The Surgeon General on Health via Happiness
by Anna Almendrala

The U.S. Surgeon General is on a mission to bring you happiness, peace and love.

His serious public health agenda for the U.S. includes addressing the state of substance addiction and ending stigma for mental health. In the past, he has also called "gun violence" a public health issue. But Vivek Murthy, one of the youngest surgeon generals to ever serve in the role, is also emphasizing happiness as one of the main ways to prevent disease and live a long healthy life.

Let's be clear: “Happiness” is not an emotion, an inherited disposition that is awarded to a select few, or even dependent on events that happen to you in life. Rather, Murthy argues that happiness is a perspective, and that everyone can create it for themselves with four simple, free approaches: gratitude exercises, meditation, physical activity and social connectedness.

In Murthy’s tour throughout the United States, he’s been collecting stories about people and communities that are putting their happiness -- long term, emotional well-being from fulfillment, purpose, connectedness and love -- front and center. In a presentation at the TEDMED conference in La Quinta, California, last Thursday, Murthy shared one such story about Visitacion Valley, a poor, troubled school in San Francisco plagued by low test scores, high suspension rates and community violence on such a large scale that they had to hire full-time grief counselors. But after instituting a new tradition of twice-daily 15-minute meditations in 2007, the school underwent a startling transformation.

"Within a year, something incredible happened: suspension rates dropped by 45 percent, teacher abstenteeism dropped by 30 percent, test scores and grade point averages rose markedly," said Murthy during his TedMed talk. "The students reported they were less anxious and they were sleeping better, and the self-reported happiness scores of the students went from one of the lowest scores in San Francisco to the highest score in the entire district."

As Visitacion Valley and other research shows, an investment in well-being can pay off in ways people would rarely associate with emotions. Happy people live longer, are less stressed, and have lower levels of inflammation and heart disease.

Research also shows that Murthy’s four approaches (gratitude exercises, meditation, physical activity and relationships) actually work to increase a sense of peace and well-being in people. In an interview with the Huffington Post after his talk, Murthy went into more detail about why exactly he thinks happiness -- a state of being that’s often dismissed as an unessential emotion -- is an essential part of health.
Your focus on meditation and making yourself happier with gratitude exercises struck me as a way to put some individual agency back in people who frankly might have lost a little bit of hope in the face of such big social and environmental health problems. Was that on purpose?

That’s intentional. I think that if we want to create a healthier country, we need to empower more people to make changes in their lives. But we also have to empower them to help change their environment.

And that’s the power of many of the exercises we spoke about today. Meditation, gratitude exercises, social connection — it creates a greater sense of emotional well being, which then gives them the fuel and the energy, if you will, to out and make changes in their lives and in their community.

What do you think about the Kingdom of Bhutan’s practice of measuring the happiness of their people?

I don’t know enough about the details of the index -- I’ve heard about it. What I do think is that the idea of considering our happiness to be a priority that needs to be tracked and actively cultivated is a valuable idea. Right now, most people don’t think about emotional well-being as an important component of health that has spillover effects on all other areas of health. For that reason, we don’t see emotional wellbeing always reflected in how we craft policy or in how we create workplaces, or in how we create schools or build curriculums.

If we can imagine a world in which emotional well-being was valued as much as test scores, if we can imagine what it be like to prioritize emotional wellbeing in our work environments, I think we can start to see that kind of society, where emotional wellbeing is something that we value, that we proactively support and cultivate — that kind of society is one that will allow us to be stronger, more empowered and ultimately healthier.

Social connectedness is also known to boost happiness, but a lot of people don’t feel connected to their community. What are some pieces of advice you have around increasing social relationships, as traditional hubs of connection are becoming less relevant?

We have to recognize that we can help increase happiness of other people by reaching out, and building connections. People have done that for me in my life. There have been many times that my family and friends have reached out to help support me and contributed to my emotional wellbeing, and ultimately to my health. For that reason, I try to pay that forward and do it for other people. This is part of a larger cultural element that we’re talking about here -- we need to take care of each other.

We live in a society where individual effort and progress is valued, and that’s absolutely correct and is as it should be. But we also are interdependent creatures. We can’t succeed solely on our own. When it comes to creating emotional wellbeing, we are only going to achieve this, I believe, if we help each other in that effort. Part of that is reaching out and building social connections in people who may not always have the social connections or the support that they need.