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### **Don't worry, be happy: It could lead to a longer life**

Speaker tells Walk Kansas participants that being happy is a choice

*By Pat Melgares, K-State Research and Extension news service*

MANHATTAN, Kan. – Is there a science to happiness?

Michelle Lane thinks so. And she can prove it.

"I have found more than 30 studies that found that happiness actually adds several years to your life," said Lane, the senior director of community wellness and corporate health at North Kansas City Hospital.

Lane was a featured speaker to participants in [Kansas State University's Walk Kansas](#) program, an eight-week challenge that encourages teams of six to exercise and live more healthfully while working toward a common goal.

One research study, Lane says, monitored 1700 people in Canada for 10 years to determine whether their attitude affected their health.

"After accounting for known risk factors within this population, the researchers found that people who were happier were 22% less likely to get heart disease," Lane said. "Then, study after study demonstrates that people with the most negative emotions had the highest risk for heart disease, and people that scored highest for happiness had the lowest risk."

Johns Hopkins University reported similar results following a 25 years study: People with a positive outlook were one-third less likely to have a heart attack.

"Pessimism is really a big risk factor for poor health," Lane said. "When pessimistic people develop age-related illnesses like cancer or heart disease, that illness tends to progress faster."

"Happy people are less likely to get sick because the brain is directly wired to our immune system. Portions of our nervous system connect with our thymus and our bone marrow, which affect the immune response systems in the body."

Lane noted a trial in which 950 volunteers were asked to be exposed to a cold virus. Prior to the study, the participants were interviewed over a two-week period in which they reported such things as feeling energetic or whether they were pleased with their life.

“During the trial, those that reported more positive emotions were less likely to get the cold, even though they were swabbed with the virus,” Lane said.

Lane reviewed more than 400 studies and came up with four “set points” to increase happiness in one’s life:

- **Satisfaction with relationships.** Lane learned that the people most satisfied with their relationships at age 50 are the healthiest. A satisfactory relationship was more important than such health indicators as blood pressure and cholesterol level. Make an effort to talk to and know people you meet daily.
- **Be intentional about finding your flow and seek out new experiences.** Exercise is one way to ‘find your flow,’ Lane said. Make it a priority to do healthy things every day that bring you joy. A mystery dinner date, scavenger hunt or other outing helps individual find a flow away from less happy things, such as doing taxes or home repairs.
- **Do nice things for others.** “It’s simply part of our nature to be altruistic and compassionate,” Lane said. “Being intentional about it makes you feel good about yourself and make you feel pride, but it also gives you those ‘feel-good’ hormones.”
- **Show gratitude.** Lane calls it “foundational science” that doing even a couple things to express gratitude helps to increase one’s happiness. Consider starting a journal to write something you are grateful for every day.

“I like to think of emotions as being contagious...like a virus, right?” Lane said. “Happy people tend to lift the mood for everybody around us; unhappy people can bring us down. So, hopefully we can all lift the moods of those around us.”

More information about Walk Kansas also is available at [local extension offices in Kansas](#).

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**FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS:** Links used in this article  
Walk Kansas, <https://www.walkkansas.org>

K-State Research and Extension statewide offices, <https://www.ksre.k-state.edu/about/statewide-locations.html>

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