopamine.

In the beginning if this feels fake or forced, it's totally normal. You are just starting this and I just really want to encourage you to do it, so whatever it is for you, find one little thing per day that

Episode: Increasing Your Happiness With Brain Chemicals

you can celebrate a small win and say yes to yourself like I did it and just be happy with it for just a second.

The second habit for dopamine is for you to work on your goal. I suggest doing this for at least 15 minutes per day. That's it. Especially if you are not someone who can find a time, quote unquote, to work on your goal. Set aside 15 minutes. That's it. You're probably already thinking about how you wish you had more time or whatever else in 15 minutes per day, so just get some time together, get 15 minutes that you can take action. I want you to take action in a really small increment every single day and this small little daily investment in your future is going to help you move forward. It's going to trigger dopamine and you're going to see that you actually can create your future and you'll have fewer regrets because you won't be just thinking about doing the thing. You'll be actually doing the thing. The key is to do it every single day and start really, really small.

All right, for oxytocin, the two habits for you to start are to take very small steps to rebuild trust with someone who you've had a falling out with. I don't want you to just like take a leap of faith and jump in and I also don't want you to be confrontational and start fighting. I want you to just take one small step with someone to rebuild trust, and this can be a very small step and it may be that you don't even want to fully trust them ever again, but what this will do is it will help you be more comfortable around this person. It's the calling them and saying, let's just talk for five minutes about nothing deep at all and just spend that five minutes as one little step forward. And if you do this and you take really, really small steps, you will change that relationship and you will get that oxytocin.

Okay? The second habit for oxytocin is to practice being trustworthy. This means that you always honor your commitments and then take it a step further and notice and appreciate the fact that you're someone who honors your commitments. Most people in the world right like the bell curve of the humans don't do this right? It's just not something they are intentional about.

So I want you to do this. I want you to practice being really trustworthy. You will enjoy more oxytocin this way and you'll create more opportunities for people to trust you. What I don't want you to do is like do everything for other people and like rescue and save and be all weird about it and just do what you say you're going to do. Honor your commitments and notice when you do it and you'll give yourself that oxytocin hit.

Next up is serotonin. Serotonin I couldn't come up with just two habits. I want to do all three here. So you're actually going to get nine habits in total. So for serotonin, the three that I want you to do first up is to tell someone about something great you did. And I want you to do this every single day and you're going to feel really uncomfortable doing this if you're not used to it. But be careful.

I don't want you to brag in a way that is arrogant. I want you to do it in a way where you're proud of yourself. You'll get that serotonin hit and you'll be more open to other people telling you about their accomplishments as well. So just tell one person you know something that you did great and do this every single day and this will bring about social respect. Now keep in mind that you cannot control other people.

Episode: Increasing Your Happiness With Brain Chemicals

So some people aren't going to give you a positive reaction, especially they're not going to give you the one that you want. But that's okay. It will learn that this won't kill you and I want you to keep doing it anyways. You will wire in the feeling of social respect over time if you do this and you'll learn to accept appreciation. So many of us don't do this, and I have been practicing doing this for a while and it feels really, really good. I'm really proud of myself in an abundant way and in I'm an amazing way and you're an amazing person as well. Not in like an I'm better than you kind of way. So notice that difference there. So tell someone about something great that you did every single day.

The next habit for you to do for boosting serotonin is for you to notice your influence on others. So just notice how you're having an influence on the people in your life. Again, do not do this in an arrogant way of thinking. I'm better than you. Do it in an appreciative sort of way. Like you're grateful that you can influence someone else's life.

I do this all the time when I get so many emails from you guys all about the way that your lives have changed from mostly from the courses that I offer. I'm telling you, it feels so, so good to notice this because as much as you try to avoid it, your mammal brain is always noticing the status that you're having. You know in the world and in your experiences and it's okay. You don't have to seek higher status or be hard on yourself when your status isn't high. It's always going to be up and down depending on what stage in life you're at, depending on you know, what area you're focusing on, but you'll feel good about being able to influence the world and you'll feel important if you just start to notice your influence on others in a really positive, abundant, meaningful way.

All right. The third kind of bonus habit that I want you to do is for you to learn to feel safe when you're totally not in control. So I want you to do the opposite of what you'd normally do. So if you normally keep your house completely neat and tidy for 30 days, I want you to let junk pile up. Or even if you just do this in one room, but the opposite is also true.

If you normally like chaos and are not neat and tidy in new, you're kind of messy. I want you to put things away and be really neat and tidy for 30 days and this is going to feel terrible at first and that's totally fine. However, if you do this for a month or so, you're gonna feel very differently about it. You'll likely feel safe and you're going to rewire your brain to see that you're going to be totally okay even when your outside world is out of your control. I love all three of these four serotonin boosts, so highly, highly recommend them.

Last up is endorphins and the two habits that I suggest you do to increase your happiness is to laugh and I think this makes so much sense because I have to say I love carpool karaoke and there is a carpool karaoke with Migos. If you follow me on Instagram, you know that I love gangster rap. I have actually linked to this sometimes on Instagram because I think it's so funny when Migos is on carpool karaoke, and I probably watched this like once a month and I laugh so hard and a really big laugh triggers endorphins, so find what makes you laugh and make time to laugh really hard every day, at least just once a day. It has to be a really big laugh. Find something that you can really laugh about and you'll get that endorphin hit.

Episode: Increasing Your Happiness With Brain Chemicals

The second way for you to get the endorphin hit. Obviously I'm not suggesting that you increase pain in order to get endorphins, but you can vary your exercise routine and this will create a level of moderate exertion and you will get the endorphin hit. If you already exercise a ton. Just vary it. If you don't exercise at all, any sort of exercise is going to give you the endorphin hit.

And those are the what is nine habits that you can start today that will actually increase the chemicals in your brain that will boost your happiness. And this ties really well into everything I teach about how to use your prefrontal cortex, right, with your primitive brain and rewire your brain so that you can create the exact life that you want. And again, the purpose behind understanding all of this, and I highly recommend that you read the book *Habits of a Happy Brain*, but the purpose is so that you can see how happiness is chemically created in your survival brain so that you can create more of it as well as not being so hard on yourself when you're not getting it right.

It's like when you're leaving the group and you feel bad about it, you're like, Oh, of course I feel bad. This is just my brain thinking that I'm going to die. But really I'm not going to die. It's totally fine. All right? I want you to achieve at least a few of these habits that you can start and pay close attention to the ones where you think you are low in that chemical in your brain, and I think you will see really big results from just a little bit of effort, even if it's really uncomfortable at first, have an amazing week. I will talk to you next week.

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