Tips from Arthur C. Brooks to help your happiness levels soar

A chance encounter sparked a quest to uncover life’s meaning. Speaking at IESE, Arthur C. Brooks shares how to make happiness your business.



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Are you managing your life or is your life managing you? Are your actions aligned with your life's mission or at the whim of its ever-changing tides? Are you happy? Are you living the life you imagined as a child?

These are the questions that Arthur C. Brooks began pondering on an overnight flight a little over 10 years ago. A frequent business traveler, he was tapping away on his laptop when he overheard a conversation between two passengers seated a few rows behind him.

Judging by their voices and the depth of their exchange, he assumed they were an elderly couple. While the husband's words were muffled, his wife's cut through the silence of the dimmed cabin: "No, it's not true that no one remembers you. It's not true that nobody will take your calls. It's not true that no one cares about you anymore," she said consolingly.

A renowned social scientist, Brooks instantly shifted into professional mode, forming a quick assessment of the downcast passenger: *He's at the end of his life. Unlike me, he never had the chance to receive a world-class education or build the future he envisioned. His career never held the same promise. Life passed him by and now it's too late to change it.*

It all made sense until the plane landed hours later in the early morning light. Far from Brooks' assumption, the forlorn passenger was, in fact, a world-famous personality who had helped shape the course of U.S. history in the 1960s and '70s. As people began shuffling up the aisles, the passenger was instantly recognized by his fellow travelers, as well as the captain, who greeted him warmly as he disembarked: "Sir, I want you to know you've been a hero of mine since I was a little boy."

What began as a routine flight became a life-pivoting wake-up call for Brooks, who realized he didn't want to look back on his life 30 years from then and feel the same regrets. The experience sparked a quest to uncover his life's meaning, eventually leading him to resign his role as CEO, rejoin academia and dedicate his life to spreading the science of happiness.

Today an esteemed Harvard professor, sought-after speaker and bestselling author, Brooks is a regular guest speaker at IESE Business School, where he shares his insights and expertise. This article is based on two lectures Brooks delivered at IESE in November 2024, aimed at helping future business leaders forge their own paths to happiness.

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The macronutrients of happiness

When people meet Brooks for the first time and learn that he teaches at Harvard Business School, many are surprised to discover that his courses include “Leadership and Happiness” — the school’s most popular elective — rather than traditional subjects like marketing, finance or accounting. As he explains, “I teach happiness because that’s the business of life.”

In his view, happiness — or “happier-ness” — requires striking a balanced and abundant mix of three macronutrients: enjoyment, satisfaction and meaning. Let’s consider each in turn.

1. Enjoyment: beyond pleasure

Not to be confused with pleasure, enjoyment emerges when the three main parts of our brain work in harmony to collect data, identify emotions and make informed decisions. While pleasure is a product of the limbic system, enjoyment originates from the higher-order prefrontal cortex, responsible for decision-making, reasoning, personality expression, social

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appropriateness and other complex cognitive behaviors.

“Pleasure is an intermediate stopping point but should never be the end goal,” advises Brooks. “Driven solely by the pursuit of pleasure, our lives would become unmanageable.”

In his definition, enjoyment is a blend of pleasure, people and memory — a formula that advertising executives know well. Consider beer commercials: their aim is to elicit positive emotions, which is why they typically show people drinking in community and in celebration, rather than someone drinking alone.

2. Satisfaction: accomplishing more with less

Humans are the only species that derive joy from reaching an objective. This means that, to feel a genuine sense of accomplishment, the success will be sweeter if it involves some element of struggle.

To this end, Brooks argues Mick Jagger had it all wrong when he sang, “I can’t get no satisfaction.” We can *get* satisfaction; we just can’t *keep* it. The brain’s drive for homeostasis and hedonic adaptation won’t allow it. As soon as our systems become used to certain stimuli and events that trigger an emotional response, we are hardwired to strive for more. Case in point: billionaires who, in order to maintain homeostasis, immediately try to earn another billion as soon as they amass their initial fortune.

Luckily, there are techniques to sidestep the hedonic treadmill and counter our natural tendency of always wanting more. These include emotional self-management, controlling where we focus our attention and adopting a “want-less” strategy.

To achieve the optimal satisfaction quotient, Brooks uses a math analogy, encouraging people to control for the denominator (the whole) rather than increasing the numerator (the fractional parts). Examine your desires, ambitions and attachments, and decide what you can live without. Think of your life as a piece of art: rather than being the painter who stands before the blank canvas, adding brushstroke after brushstroke, emulate the sculptor who chips away at the marble block, eliminating the excess to achieve the desired result.

3. Meaning: declutter the mind and keep it simple

“What’s the meaning of life?” Brooks says this is the wrong question. Instead, it should be “What’s the meaning of meaning?” Meaning — as in meaning in life — is a combination of coherence, purpose and significance.

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What's the significance and the importance of *your* life? Why are *you* here? These are questions only *you* can answer, but Brooks offers several guideposts.

In our search for meaning, people often use complicated tools to solve complex problems. "Have you ever noticed that dating apps and Zoom meetings leave people feeling even more alone, isolated and depleted?" asks Brooks. "This is because the issues that matter most to us — love, companionship and connection — are inherently complex and impossible to simulate with technology."

In today's age of information overload, the path toward meaning requires going back to the starting line before any progress can be made. Brooks suggests several strategies to decluttering the mind. These include digital detoxes, mindfulness practices, phone hygiene and leaning into boredom. By allowing our minds to wander, we are better poised to tap into our innate creativity — an essential quality for today's innovative leaders.

Habits to raise your happiness levels

The most compelling explorations of happiness began after 400 B.C. with Aristotle. In modern times, many credit the Harvard Study of Adult Development for putting it on the map today. Launched in 1938, it tracked the lives of 724 men over 80 years to better understand the primary drivers of human happiness and wellbeing. Its findings were clear and conclusive. In the words of its current director, Robert Waldinger, "Good relationships keep us happier and healthier. Period."

As the study attests, the keys to living a happier life are within our reach. The set-point theory of happiness backs these findings, concluding that about half of our baseline happiness is determined by genetics, 10% by life circumstances and the remaining 40% by intentional actions. This breakdown gives us ample room to manage our own happiness levels.

In this regard, Brooks says that developing habits in four spheres — faith, family, friendships and work — empowers us to influence the happiness within our control.

1. Faith: feeling small in the grand expanse of the universe

More than a specific religious doctrine, faith is a force that transcends the self and allows us

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to see the bigger picture. While it goes against our natural human tendencies, our ability to see life through a wider lens helps us admit our smallness in the grand expanse of the universe and reminds us that life is more than our personal struggles and dramas.

Brooks mentions ways to achieve transcendence in our daily lives beyond adherence to specific religious practices (though that also helps). These include meditation practices, reading the works of Stoic philosophers or delighting in the fugues of Johann Sebastian Bach, among others.

2. Family: make time for family because life is short

Mysterious and mystical bonds emerge in the intimacy of kin-based relationships. As Brooks explains, “Homo sapiens are a kin-based, hierarchical species, meaning that we are neurologically hardwired to not walk alone. It can be explained by oxytocin excreted in the brain, the ‘neuropeptide of love’ that gives us an intense sense of wellbeing when we are with family.”

That said, he recognizes that challenges surface even in well-adjusted families, especially when it comes to conflict, compatibility, forgiveness and honesty. Except in cases of abuse, he encourages people to nurture their family relationships in all their complexity, accepting their flaws and imperfections, and viewing them as opportunities for growth.

The topic of family is deeply personal for Brooks. “One of my greatest regrets is losing connection with my parents. They were both interesting and brilliant people, and both of them died young. As a teen and young adult, I thought I had all the time in the world with them, but sadly this wasn’t the reality.” His advice in a nutshell: make time for family because life is short.

3. Friendships: it’s lonely at the top, so cultivate “real friends” not “deal friends”

Brooks often works with CEOs of leading companies to help them enhance their organization’s overall happiness and wellbeing. Yet, in doing so, he sometimes finds they have an ulterior motive: wanting to increase their *own* happiness and wellbeing. Despite their success and the fact they are rarely alone, these top-level leaders are often the loneliest people in the company, he finds.

In his view, their tendency to cultivate “deal friends” as opposed to “real friends” might be a

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contributing factor. “Real friends are ‘useless’ in the sense that they are not utilitarian,” says Brooks. “Real friends, like family members, couldn’t care less about your job title, power or status. They simply love you for who you are.”

4. Work: earning your success and serving others

According to Brooks’ research, the intense satisfaction of meaningful work has nothing to do with money, educational degrees, stature, prestige and the admiration of others. At the intersection of work and happiness, only two characteristics are reliable sources of joy: earning your success and serving others.

To this end, he warns against loyalty-based systems or tenure tracks, which can undermine morale by incentivizing employees to ingratiate themselves with the boss to get the coveted promotion or outstaying their welcome in terms of impact and motivation. Merit-based systems, on the other hand, have the opposite effect, since they prompt leaders to define merits for their teams and then hold them accountable.

Going back to the earlier definition of satisfaction, people want to earn their success and, when motivated, reach higher levels of productivity for the benefit of the entire team or organization. This leads to the second key aspect of meaningful work, which is about service to others. This goes to the heart of human dignity: both feeling needed and serving needs. As illustrated by the downcast traveler, nothing brings greater despair than feeling overlooked, unwanted or unneeded.

When leaders embrace a spirit of service, they create opportunities for others to align with their mission and join a community where mutual, interconnected needs are fulfilled. At its core, service-oriented work represents the highest purpose of leadership and management: cultivating an environment of shared responsibility and collective growth.

Indeed, business leaders are uniquely positioned to act as “happiness teachers,” guiding the pursuit of passion and wellbeing within their companies and communities, all while recognizing that spreading happiness begins with the self.

Arthur C. Brooks is a Professor of Management Practice at Harvard Business School, where he teaches courses on leadership, happiness and social entrepreneurship, as well as the Parker Gilbert Montgomery Professor of the Practice of Public and Nonprofit Leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School. He is a globally renowned speaker and the author of several

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bestselling books, including *Build the Life You Want*, co-written with Oprah Winfrey. His next book, on the search for meaning, will be published in 2026.

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