

THE WAY YOU MAKE ME FEEL

My sister-in-law, Candace Pert, Ph.D, found the opiate receptor in the brain at age twenty-six while working on her dissertation at Johns Hopkins University. The opiate receptor is the site where the brain's painkillers and happiness producers create our sense of well-being and happiness.

As a neuroscientist, Pert was fascinated by emotions and the mind-body connection. With an international reputation in the fields of neuropeptide and receptor pharmacology and chemical neuroanatomy, she worked with clinicians and physicians to help them understand her theories of emotion. Her first book, *Molecules of Emotion: Why You Feel the Way You Feel*, brought her scientific expertise into focus for the lay reader.

Subsequent studies by others identified neurochemicals that make us happy and give us a sense of well-being. Among the most common are dopamine, serotonin, endorphins, and oxytocin. Dopamine, sometimes referred to as “the reward molecule,” helps us drive toward goals and seek pleasure. Achieving goals provides us with a surge of dopamine, creating happiness. Another chemical, serotonin, helps us increase our confidence and self-esteem. When lonely or depressed, there is usually an absence of serotonin. Feeling thankful for good things in life can boost serotonin levels as well.

Endorphins, literally translated, are self-produced morphine and can help us withstand rigorous exercise and minimize pain. When you get your second wind, it is most likely that oxytocin levels have elevated in the body. Oxytocin also helps us bond with others through touch and promotes affection and love. A sense of humor helps, too. When we laugh, endorphins are activated.

While the various chemicals and neurotransmitters in the body have been extensively studied, another expansive research project— The Harvard Study of Adult Development — has for seventy-five years followed 724 men, asking about their work, their home life, health, and outlook on life. The study began in 1938 and followed two groups of these men. Today, some sixty from the original group are alive and are in their 90s. The first group consisted of sophomores at Harvard University and the second was men from some of the most impoverished and troubled areas of Boston.

All the young men were interviewed and given medical exams at the outset of the study. They were interviewed and examined annually. After all these years what did the researchers conclude? According to Robert Waldinger, today the fourth

research director of this project, “Good relationships keep us happier and healthier. Period.” He notes “three big lessons” from the study. First, social connections are good and make us happy while a sense of loneliness can kill us. Second, the quality of our relationships matter. “Living in the midst of good, warm relationships is protective,” Waldinger says. Finally, the last lesson is that “good relationships don’t just protect our bodies, they protect our brains.” Being able to rely on someone else creates a sense of happiness and well-being.

Is happiness elusive? Not really. Having good relationships is key. Our neurotransmitters take care of the rest.

For more information:

https://www.ted.com/talks/robert_waldinger_what_makes_a_good_life_lessons_from_the_longest_study_on_happiness

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-athletes-way/201211/the-neurochemicals-happiness>

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