Famed poet Emily Dickinson once wrote, "The soul should always stand ajar, ready to welcome the ecstatic experience." When Dickinson penned this profound directive, she was certainly not entrenched in the chaos of modern life, with its congested traffic, incessant e-mails, and ubiquitous advertising that screams for our attention and jangles our nerves.

Too many bills, worries about health—not to mention a crumbling economy—can overwhelm even the most emotionally stalwart. It can sometimes be hard to feel. However, three natural steps can help enhance your everyday happiness (see sidebar).

What Makes People Happy?

What makes people happy and healthy? Other people. Groundbreaking research released late last year from the UCLA School of Medicine demonstrated that being lonely is bad for our health. The researchers found that isolated individuals had an overactive inflammatory response and an underactive immune system, the double whammy of poor health and disease.

In addition to avoiding isolation, research also demonstrates the importance of quality rather than quantity. In 2008, researchers from Denmark found that study participants believed good relations and life philosophy were the most important indicators of quality of life. The researchers concluded, "What one possesses in objective terms—money, status, work—does not seem to be important to global quality of life and is of little importance to self-assessed health."

Recently, researchers from the University of Nebraska released their data analyzing nearly 10,000 people over the age of 18 to find out if happiness really does positively impact health. They discovered that happy, satisfied people were healthier even at the two-year follow-up.

Of course, we all want to be happy but happiness can be extremely elusive. Some days, especially during stressful times, it takes a concerted effort to be happy. During spurts of stress and anxiety, we need to give our bodies extra support. A great place to start is with physical activity.

Scientific literature features many studies confirming that exercise can ease symptoms of depression and anxiety. A recent literature review by German researchers concluded that exercise is clinically effective even in cases of major depression and panic disorder. Strive for at least 30 minutes six days per week.

Fish Oils: As Good as Prozac

Over the past couple of years, the hot dietary supplements for mood enhancement have been omega-3 fatty acids. Recently, eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA), an important essential fatty acid, was compared to the antidepressant drug fluoxetine (e.g., Prozac). The study, which was featured in the Australian New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry, demonstrated that EPA was just as effective as the drug. The researchers also found that EPA actually enhanced the effectiveness of fluoxetine. This year, the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) announced it will be sponsoring a study to determine if EPA and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA), another important omega-3 essential fatty acid, can help prevent depression in pregnancy and postpartum. For mood enhancement, the goal is to take 1,000 mg of EPA or DHA from fish oils a day.

New research continues to confirm the effectiveness of B vitamins to help stabilize mood and prevent depression. Last year, the British Journal of Psychiatry found that low levels of folate and vitamin B12 were linked to late-life depression.

Numerous studies exist showing the standardized herb St. John’s wort can help alleviate symptoms of depression. A literature review featured in the September 2008 issue of the Journal of
Holistic Nursing confirmed that St. John's wort is "more effective than placebo and, in several studies, more effective than common antidepressant medications in treating minor depression." Keep in mind, St. John's wort is not indicated for major depression or bipolar disorder. The dosage for St. John's wort (standardized to 0.3 percent hypericin) is 300 to 600 mg two to three times daily.

SAM-e, Theanine, & Chromium

Many positive studies have been done on the natural substance S-adenosylmethionine (SAM-e). A literature review featured in the June 2005 issue of Clinical and Investigative Medicine concluded that SAM-e is effective for minor depression and "there appears to be a role for SAM-e in the treatment of major depression in adults." The dosage is 400 to 1,200 mg per day of enteric-coated SAM-e. Several studies have shown that 5-HTP, an important amino acid, increases serotonin, endorphins, and other neurotransmitters that can help enhance mood. According to author and naturopathic physician Michael Murray, ND, "Numerous double-blind studies have shown that 5-HTP has equal effectiveness compared to drugs, such as Prozac, Paxil, and Zoloft and tricyclic antidepressants like imipramine and desipramine." Murray recommends 50 to 100 mg three times a day. Consider taking at night, as 5-HTP causes drowsiness in some people. For this reason, 5-HTP is also recommended for treating insomnia.

Never discontinue taking prescription medications without first consulting with your doctor. This is especially true for antidepressant drugs. If you are having trouble focusing because of stress, you may want to try a product that contains L-theanine. "In addition to helping alleviate stress," explains author and holistic pharmacist Sherry Torkos, "L-theanine has been shown recently in
One ounce of MineralRich® delivers:

✓ 70+ Essential & Trace Minerals including...
✓ 1,000 mcg B-12
✓ Biotin
✓ Calcium & Magnesium
✓ Zinc
✓ Selenium
✓ Manganese
✓ Chromium
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clinical studies to significantly improve the ability to concentrate and think clearly.” Torkos recommends supplements that contain the ingredient Suntheanine at a daily dosage of 100 to 200 mg of L-theanine, one to three times per day.

Balancing blood sugar levels may also make you happier. “Chromium is highly effective in relieving atypical depression characterized by sugar cravings, gained weight, and feeling tired all of the time,” explains Patrick Holford, author of New Optimum Nutrition for the Mind. “In fact, taking proper levels of chromium can make a big difference to certain depressed people.” The daily dose of chromium picolinate is 200 to 500 mcg.

Product Examples

NATROL 5-HTP TR TIME RELEASE features 100 mg of the nutrient per tablet.

GAIA HERBS LIQUID PHYTO-CAPS ST. JOHN’S WORT is a concentrate of fresh St. John's wort flower buds.

CARLSON MELLOW MOOD contains B vitamins, GABA, and L-theanine for better moods.

JARROW FORMULAS SAM-e (in 60 or 20 count) regulates mood with 100 mg SAM-e per vegetarian, enteric-coated capsule.
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