

Aristotle's 10 Rules for a Good Life

An ancient Greek recipe for happiness

By [Arthur C. Brooks](#) August 10, 2023



Illustration by Jan Buchczik

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Many people say they are looking for happiness. They spend a lot of time and resources searching for the secrets of well-being, like old-time miners prospecting for gold. But for some sages throughout history, this is the wrong approach. Happiness isn't something to be *found*; it's something to *attract*.

Perhaps the most famous proponent of the second path was the Greek

philosopher Aristotle. He defined happiness as *eudaimonia*, which means “good spirit.” To us moderns, this might sound vaporous, like the superficial happy feelings that so many people (incorrectly, in [my view](#)) chase. Instead, the philosopher meant that happiness was a divine state that would visit each of us as it pleased. Our only responsibility was to open the door to it. And we do so by living well.

To live well, we should practice specific virtues and make them into habits. As Aristotle [wrote](#) in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, “If it is better to be happy as a result of one’s own exertions than by the gift of fortune, it is reasonable to suppose that this is how happiness is won.” Here are 10 of the virtues he recommends—which, as modern research shows, do generally attract the good spirit.

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1. Courage

Aristotle [wrote](#) about courage in the context of the willingness to sacrifice one’s life, such as in war. Whether he would recognize the virtue in our modern settings is hard to guess—who knows what he would say about the fear of being canceled on social media? But the question at hand is not the source of fear but whether courage—to act in the face of fear rather than give in to it—invites happiness. And the research suggests that it does: Scholars have [shown](#) that courage can lead to resilience after adversity, and resilience [leads](#) to greater happiness.

2. Temperance

By this, the philosopher means self-control in the face of one’s appetites and

base impulses. He would classify the hippie motto "If it feels good, do it!" as a recipe for misery. Modern researchers investigating self-control agree, but with a twist. Scholars writing in the *Journal of Personality* in 2017 [found](#) that as impulse control among college students increased over the course of a day, positive affect initially *fell*. As self-control kept rising, however, negative feelings decreased; happiness rose to its highest levels when self-control was at its highest as well. In other words, a little moderation isn't so good for well-being, but immoderate moderation may be great.

3. Liberality

By this, the philosopher is referring not to politics (*liberalism*) but to money. Specifically, he recommends avoiding stinginess but without being profligate. In fact, evidence suggests that being a cheapskate influences your well-being. For example, three economists in 2014 set up an ultimatum-bargaining game in which participants had to split a certain amount of money: One participant offered a certain split; the other could say yes or no, but *no* meant that neither side got anything, so the offer of a lousy split could be answered with spite. The authors [found](#) that physical stress levels were higher for both parties when the bargaining involved offered a split lower than 40 percent.

4. Magnificence

Related to liberality is what Aristotle [calls](#) "magnificence," according to which a person "will think how he can carry out his project most nobly and splendidly, rather than how much it will cost and how it can be done most cheaply." He was not asserting here that the path to happiness is to buy an ostentatious yacht; rather, magnificence [means](#) giving to projects that benefit a large number of people. Today, we might call this "munificence"—to be as philanthropic as you reasonably can be. For this, the support is unambiguous: [Giving feels good](#).

5. Greatness of soul

A great-souled person, [according](#) to Aristotle, acts like his close predecessor in ancient Greek philosophy, Socrates, who was a “being indifferent to good and bad fortune.” This requires being high-minded—not that you can’t tell the difference between pleasant and unpleasant things, but that you are occupied by what is deeper and more meaningful in life than transitory pleasures and passing irritations. Indeed, research comparing the pursuit of pleasure versus of meaning among adolescents [shows](#) that the latter leads to greater happiness. In other words, get off social media and read, say, *Nicomachean Ethics*.

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6. Gentleness

The virtue of gentleness refers to a propensity toward kindness and an ability to control your temper. The idea is that to be self-possessed in this way brings happiness. If true, then gentleness’s opposite, aggression, should lower well-being by making it harder to manage one’s own emotions. Researchers have tested this idea by asking people to think of someone they despise, and then either to imagine violent, malicious actions toward the person or to focus on a neutral thought (specifically, what they planned to do the following Wednesday—presumably *not* beat up the person in question). They [found](#) that the aggressive thinkers began to brood over their fantasy assault and experienced lower well-being than the temperate crew as a result.

7. Truthfulness about yourself

Aristotle put a great premium on honesty. He counseled against “pretense in the form of exaggeration” and boastfulness, but also against self-deprecation. You might say he recommended that we seek something like secure humility, through which we recognize ourselves and can show others

who we are without either puffery or self-denigration. This tracks with the general work on humility, which [correlates](#) with lower levels of neuroticism and depression, as well as with a greater love of life. But it is also consistent with research [showing](#) that insecurity and excessive self-criticism are associated with anxiety and sadness.

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8. Equity

This is a word that gets a lot of attention in our modern debates. It commonly involves efforts to increase fairness and to redress past discrimination. And it is manifestly true that when people believe they are being treated unfairly, it [lowers their happiness](#). But Aristotle meant something totally different. "The equitable man," [wrote](#) the philosopher, "is one who by choice and habit ... does not stand on his rights unduly, but is content to receive a smaller share although he has the law on his side." He called this "a special kind of Justice." For this proposition, I can find no specific empirical evidence. However, it is almost certainly related to the next virtue.

9. Forgiveness

Aristotle [wrote](#) about the virtue of consideration for others. To the contemporary ear, this sounds like politeness, or sensitivity to others' feelings, but the philosopher was recommending something much trickier: forgiveness and forbearance toward others' faults. The wisdom of this advice has a large modern literature to support it. Virtually every study of forgiveness [shows](#) that practicing it purposefully and letting go of grievances lowers depression and anxiety symptoms.

10. Modesty

Modesty is often thought in the modern world to resemble humility. But Aristotle defined it as refraining from shameful (if tempting) behavior—and

applied this even to private conduct. This conception of modesty makes it similar to temperance, except that instead of moderation in the face of base appetites, we should abstain completely from vices. He added a [caveat](#), however: Modesty could be a virtue only if “a good man would be ashamed if he were to do so and so.” In other words, you have to believe a certain action is vicious in order to be virtuous in avoiding it. I personally have no moral qualms about liquor but don't drink myself, so by the Aristotelian standard, my teetotaling is not a virtue. Bearing this caveat in mind, this kind of modesty is indeed a happiness strategy: When people undertake what they consider [moral acts](#), they gain in happiness and even more so in sense of purpose; when they commit immoral acts, they experience the opposite.

Aristotle proposed these happiness virtues more than two millennia ago, but I believe they provide a handy checklist today for living well. Here's an abbreviated list you might just want to put up on your fridge, or tape to the bottom of your computer screen.

1. Name your fears and face them.
2. Know your appetites and control them.
3. Be neither a cheapskate nor a spendthrift.
4. Give as generously as you can.
5. Focus more on the transcendent; disregard the trivial.
6. True strength is a controlled temper.
7. Never lie, especially to yourself.
8. Stop struggling for your fair share.
9. Forgive others, and forbear their weaknesses.
10. Define your morality; live up to it, even in private.

None of these rules is easy to follow. It is harder still to make them into habits. But the payoff—a well-earned visit from sweet *eudaemonia*—is worth the effort.