

Exeter psychologist bounces back from hardship to spread happiness message

She says it doesn't take a bottle of wine or winning the lottery to make yourself feel good

By Becky Dickinson, Journalist and Life Writer



Dr Vikki Barnes, author of *Free Happiness: The art and science of positivity* (Image: Dr Vikki Barnes)

What if there was a way to feel happier, whatever life throws at you? A way to experience true happiness that didn't involve wine or winning the lottery.

Well, an Exeter "happiness specialist" believes there is.

Dr Vikki Barnes is a clinical psychologist. She's worked with everyone from the NHS to business tycoons, including Sir Richard Branson, and hurricane survivors, and she's no stranger to hardship in her own life too.

Now a wellbeing consultant, Vikki believes we can all train ourselves to be happier, and she says it's not a matter of wealth, or circumstance, but of science.

According to research, half of our overall happiness is genetically determined.

"Fifty per cent of our happiness is static," explains Vikki. "So some people are born with a baseline of more happy or less happy."

However, somewhat surprisingly, studies reveal that only a small amount of the way we feel is determined by the events in our lives.

"Ten per cent is contextual; so what happens to us will either make us feel more or less happy," says Vikki.

So if half of our happiness is fixed and 10 per cent is influenced by what goes on in our lives, what about the rest?

If you've done the maths, you'll realise that leaves rather a lot of room to play with 40 per cent, to be precise. Which is where Vikki comes in.



Dr Vikki Barnes in one of her happy places (Image: Dr Vikki Barnes)

"I get people to do something about that 40 per cent and it makes a massive difference," she says.

"It's all about our own choices and what we do. It's our mindset, our behaviours, our habits. We can all do something about that."

Learning how to optimise that critical 40 per cent is the subject of Vikki's new book, ***Free Happiness: the art and science of positivity***. The science-backed guide has a five-star rating on Amazon, and a forward note from Sir Richard, that reads: "Thank you for this beautiful girl, who looks after everybody. We've all got to play our part in protecting the world, we need to work as one." And in line with the title, Vikki stresses that no cost is involved in striving for the holy grail of happiness.

"You can spend money on things that make you happy, of course you can, but happiness itself is completely free," she says.

"It can be found anywhere; you can find it in nature, you can find it with other people, you can find it by changing your perspective about your life."

However, she adds that true happiness isn't something you can suddenly achieve overnight but is more like the process of 'training a muscle'.



(Image: Dr Vikki Barnes)

So how do we go about training this invisible 'happiness muscle'? Vikki's top tip is to be authentic, and she says this involves getting in tune with yourself and your feelings.

"The first step is recognising when you're not being yourself," she says.

"It's about getting more in tune with our bodies and how we're feeling: asking what's this churning tummy I've got, what's this headache, why am I feeling flushed or sick? Maybe the person I'm with is making me feel uncomfortable.

"It's like learning any new skill, it takes time. Then over time you learn how to do something about these feelings.

"If we're authentic then we're happy because we know we did things the way that only we could do it."

Vikki's work is rooted in the science of positive psychology and includes techniques like kindness, gratitude and positivity.

She says unfortunately most people have a habit of focusing on the negative - a natural consequence of evolution from an era when our ancestors needed to be alert for dangers in the environment.

"We've learned over time to let negative pathways form in our brains, so we need to create positive pathways," says Vikki.

"It's about positive mindset, positive thinking, creating positive environments and positive relationships."

It would be easy to dismiss all this positivity talk as glib, or impractical, especially in the face of suffering or in the throes of a pandemic.

But Vikki says: "It's not about being perfect and only experiencing the good stuff, we don't get that choice in life."

The doctor of clinical psychology is no stranger to hardship and suffering on both a personal and professional level.

In 2018, she went to the British Virgin Islands to support the mental health of survivors of hurricane Irma.

"Seeing the devastation was like nothing I'd ever experienced," she recalls.

"Those people were so resilient and hopeful and optimistic. I think they taught me more than I taught them.

"They were just taking the next small step. I left thinking if you've got hope you've got everything.

"As long as you've got that optimistic mindset and you can see a light at the end of the tunnel, then you've got it.

"All we really need to do is take the next small step because that's all we can do."

A few years ago, it was a theory she's had to put into practise in her own life too.

"I went through a time where I was made redundant, my relationship that I thought was going to be forever broke down, my health deteriorated and I had to move house, all within the space of a couple of months," Vikki says.

"Everything felt like it was falling apart at the same time and I didn't know whether I could get through it or even whether I wanted to.

"That was the lowest period in my whole life. I certainly thought that if the world decided to take me elsewhere then that would be easier.

"If I hadn't been practising positive psychology for so many years, or felt able to speak to people openly about it, I don't think I'd have found the techniques to help myself through today."

Vikki says the aim of her new book is to help people to think: "I can do this; no matter what's going on in my life, I can learn to be happier."

She adds: "Everyone has low times, it's about normalising it and accepting it. I'm lucky because I knew it was ok to feel like that."

The psychologist and author now runs her own consultancy, **Positive Wellbeing**, supporting mental health in a range of organisations and professions including: universities, healthcare, engineering, hospitality, accountants and seafarers.

And while it may seem like a sad reflection on society that we need lessons in how to be happy, Vikki believes it's just what the world needs.

"We've all been through a heck of a lot," she says.

"We're in a very fast-moving culture. We're adding more into our days and our lives and expecting more of ourselves and each other.

"I think life is more complicated than it once was in some ways and we may be more stressed and more overwhelmed.

"The good news is that we don't need to be and we can do something about it."

Her goal is simply to promote happiness using science-backed techniques. Because, as the cover of her new book states, "You get one life, let it be happy".

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