



January 2009 - Newsletter

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A Different Type of Resolution

At this time each year, many of us make resolutions that involve varying degrees of pain or self-discipline. For example, "I resolve to lose ten pounds," or "I resolve to save more money." But for 2009, you may wish to consider a much easier resolution which is almost guaranteed to generate happiness – **Spend more time with happy people.**

Dr. Nicholas Christakis of Harvard University Medical School tracked 4,700 individuals for over 20 years and found that people who are happy dramatically increase the chances that those they come in contact with will also become happy. The study which was published in the December, 2008 online edition of the *British Medical Journal*, additionally found that the power of happiness can span another degree of separation, elevating the mood of the contact's husband, wife, brother, sister, friend or even next-door neighbor.

"You would think that your emotional state would depend entirely on your own choices, actions and experiences," says Dr. Christakis, "But it also depends on the choices, actions and experiences of other people, including people to whom you are not directly connected. Happiness is truly contagious!"

A person's happiness can positively affect another's happiness for up to a year, the researchers found. And while unhappiness can also spread from person to person, its "infectiousness" seems to be far weaker.

Earlier studies have confirmed the common experience that one individual's emotions can directly influence another's; for example, laughter can trigger giddy feelings in others and seeing someone smile can momentarily lift one's spirits. But Dr. Christakis' study is considered groundbreaking because it is the first to assert that happiness can spread not only from person to person but across groups as well and for an extended period of time.

So how exactly does happiness "infect" others in close proximity? The study found that when one person becomes happy, the chances that a friend, relative or neighbor would become happy increased between 8 percent and 34 percent. This "happiness effect" repeatedly continued through three degrees of separation, although it dropped progressively from 15 percent to 10 percent to about 6 percent before disappearing completely.

The findings, according to Dr. Christakis and his research team, provide striking new evidence about the power of social networks which has implications for virtually every cluster of human beings ranging from the home to the neighborhood to the workplace. In addition, the study found that happy people tend to be healthier, more creative and productive.

So if you make an attempt to connect with the happy people around you, you will soon be "infecting" others with whom you come in contact. This is certainly a positive and painless resolution for 2009! But remember, for those occasions when happiness is in short supply, your EAP is available 24/7 to help you address life's challenges and maybe even put a smile back on your face!