

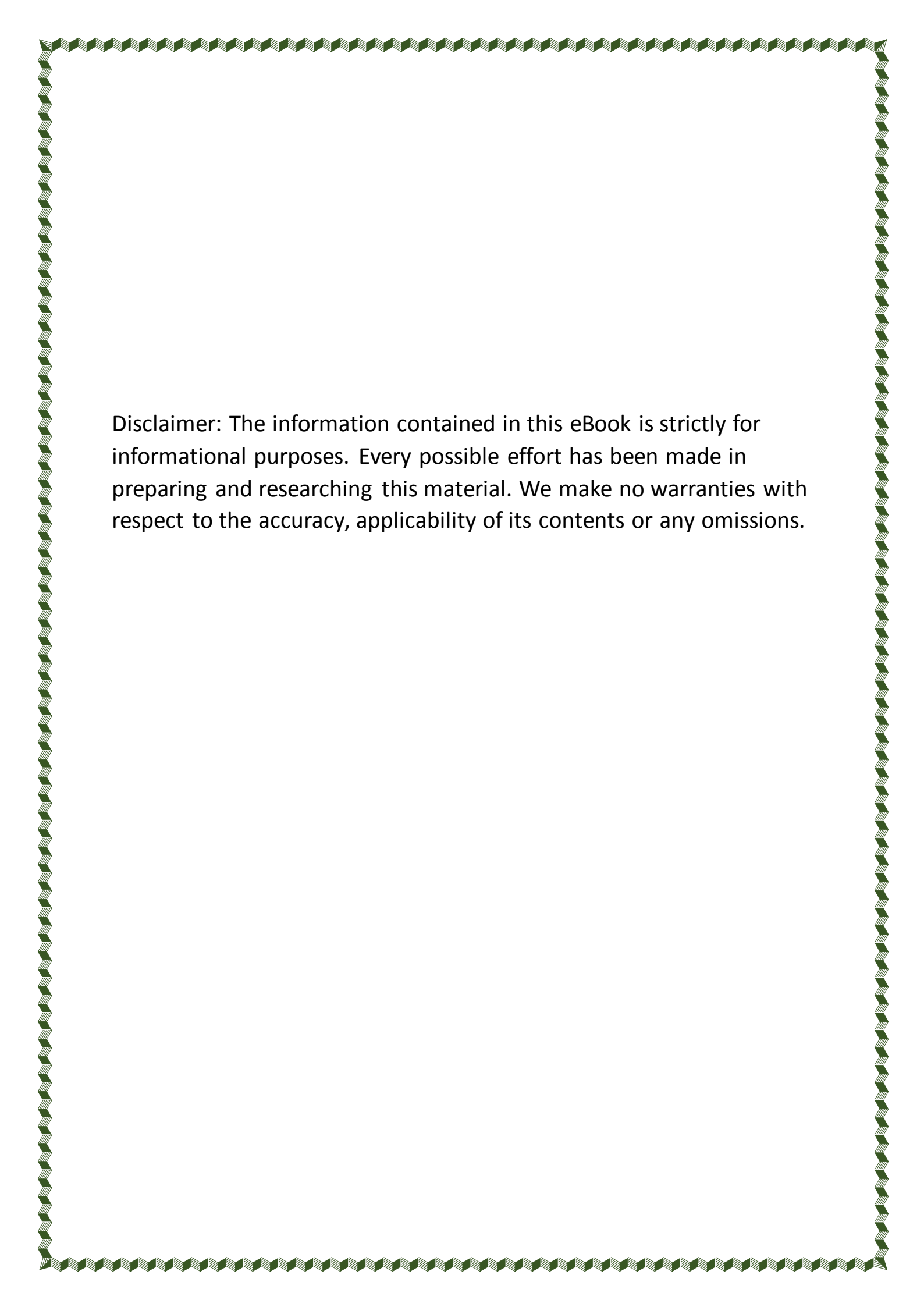
# The Psychology Of **HAPPINESS**

By The American Institute of Healthcare Professionals



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# Introduction

Happiness. For so many, it's an elusive state. It's something that people have long sought to obtain, and experts have endeavored to define. In fact, back in the 1990s, an entire branch of psychology was dedicated to it. Positive psychology isn't just trying to pin happiness down, the plan is to share it around for everyone.

The term itself was coined in the 1950s by Abraham Maslow. You probably know him better through his hierarchy of needs. It didn't become a popular branch of psychology until the late 1990s, though it came to the fore in the early 2000s. Maslow used the term differently. For him, it was a loose term with the intent to view human nature through a more balanced lens. It wasn't just about the psychological aspect, it was also about potential.

In the 2000s, though, positive psychology became something different. This is was about positive emotions and finding authentic happiness.

Happiness isn't just the mood you're in when you get great news. It's a state of being, this deep satisfaction stems from living a good life. Moreover, being happy can actually improve both your mental and physical health.

Positivity benefits your blood pressure, inflammation, immune system, and cardiovascular health as well.

Better yet, all of that means that happiness might just extend your lifespan. You'll enjoy them more when your health is in tiptop shape. It's a global pursuit.

It doesn't matter what corner of the world you are from, we all rate happiness high on the scale of personal outcomes we desire.

# Happiness 101

Are you happy? Do you often find yourself wishing for more happiness? Or, do you wish that you had more moments of joy? It can be elusive so, there are people who will go to the greatest lengths just to capture a short moment of happiness.

The Declaration of Independence was written in 1776 and in it happiness is included with life and liberty as an inalienable right. Then, how on earth can it be so elusive? It may come down to the fact that it's difficult to measure happiness – how can you quantify it?

It's subjective. What makes *you* happy will not be the same as what makes me happy or your children happy. From the psychological standpoint, though, we can't understand happiness unless we are able to quantify it.

When we talk about happiness, what we are referring to is someone's satisfaction. It could be a brief moment, or it might be over the course of a lifetime.

Additionally, you don't need to express it just to enjoy it. Happiness can be internalized in varying degrees, whether it's euphoria or simply mild satisfaction.

Positive feelings and thoughts fuel happiness, which psychologists refer to as positive affect. Negative affect is the contrast, the negativity and low moods of pessimists.

# How Happiness IS Quantified: What The Science Shows

If happiness is subjective how can we measure it? Well, the World Happiness Report that the United Nations releases every year certainly believes that it can be measured. This invites citizens of every country to report their own levels of happiness.

From the years 2015 through 2017, Finland ranks number one on the happiness scale, followed by Norway, Denmark, and Iceland

In fact, Finland wins twice here as their immigrants are also rated as the happiest of the world's immigrant population. The United States has dropped multiple places over the years and now sits in 18<sup>th</sup> place.

So, why is it that Nordic countries do so well and are often the happiest of the world's societies?

The report measures the levels of happiness in each country using The Cantril Ladder, a scale that was devised by the late Hadley Cantril, a US psychologist. Each participant is asked to imagine a 10-rung ladder.

The first rung is the worst life that they can imagine, with the top rung being the ideal life.

Then, they choose which rung of the ladder represents their situation. The happiest three countries rate themselves at a 7.5 (or higher). All of the top ten have rated themselves over 7.

These are prosperous, highly developed countries. So, you could assume that their happiness is simply linked to their wealth. That is what many of us believe

brings happiness – the possession of more and more money. To us, wealth is a symbol of success. It offers you more buying power and the opportunity to buy exactly what you want.

### **But, can it truly buy happiness?**

This is a question that has plagued both economists and psychologists. If there was a correlation between happiness and money, then we would have expected the most prosperous nations to have the happiest citizens.

However, the World Happiness Report tells us that this isn't the case. Yes, the rich people in countries are happier than the poorer citizens. Yet, the most prosperous countries aren't happier than poorer countries. So, wealthy people aren't leading happier lives just because they have money.

We can look to other studies for proof of this, particularly *Lottery Winners and Accident Victims: Is happiness relative?* (Brickman, et al <http://psycnet.apa.org/record/1980-01001-001>).

This study looked at serious accident victims as well as lottery winners to look at how happiness and money are linked. There were 22 lottery winners in the study and 29 people who were paralyzed as a result of their accident.

The joy that came from the lottery win numbed the winners to life's smaller joys. Only major events could elicit joy from them. There was no lasting happiness elicited by a big money win.

Often, the same problems are still present even when you have the money to change things up. The only problem that money can solve is a financial one. That doesn't mean you will find happiness thereafter.

# Why Happiness Matters

Happiness is a symbol of a life that is enjoyed. Happiness comes with benefits beyond happiness itself.

Sure, success can also breed happiness, but there is something important in understanding that your own happiness can make you a more successful person. This simply supports an earlier study from the 1980s where researchers induced an artificial positive affect through candy and comedy movies.

The subjects in the study were given a problem-solving exercise and those who were in the positive affect state were more efficient at solving those problems than those in a negative affect state or a neutral one (<http://psycnet.apa.org/record/1987-27192-001>). Positive affect can indeed boost your abilities and performance.

## Can Happiness Extend Your Lifespan?

A 15-year study (Effects of Happiness on All-Cause Mortality During 15 Years of Follow-Up: The Arnhem Elderly Study, Koopmans et al, <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.462.8911&rep=rep1&type=pdf>) suggests that it might.

In a study of elderly people, the ones who reported high levels of happiness lived longer than those who didn't. The only question now is did the happiness result in a longer life or did good health contribute to happier people?

Researchers did find that happiness encourages physical activity which can be beneficial to overall health and wellness.



# Promoting Happiness

You may be tempted by the myriad of self-help books that promise to help you find happiness. Can you nurture a positive effect? Or, is your happiness influenced by your life circumstances, environment and other factors that are out of your control? This really depends on how you define happiness, the studies mentioned above did create an artificial state of positive affect.

There are ways to nurture your own happiness.

- Some believe that it is a mindset.
- There is also the stance that true happiness is found from living a life of fulfillment and purpose.
- Some say that true happiness comes from being grateful for and enjoying what you have as opposed to focusing on what you don't have.
- For some happiness is found at certain moments of the day, for example hugging their child, or taking a hot bubble bath. It does not have to be a constant "floating in a cloud" situation, but certain moments that make life worthwhile.

## Ways To Nurture Your Own Happiness

### Kind Acts

We know that there are benefits to giving to others. So, instead of hoarding possessions that will only offer brief glimpses of the happiness you are searching for – try giving to others. Just look at the World Happiness Report and how some of the richest nations are *dropping* spots.

*The United States is one of the world's wealthiest nations yet only ranks 18 in happiness.*

Practice acts of kindness and give of yourself to nurture your positive affect. Elizabeth Dunn conducted an experiment that shows giving boosts happiness more than spending. Each participant was given a cash gift and told they could spend it on someone else or themselves.

While they all had different amounts, the amount didn't matter. The people who gave experienced a greater deal of happiness

It doesn't matter whether you choose to donate money to a cause that you value or you dedicate your time and energy.

Any acts of kindness that you can practice will make a difference to others and to you. It could be as simple as just reaching out to someone you know who is having a hard time.

## Healthy Relationships

Our family and friends can have a strong impact on our happiness levels. Making friends has a strong influence on your self-esteem. When compared, extroverts tend to rate higher on the happiness scale than introverts.

This is simply because extroverts have an easier time putting themselves out there to make friends. If you *are* an introvert, you can use the internet to make friends with other introverts whom you share commonalities with.

It's difficult to put yourselves out there when spending time with people can be draining. However, even introverts need to nurture their positive affect by making time for good friends and family.

Studies show us just vital relationships are to our well-being. Perhaps the greatest example of this is the 20-year study from Nicholas Christakis and James

Fowler. The study looked at the relationships between close friends and family (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19056788>).

They found that your prospects of happiness are boosted when someone you have a close relationship with lives within a mile away. Happiness is contagious! It isn't just influential to the people in question, it can also impact the people around you, up to three degrees of separation.

Your relationship with your spouse can also influence your happiness. When you are in a happy marriage, it can boost your happiness levels. Living with your partner also offers a boost, but not as high as a marital relationship.

Don't be afraid to express your emotions, whether it's for your family, good friends or romantic interests. Healthy relationships are a great benefit to your happiness and health. It really doesn't matter whether your network is small or large, what matters is that you tap into it.

Call your friend and talk about your feelings. Plan your favorite activities with your parent or sibling. When you spend time with people who respond favorably to you it doesn't just benefit that relationship. It also cultivates positive affect.

## **Healthy Habits Of The Happiest People**

You don't need to run out and stock up on self-help books or content about happiness. You don't need to search the web endlessly for the answer to all of your questions.

Before we leave you, we want to share with you some of the healthy habits of the happiest people.

### ***Exercise***

In addition to eating well, you should always stay active. Getting regular exercise doesn't just help your body stay healthy, it's also good for your mind. Exercise can relieve the symptoms of depression and anxiety. There are a variety of physical illnesses that anxiety and depression contribute to as well, so exercise is incredibly beneficial.

### ***Spiritual Engagement***

Spirituality doesn't have to mean religion. Even if you are non-religious you should be engaged spiritually. For the religious among us, engaging in a church is a great way to remain connected. It offers an opportunity to worship with like-minded people at least once a week.

For non-religious individuals, there are community engagements, meditation, and even spending time in nature. There are a variety of ways for you to engage yourself spiritually. What's more spiritual than spending time in nature? Perhaps a hike is how you like to stay engaged.

### ***Optimism***

A positive mindset, an ability to practice gratitude all of this feeds an optimistic person. Gratitude has made a lot of waves in the last few years. There's a reason for that.

Showing gratitude is associated with happiness and positive emotions. Not only that but it can help you relieve stress and the symptoms of depression as well. It can encourage a sense of belonging. You can keep a gratitude journal or simply list off the things you're grateful for each morning and again before bed.

## *Strengths*

You may be surprised at just how beneficial to your happiness your strengths can be. Do you know what yours are? The first step, of course, is to discover your strengths. The second step is to put them to good use.

People are happier when they're putting their strengths to use, whether it's critical thinking and problem solving or persistence. Perhaps one of the reasons for this happiness is that exercising your strengths brings you closer to your ultimate goals in life.

## *Flow*

First of all what is flow? It's simply a state of joy. So, certain activities or experiences can bring you to this state. Find what provides you with your flow. It might be playing indoor soccer with your friends on a Friday night. It could be playing the piano or perhaps teaching.

Find your flow and indulge it. What better way to nurture positive affect than by feeding your happiness. It's internal, and everyone knows that intrinsic motivations bring truer and lasting happiness, as compared to extrinsic motivations.

Just as important as healthy habits are to nurturing positive affect, so is protecting it. Which means that when there are certain things that you know bring about negative affect you work to mitigate them.

There are just certain things in life that are out of your control. You can't influence your boss as much as you would like. It's difficult for you to remove all of life's stresses.



The key is learning how to manage these situations to the best of your ability as to ensure they don't tear down your positive affect. For some people, it might be simple to change jobs. Not everyone has that luxury, though.

You may not have the opportunity to find a new position, leave the company or strike out on your own. If you don't – that's okay. This is where you can exercise your ability to manage stress and emotions.

These are healthy habits that everyone should work on. Remember, you can only control your response to these situations. That knowledge in and of itself can make a big difference to your happiness levels. Just accepting your inability to control everything can influence your happiness.

## Final Thoughts

Okay, so positive affect is influenced by a variety of external factors. However, you can influence it, too. As much as the world tries to tear you down and take your happiness with you, you can rise up and build your happiness. It comes from within.

There are so many different ways you can do this, from smiling until it puts you in a happy mood to working on your self-control and boosting your social skills to work on your social standing.

The term fake it till you make it is frowned upon. There is a negativity associated with it. Firstly, if you are angry or sad you should allow yourself to experience those emotions fully.

You can't overcome them until you first process them. Secondly, you can pretend that you're happy to push yourself to internalize joy. You have to be honest with yourself and know that's what you're doing. No one wants you to wear a face every day and pretend to be happy when you're miserable inside. That isn't the purpose of smiling through it all.

It's kick-starting your good mood. There is something to be said for managing your mindset and working on being an optimist. Some people roll their eyes at the idea of this, but optimism can help you cope with stress.

Let us tell you what happiness *isn't*. It isn't jumping from a trampoline of joy to another trampoline of joy. With happiness there are times of discomfort. Money offers you freedom from stress about a home, clothing, and food.

There are factors like genetics, circumstances, and relationships that can influence your happiness, too. Remember, you have the greatest control over

your happiness. You control your thoughts. You control how you respond to stress and express your emotions. So, embrace life's smaller pleasures that bring you happiness.

Take that bubble bath with a glass of wine, indulge in your hobbies, find a job that you enjoy, set goals, chase goals, make friends, keep friends. Whatever you do, do it with the idea that it will add value to your life.

Do you want true happiness? In the United States, it's clear from our falling spot on the World Happiness report that we need a shift in our priorities. Instead of putting it all on wealth and material possessions or on others, it's time we got to know ourselves better to determine what will really bring us happiness.

You might already have plenty of money, but happiness evades you. Perhaps you wish you had a problem like that and you believe that if you could repair your finances everything would be fine.

The truth is, your happiness lies in your hands more than it does in any external factor that may be negatively influencing it. Poor people can find happiness just as well as wealthy people can. They may experience different troubles and strife, but the point is that they find a way to overcome that to find true happiness in life.

**So, what is it that you are letting stand in the way of your happiness? More importantly, what are you going to do about it?**

**Stay Happy and Take Care!**