

The Sunday Telegraph
Edition 1SUN 18 APR 2004, Page S01
Body and Soul
The science of happiness
By Debra Taylor

That elusive inner glow isn't just for yoga devotees. Turns out going to the pub and bungee jumping are just as good for you. By Debra Taylor.

Sure, life is stressful. No surprises there, but don't underestimate your ability to deal with it. The fact is, each and every day you're tackling stress without even knowing it. The good news is you're winning the battle and you're most likely doing it in ways you never even dreamt of.

For example, every time you go to the pub or play a sport, you're kick-starting your body's natural ability to get happy. In more technical terms, every time you do something you enjoy, a specific series of feel-good neuro-transmitters and hormones are activated.

"Every thought or emotion we have is an electrochemical event," explains Dr Lissa Johnson, a Sydney-based clinical psychologist. Those events involve dopamine and opioids - which are essentially the body's natural happy drugs - and adrenaline.

These natural responses may explain why many of us get enjoyment from similar things, such as socialising. That said, those same natural responses may also explain why we also prefer vastly different activities. "There is some evidence, for example, that people with low dopamine activity seek out more novel and exciting things to do," says Johnson.

Whatever makes us happy - however, it's clear that our bodies' internal chemistry is partially responsible. Here are some of the reasons why...

"If I'm anxious or unhappy, I'll book myself in for a bungee jump. Afterwards I feel fantastic."

No, you're not crazy if you like jumping off a cliff. Exercise itself allows us to work through our natural "fight or flight" response to stress. "In modern life we still get the stress hormones released by the fight or flight response and exercise allows us to burn them off," says Johnson. Also, if you enjoy dangerous sports, you may be one of those people whose dopamine is low - which means you need a little more than kicking a ball around to make you feel good.

"When I want to relax, there's nothing better than lounging in a nice, hot bath and listening to my favourite music."

When you doze in the bath, you are putting yourself in a meditative state, which not only de-stresses you, but can be doing you good in the long term. "Recent research by a Harvard-trained neuroscientist has found that a part of the brain near the left hand side of the forehead tends to be particularly active in Buddhist monks," says Johnson. "There's some evidence that activation of that part of the brain is also associated with positive emotions, and with enhanced immune function." Meanwhile, listening to music isn't just relaxing, it's a mood enhancer which can stimulate positive emotions.

"The happiest times I have are walking my dog, I just love it."

There's a good reason why you prefer your pooch to most people. Uncomplicated companionship is very relaxing, as is getting out and about for those long walks in the park. In fact, in 2004, researchers found that people with pets had lower resting heart rates and blood pressure than those without a cat or dog. Dr Karen Allen, who conducted the research for The State University of New York, says the findings show that cats and dogs can offer emotional support to their owners. "The results suggest that social support can indeed cross species," she says. The bottom line - people with good relationships are happier, regardless of whether they're with man or beast.

"When I need to unwind after a hard day, I head straight to the movies."

Sitting in a dark room with a bunch of complete strangers may seem antisocial, but it's actually a comforting group activity. "There are other people around you experiencing the same thing," explains Dr Timothy Sharp of Sydney's The Happiness Institute. "The other thing that happens is that you forget about everything else. This is what we call "living in the moment or the present". That means you are relaxing."

"If I'm down, I head off to karaoke with my best friends and we have such a great time."

Some people wouldn't do karaoke if they had a gun to their head, and they're usually the ones who pour scorn on the idea. But, if you're a dedicated karaoke nut, you've really got something to sing about. German scientists from the University of Frankfurt recently discovered that singing releases hydrocortisone, a natural anti-stress hormone. "People who engage in this type of activity tend to be at the extrovert end of the spectrum. And extroverts tend to be happier than introverts," says Dr Sharp.

"If I'm not having a good time, I go to the pub with mates and talk it through over a beer."

Drinking the pub dry may not be a good health choice, but sitting with your mates over a moderate tippie is one of the best things you can do. "Social support is associated with enhanced immune function and wellbeing," says Lissa Johnson. Plus, chances are that you will have a good laugh and that can help protect your heart. In a recent study at the University of Maryland, doctors discovered people who laugh more have less chance of a heart attack.

"I relax by locking myself in a room and painting a picture."

You don't have to play sport or hang out with a crowd to jump-start your body's happy hormones. "Part of this is about living in the moment," says Dr Sharp. "There is something we call flow that refers to the sense of being so involved in an activity you love, you lose track of time." If you have a pastime you really love doing on your own - whether it's painting, knitting or photography - chances are you'll emerge as a more positive person. "People involved in something they really enjoy experience more positive emotions and are less likely to be negative," adds Dr Sharp. So break out the brushes or the knitting needles.