

Life Skills Class:  
**The Science of Happiness**





## Life Skills Class: **The Science of Happiness**

Research has shown us that happiness can be categorized into three main types.

### 1. **Pleasure**

- a. Things and activities that give us physical pleasure.
  - i. Foods, drugs and other mood-altering substances
  - ii. Pleasurable activities like sex, massage, cuddling... sensory pleasure.

### 2. **Flow states:**

The state in which a person engages in an activity and is so focused on it that their brain is no longer focused on much of anything else.

- a. The stressors of life fade away as you are immersed in the flow state.
- b. Emotions such as anxiety and depression are often lessened or noticed less as the person's focus is shifted to the flow activity.

### 3. **Connection**

It is important for humans to feel like we are part of something bigger than ourselves. This can mean different things to people, but the common theme is a feeling of connection and belonging.

- a. **Family** - The most common way people gain this sense of connection and fulfillment is through their relationships with family. These bonds are often for life and provide us with feelings of security, love, and belonging.
- b. **Friends** - Strong friendships can provide the same sense of fulfillment and belonging as family.
- c. **Community** - Many of us find that connection through being a part of a group such as a church, or a team and work.
- d. **Purpose** - For many, their sense of connection to the world is found through their contribution to it.

What happens to our nervous system when we are happy? Neurotransmitters and hormones are released when we experience happiness. These are 'feel-good' chemicals that have a significant impact on us.



**Dopamine** - Known as the 'reward' neurochemical, when Dopamine is released, we get a sense of reward. It feels exciting. The feeling of winning an award, or being acknowledged by your peers, or completing a project are all associated with Dopamine. Dopamine receptors can be artificially stimulated by using various substances and even through unhealthy behaviors as well. By finding healthy, rewarding activities and relationships, we can maintain a healthy level of Dopamine in our system.

**Serotonin** - The majority of Serotonin that exists in our body resides in the enteric nervous system and helps regulate our digestive system. It's main function here is to send a signal to the brain when we are 'full'. In the same way, Serotonin is present in the central nervous system to measure when we have 'enough' or are satisfied in general. Most antidepressants work on the Serotonin receptors for this purpose... to help us feel that we have enough, or are fulfilled. Engaging in fulfilling activities and relationships can help us have a healthy balance of Serotonin. Gratitude journaling has also shown to be an effective tool in dealing with a Serotonin imbalance. Also, some may experience the phenomenon of too much Serotonin, in which case it is common to feel that life is 'too much' or overwhelming. Remember, balance is the key.

**Oxytocin** - Commonly known as the love hormone, Oxytocin is a bonding chemical that is released when we are in relationships ranging from romantic, to familial, to platonic and even with our pets. Oxytocin can give us warm fuzzy feelings, or butterflies in our stomach, or heart pounding excitement, depending on the nature of the relationship. Oxytocin controls other chemicals in the body as well. It can cause an increase or decrease of Dopamine, Serotonin, and Cortisol to name a few. Oxytocin can not be stimulated through substances or medications. It is primarily stimulated by relationships. Many who have a deficiency of Oxytocin will seek to compensate by medicating with substances when what they truly seek is connection.

**What are two healthy ways you can find pleasure?**

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**What are two healthy flow activities that you can engage in?**

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**Name one way you can find a sense of connection and belonging?**

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