

Life skills

HOW TO LIVE HAPPY

...by the happiest people in the world (that's the Finns, FYI)

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The World Happiness Report measures how happy people feel they are and why and, this year, the Finns topped the charts. Sure, some of that is down to how society is run, which we can't change, but a lot of it is down to their outlook and lifestyle. Determined to borrow some of that good stuff, we drafted in Dr Jane Tuomola, a clinical psychologist based in Helsinki (compasspsychology.fi), to uncover what underpins Finnish happiness.

Get outdoors daily

Finland is known as the land of a thousand lakes, blessed with 39 national parks and some of the cleanest air and the purest lake water in Europe, so people get out and enjoy it, beginning in childhood. All school children take a 15-minute break for every hour of teaching, always outside. 'Children now have so much screen time and spend so many hours sitting, but here kids study hard, then run around and let off some steam, come

back refreshed to concentrate again.' And that ferocious love of the outdoors continues. 'Spending time in forests – or any green environment – is known to boost emotional wellbeing,' says Tuomola. 'The Japanese call it "forest bathing", but people do it automatically here. In summer, families hike, bike and swim in the lakes and, when it's cold and dark, people are out cross-country skiing. Being outside every day means you're getting exercise – and sunlight. Both are important to emotional wellbeing.'

Schedule self care

The weekly sauna is sacred in Finland, and it's more significant than you may think. Not only has it been proven to lower blood pressure and increase heart rate similarly to medium-intensity exercise, potentially protecting against heart disease and stroke, it has a deep psychological impact, relieving physical and mental stress. 'Every family is allocated a time slot in the sauna every week and everyone goes,' says Tuomola. 'It's hugely bonding, and it's very good for your wellbeing in terms of relaxing and cleansing.' The significant, borrowable element, is making a weekly, scheduled appointment for some self care. No questions asked, no cancellations. It doesn't have to be a sauna, it's the ritual, rather than the activity, that's important.

Value teamwork

'Family is seen as very important in Finland and society is structured to support that. A woman's job will be kept open for up to three years after she has a baby, and fathers have to take two months of parental leave,' says Tuomola. In the UK, shared parental leave was introduced in April 2015, allowing parents to share 50 weeks of leave and 37 weeks of pay after they have a baby, but take-up is as low as two per cent, partly because people are still unaware it exists, partly because there's still a cultural stigma attached to men taking time off. Finland, on the other hand, is the only country in the developed world where dads spend more time with their school-age kids than mums and that shared approach to parenting is beneficial to children easing the burden for mums – so, rather than taking on all the parenting duties, divide and thrive!

Rest – guilt-free

When it comes to holiday, Finland has it sussed – it's genuinely frowned upon if people don't take their annual leave. 'Finland shuts down in July and adults taking four weeks off is the norm,' says Tuomola. Conversely, only half of Brits take all of our holiday allowance, with most of us only clocking up 77 per cent of what we're due. Fear of getting behind is the most common reason not to pop on our 'out of office,' and 37 per cent of us aren't even able to go a single day without checking our work email when on holiday. 'We all need it to be able to reset, check in and think about what's working in life, and what's important. People should really prioritise taking their allotted annual leave,' says Tuomola. Put on your out of office, disconnect and relax.

“ADULTS TAKING FOUR WEEKS OFF WORK IS THE NORM IN FINLAND”

Keep learning

Because schools don't charge fees and there are no private universities, in Finland education is a right, not a privilege, and everyone can achieve, regardless of their background. It's well-known that learning and gaining skills is hugely beneficial for mental health, providing a sense of purpose. 'Continuing to learn means you can achieve self-actualisation,' says Tuomola. 'That means realising your creative, intellectual or social potential – and it's a benchmark of good mental health.' We can't emulate their education system, but we can invest in learning. 'If you've always wanted to learn to cook, dance or to speak another language, it's something to prioritise in terms of happiness.'

Engage with nature

Simply strolling through nature is beneficial to your emotional wellbeing, but if you take that up a notch and engage with nature – mindfully rather than passively – you get an even greater reward and. To Finns, that's second nature. Families head into the 23 million hectares of foliage to mountain bike,

walk and pick fruit through the seasons. 'Connection with nature is inherent here and seasons are celebrated,' says Tuomola. 'July marks berry-picking season, where people pick blueberries, lingonberries and cranberries. And there's the mushroom season, which runs through to October, where many people forage for mushrooms. Seasonal produce is valued and the forest is hugely important.' We don't have 23 million hectares of stunning forest, but 11.6 per cent of Britain's land surface is wooded, and our fair isle is home to blackberries, elderberries, damsons and more. Check what you're picking on wildfooduk.com.

Be grateful

There's a Finnish saying, 'Happiness is having your own red summer cottage and a potato field.' A summer house is a luxury most of us can't afford, but the expression boils down to an appreciation for the small things. 'A lot of people think happiness means walking around with this constant feeling of joy, but a general satisfaction with life is more important to overall wellbeing,' says Tuomola. And gratitude is key to that, something that's commonplace in Finland. 'I often ask clients to think about what three things they're grateful for every day – even if it's simply surviving a bad day.'

And never let the weather get you down...

During winter, the Finnish may only see six hours of daylight and temperatures get down to -15 degrees celsius. You'd think it could put a dampener on things, but you'd be wrong. 'There's a great Finnish saying, "There's no such thing as bad weather, just bad clothing,"' says Tuomola. 'People ski and ice skate, and every kid can cross-country ski almost as soon as they can walk.' There's another word in Finnish, *sisu*, which means stoic perseverance and grit, whatever comes your way, and it runs through the veins of the population. 'It's a sense of resilience, grit and strength that people develop,' says Tuomola. 'People have to cope with the winters here, so they make the best of it and don't complain.' It's summer now, but when winter strikes, bundle up and release your inner *sisu*; you can't change it, so embrace it. **1**