

Bobby McFerrin's "Don't Worry, Be Happy": A Neuropsychology Reading by Maria Popova

Unpacking the lyrics of the iconic happiness anthem to find surprising science-tested insights on well-being.

In 1988, Bobby McFerrin wrote one of the most beloved anthems to happiness of all time. On September 24 that year, “Don’t Worry Be Happy” became the first a cappella song to reach #1 on the Billboard Top 100 Chart. But more than a mere feel-good tune, the iconic song is brimming with neuroscience and psychology insights on happiness that McFerrin — whose fascinating musings on music and the brain you might recall from World Science Festival’s Notes & Neurons — embedded in its lyrics, whether consciously or not.

To celebrate the anniversary of “Don’t Worry, Be Happy,” I unpack the verses to explore the neuropsychology wisdom they contain in the context of several studies that offer lab-tested validation for McFerrin’s intuitive insight.

In every life we have some trouble
When you worry you make it double

Our tendency to add more stress to our stress by dwelling on it is known as Buddhism as the second arrow and its eradication is a cornerstone of mindfulness practice. But now scientists are confirming that worrying about our worries is rather worrisome. Recent research has found prolonged negative cardiac effects of worry episodes, following a 2006 study that linked worrying to heart disease.

Here, I give you my phone number
When you worry call me
I make you happy

Multiple studies have confirmed the positive correlation between social support and well-being, and some have examined the “buffering model,” which holds that social support protects people from the adverse effects of stressful events.

Harvard physician Nicholas Christakis has studied the surprising power of our social networks, finding profound and long-term correlation between the well-being, both physical and mental, of those with whom we choose to surround ourselves and our own.

Cause when you worry
Your face will frown
And that will bring everybody down

Mirror neurons are one of the most important and fascinating discoveries of modern neuroscience — neurons that fire not only when we perform a behavior, but also when we observe that behavior in others. In other words, neural circuitry that serves as social mimicry allowing the expressed emotions of others to trigger a reflection of these

emotions in us. Frowns, it turns out, are indeed contagious.

Put a smile on your face

Pop-culture wisdom calls it “fake it ‘till you make it”; psychotherapy calls it “cognitive behavioral therapy”; social psychology call it story editing. Evidence abounds that consciously changing our thoughts and behaviors to emulate the emotions we’d like to feel helps us internalize and embody those emotions in a genuine felt sense. Paul Ekman, who pioneered the study of facial expressions, found that voluntarily producing a smile may help deliberately generate the psychological change that takes place during spontaneous positive affect — something corroborated in the recently explored science of smiles.

Don’t worry, it will soon pass
Whatever it is

In 1983, UCLA psychologist Shelley E. Taylor published a seminal paper [PDF] in the journal *American Psychologist* proposing a theory of cognitive adaptation for how we adjust to threatening events, based on evidence from a number of clinical and empirical studies indicating that we grossly overestimate the negative impact of the events that befall us, from cancer to divorce to paralysis, and return to our previous levels of happiness shortly after these negative events take place.

As Daniel Gilbert puts it in *Stumbling on Happiness*, one of our 7 must-read books on the art and science of happiness, “The fact is that negative events do affect us, but they generally don’t affect us as much or for as long as we expect them to.”

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So there you have it: “Don’t Worry, Be Happy,” timeless oracle of mental health science. For more on the profound and fascinating intersection of music and mind, see our omnibus of 7 essential books on music, emotion, and the brain.