Don't worry be happy

Running low on self-esteem? Caught in negative thought cycles? Get to know yourself better and break free, says Emma Cook

In 1976, two American researchers, Ellen Langer and Judith Rodin, gave a group of elderly nursing home residents a plant to care for. Another group in the same home were given plants, but told that nurses would take care of them. Three weeks later, those who had cared for their own plants reported much higher levels of happiness than those who hadn't; 18 months later, their health and levels of activity had improved and, most significantly, fewer of those residents had died.

Happiness research has come a long way since that landmark study, but what it proved has been shown time and again: having control over our lives, working towards a goal and caring for others, even for plants, can make us happier – and even extend our lives.

Researchers have since hit upon a list of activities that improve our overall wellbeing. Many of them, such as gardening, have an almost instant effect: engaging in activities in which we can lose ourselves or, in psychological terms, achieve "flow"; taking up charitable work to make us less self-absorbed and more connected to the world around us; getting physical exercise; and focusing on pleasurable pastimes that use our key skills and create greater meaning in our lives.

All these are invaluable ways to boost our mood, but achieving lasting happiness, most experts agree, depends ultimately upon understanding ourselves. If we can get to the root of who we are, and why, then true contentment will be ours. There's just the small question of how.

For Sigmund Freud and his followers, conscious thought was but the tip of the iceberg: true understanding of the self lay in the unconscious and could be unlocked only with the help of a skilled practitioner. Psychoanalysis and psychotherapy continue to rely on the notion that our wellbeing depends on continually evaluating our past.

However, there has been a significant shift in the last 10 years, born of positive psychology and the rise of the self-help industry. And it is founded on the relatively novel idea that self-awareness doesn't have to be a process of endless reflection. The liberating notion that the solution to much of our discontent need not lie in the past forms the basis of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). The emphasis is on changing the way we think in the here and now, and breaking negative thought patterns.

Mark Williams, professor of clinical psychology at Oxford University, uses a cognitive approach with depressive patients. One of the critical aspects that holds people back from happiness and keeps them vulnerable, he says, is their style of thinking. "They're more likely to react to a sad mood with large numbers of negative thoughts which leads to brooding and 'adhesive preoccupation' – that middle-of-the-night feeling when we're caught in a cycle of worry."

If you've gone three times around the block on a problem, Williams says, then you're no stranger to adhesive preoccupation. And one of the worst preoccupations, ironically, is often, "Why aren't I as happy as I long to be?" "As soon as you start asking that question," Williams says, "it will almost certainly make you feel less happy." Instead he prescribes instant techniques to develop mindfulness, a behavioural antidote to our tendency to ruminate and catastrophise. "Mindfulness means cultivating awareness of what's going on externally and internally," he says. "It's influenced by the Buddhist idea of focusing your attention on the moment, without judgment."

Williams teaches patients to "notice" emotive and physical sensations, without reflection or analysis; to simply "see" your thoughts coming and going. "If, say, you feel tired, spend a couple of minutes asking yourself, 'Why do I feel tired? What is it about 'me' that makes me feel tired?' What are the potential consequences of feeling this tired?" After two minutes, he says, most people will feel more tired. "Now try again, but this time notice you feel tired and make space for it; allow the experience to be there, but no more.

Within eight weeks of following similar techniques, Williams says, patients start to notice how the mind is drawn into fruitful cycles of "What if scenarios, which mean we end up living more our head than we do in our life." In two research trials with people suffering recurring depressive episodes, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy halved the chances of depression returning.

Ultimately, mindfulness means paying much more attention to our thoughts, particularly the critical ones, and asking ourselves key questions. Would we let loved ones pass negative comment on our behaviour, intelligence or personality? Would we judge them so?
Christine Ohuruogu
Olympic 400m Champion

I’ve never been that confident. I never thought I was the best at anything, but I’ve always had high expectations and pushed myself. It’s not necessarily being competitive, but wanting to do my best. I’ve always suffered from nerves before a race. That doesn’t go away, no matter how well you do. You’re anxious about whether your body’s going to allow you to do what you want to do, and whether you can deal with the pain. You always size up the competition, but once you realise they are just human beings trying to do what you’re trying to do, it puts things in perspective. Worrying won’t change anything. It’s a waste of time and energy.

I have struggled in the past, though. The day I found out I’d been banned from competing for a year (in 2006, for missing three out-of-competition drugs tests), I was a complete mess, at my lowest point. Everything I’d worked so hard for had been taken away, for something so small and so silly. It was the hardest year. I can’t think of anything so desperate and difficult. Having to face people, to have everyone asking the same questions. I stopped reading papers and watching the news, and just sat at home like a hermit.

I remember at the time my mum saying life is like an elastic band: you can be pulled down so far, but once you let go of that band, it’s going to spring back higher than you could ever have imagined. And it was true, I trained hard, I had one race going into the world championships [in 2007], and I won. That was just prepared the way for the Olympic gold in 2008, which really cemented my self-belief.

Now, I’m just thinking of the job at hand - today, next week, this year. I like to tackle things in bite-sized pieces. I’m better when I’m dealing with the here and now. My aim is just to get to 2012 in one piece. To train and make sure I’m in the best shape to defend my title, but to keep it in perspective. There are more important things in the world than running around a track.