

How to Be Happy in Grad School (and in Life)

"There is no one-size-fits-all recipe for happiness and it would be truly dreadful if there were," observes Simon Critchley. Nevertheless, here are ten tips I've learned from more than two decades of working in academia. Note that these are my own suggestions and have not been endorsed by anyone at the University. Note also that they are not meant to replace active engagement in the fights against poverty, discrimination, abuse, and other kinds of injustice that prevent many people from finding the happiness they seek.

1. **Meditate.** Meditation is the best way I know to cultivate *mindfulness*, or awareness without judgment, which is the most valuable life-skill you can acquire. Sit silently for ten minutes a day, focusing on your breathing, and let your thoughts pass without judgment. Cultivating mindfulness can help you quiet the voice inside your head that feeds your worries, anxieties, and other destructive emotions.
2. **Practice self-compassion.** Perfection is not the goal. Mistakes and imperfections are a natural and healthy part of life. In fact, some of the most important lessons you will learn will come from failure. Commit yourself to success, but permit yourself to fail, in your work and in your personal life. Treat yourself as compassionately as you would treat a good friend. Learn the art of "good enough" and the idea of "satisficing." Practicing self-compassion can also help increase your compassion for other people.
3. **Send out good vibes.** Whenever you interact with another person, especially a difficult person, say to yourself, "I want this person to be happy." You can't control other people, but you can control how you react to them. When we act with loving-kindness toward others, we often create a positive feedback loop in which our good intentions are reciprocated. Not always, but often.
4. **Master your anger.** Anger may be the most destructive of all the emotions, because it is a mask for our deeper feelings. When you feel angry, you more likely are feeling hurt, scared, humiliated, frustrated, rejected, disrespected, attacked, offended, ignored, devalued, or trapped. Anger is what we feel when these emotions are at their most intense. Yoda was right: "Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering." Look past the anger to see what is making you feel vulnerable. Name that emotion and say what you want instead. Be assertive about your needs and desires without assigning blame.
5. **Eat well and exercise.** The mind-body dualism is a false construct: study after study shows that mental fitness is intimately connected to physical fitness. (Fun fact: ASICS is an acronym for the Latin phrase *anima sana in corpore sano*, or "a healthy mind in a healthy body.") Make time to eat healthy foods and incorporate aerobic, resistance, and flexibility exercises into your daily routine as often as possible.
6. **Get enough sleep.** Seven hours a night is good, eight is even better. Lack of sleep makes everything worse. Good sleep recharges your body and makes you better able to handle the stresses of the day.
7. **Get things done.** Happiness depends in part on *flow*, or absorption in a meaningful task, especially a task that serves something larger than yourself. So strive for "Inbox Zero" (Google it) and set specific, achievable goals. Create a task list. Stay focused, follow your passion, and persevere. Learn from Dwight D. Eisenhower: "What is important is seldom urgent and what is urgent is seldom important."
8. **Have a social life.** Counter-intuitive as it may seem, play is crucial to creative thinking. Go to a concert, see a movie, or share a meal with friends. You will find yourself refreshed, and you may make mental connections that would not have occurred to you otherwise. Keep in touch with caring friends and family members—they are your support network—and ask them for help when you need it.
9. **Think like a novelist.** Put day-to-day crises in the larger context of your whole life story. Remember that today's events are only one scene in a much larger story, and that this period in your life is only one chapter. Use third-person pronouns when thinking about yourself, which gives you the distance to be self-reflective without being self-involved. Make your story one of adaptation, resilience, and redemption.
10. **Remember that you are ultimately responsible for your own happiness.** No one can make you feel anything. You can allow people to affect you negatively, or you can stay positive. So stay positive!