

HOW TO CREATE HAPPINESS: A KEY TO EMOTIONAL HEALTH

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In the words of the 19th century philosopher John Stuart Mill, “Ask yourself whether you are happy, and you cease to be so.” Mill’s observation highlights one of the paradoxes of the pursuit of happiness: We cannot find it by looking for it. Rather than being found, happiness is something that must be created. From the sacred texts of antiquity to the journals of modern science, there are several common themes that have been identified as ways to create more happiness and greater satisfaction in life.

Practice positive thinking. Historically, the importance of attitude has been recognized since ancient times. The Greek philosopher Epictetus observed, “Men are not disturbed by things, but by the views they take of them.” In the play *Hamlet*, Shakespeare (c. 1602) made a similar observation when he wrote, “There’s nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.” In modern times, contemporary cognitive theorists have focused on cognitive appraisals of situational events as important determinants of emotional experience. Dr. Aaron Beck (1976), the founder of cognitive therapy, emphasized cognitive appraisals as primary determinants of emotional disorders such as depression. In other words, change your thinking and you change your feelings. From a cognitive perspective, we can learn to make choices regarding thoughts that can contribute to positive feelings, constructive attitudes, and a realistic sense of hope regarding the future. In the words of Norman Vincent Peale, “Change your thoughts and you change your world.” You can begin to change your world by increasing your positive thoughts and decreasing your negative thoughts. For example, rather than seeing what cannot be done, look for what can be done. Rather than focusing on your limitations, focus on your possibilities. Even better, think like an optimist.

Empirical research has shown that optimists are happier, healthier, live longer, and generally get more out of life than do pessimists (Seligman, 1990).

Recommendation: *Change your attitude by challenging negative thinking and practicing positive thinking on a daily basis. Rather than increasing your negative thoughts by dwelling on them, increase your positive thoughts by focusing on them instead.*

Change what can be changed. Is there a best way to create happiness? According to psychologist Mihály Csikszentmihályi (1990) one of the pioneers in the field of positive psychology, “My studies of the past quarter century have convinced me that there is a way. It is a circuitous path that begins with achieving control over the contents of our consciousness” (p. 2). Psychological research reveals that people who have a high sense of internal control in their lives report more happiness, less stress, and less depression than do people who have a low sense of control (Benassi, Sweeney, & Dufour, 1988). In other words, we are more likely to be happy when we shift the focus of our attention away from things we cannot control (e.g., things that happened in the past or the behavior of other people) and focus more on the things that we can control (e.g., changing our own behavior in a way that is likely to improve a difficult situation). The most difficult task involves developing the wisdom to know the difference between the things we can control and the things we cannot control. For starters, stop focusing on what others should do to make you happy. According to Csikszentmihályi (1990, p. 2), “People who learn to control inner experience will be able to determine the quality of their lives, which is as close as any of us can come to being happy.”

Recommendation: Focus on changing the things that you can change (yourself) rather than trying to change the things that you cannot change (someone else). Find a trusted friend, sponsor, or counselor who can help you develop the wisdom to know the difference.

Use problems to make progress. Psychological research has shown that people who are highly successful are, in large part, more resilient in the face of defeats, setbacks, and disappointments (Sternberg, 2006). One's attitude defines the difference between problems and progress. In some ways, one's progress is often reflected in the quality of one's problems. When encouraged to do so, people who look back on their lives can always describe events of past difficulties that helped them learn and grow. Using this knowledge, people can learn to view their current difficulties as opportunities for learning and growth. Just as last year's misfortunes can lead to this year's unexpected gains, today's crises can lead to tomorrow's opportunities. A pessimist is someone who makes difficulties out of opportunities whereas an optimist is someone who makes opportunities out of difficulties. *Resilience* refers to one's positive capacity to cope with crisis and even catastrophe. Rather than focusing on yesterday's losses and misfortunes, resilient people pay more attention to today's gifts and tomorrow's opportunities. As an expert in the field of resilience has observed, "The conclusion I have reached is that what distinguishes those who are highly successful from others is, in large part, resilience in the face of humiliations, defeats, and setbacks of various kinds. Without resilience, we risk watching the world go by instead of actively participating in it" (Sternberg, 2006, p. 26). To develop resilience, remember the old adage, "The only difference between stumbling blocks and stepping stones is how we use them."

Recommendation: Identify three of the most difficult challenges you have ever faced, and

then write down how you got through those situations and how you developed strength and resources in those rough times.

Surround yourself with people who inspire you. If you want to know how emotionally healthy you are, then look at the people who surround you. Psychological research has shown that the people who are most fulfilled in life surround themselves with mutually supportive friendships (Myers, 2000; Myers & Diener, 2006). In some ways, our relationships are like investments that involve deposits and withdrawals. Healthy relationships seem to make deposits into our lives, while unhealthy relationships seem to make more withdrawals. In other words, some people build us up, whereas others tear us down. Some people bring out the best in us, and others bring out the worst. To create happiness in your life, surround yourself with uplifting people. Get more involved with people who fulfill you, and avoid people who drain you.

Recommendation: Surround yourself with people who inspire the best in you, and avoid people who bring out the worst.

Keep a gratitude journal. Empirical studies have shown that those who keep gratitude journals feel better about their lives. Compared to a control group of participants who recorded hassles or neutral life events, those who kept gratitude journals on a *weekly* basis exercised more regularly, reported fewer physical symptoms, felt better about their lives as a whole, and were more optimistic about the upcoming week (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Compared to the weekly intervention, a *daily* gratitude intervention resulted in higher reported levels of the positive states of alertness, enthusiasm, determination, attentiveness, and energy compared to a focus on daily hassles or downward social comparisons (ways in which participants thought they were better off than others). Compared to participants who were instructed

to focus on daily hassles or social comparisons, those who used the daily gratitude intervention were more likely to report having helped someone with a personal problem or having offered emotional support to another person (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). To create more happiness in life, cultivate a sense of appreciation in your life. Add the phrase “thank you” to your vocabulary and use it frequently.

Recommendation: *Keep a gratitude journal in which at the end of each day you write down at least one thing for which you are grateful. Review your journal entries at the end of each week and again at the end of each month.*

Savor the small pleasures. Psychological research has shown that happiness is more strongly correlated with the *frequency* of satisfying events rather than with the *intensity* of satisfying events (Gilbert, 2007). In other words, enjoying a lot of small, simple pleasures is better than winning the lottery. In fact, surveys of lottery winners reveal that people who win the lottery tend to have a brief burst of happiness for an average of three months before returning to the baseline of happiness they experienced before winning (Myers & Diener, 2006). In learning to experience satisfying events, it is important to develop *mindfulness*, which refers to being purposefully aware of the present moment. Mindfulness refers to an awareness of what one is experiencing and one’s response to that experience in the present. Without mindfulness, the satisfaction of the event itself is not really experienced. For example, in contrast to the compulsive drinker, who experiences little satisfaction and great misery, think of the wine connoisseur who experiences great satisfaction when feeling the shape of a crystal glass, observing the color of the wine, and savoring the bouquet of a wine before it is even tasted. Although few can be connoisseurs of wine, anyone can learn to be a connoisseur of life. For example, when crunching into an apple, anyone can learn to pay precise yet relaxed attention to the sweet

scent, the glossy red skin, and the burst of flavor.

Recommendation: *Make a list of simple, healthy pleasures in your life and commit yourself to spending time being mindful of these pleasures every day. Rather than rushing forward in the pursuit of hedonism, learn to slow down and focus attention on the pleasure in a single moment.*

Seek long term goals. Psychological research has shown that the greatest satisfaction and rewards come to those who develop the discipline to delay gratification while focusing on long-term goals (Sternberg, 1996; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). On the other hand, some of life’s greatest frustrations and disappointments come to those who focus on immediate results and short-term goals. If you want to create more happiness in life, focus on long range goals. Be suspicious of promises of quick solutions and instant results. Use persistence, cultivate commitment, and learn to discipline your desires.

Recommendation: *To create happiness, strive to work persistently toward long-term goals. Learn to delay gratification and avoid quick fixes.*

Develop a sense of patience. St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), the Carmelite nun, mystic, and social reformer of the sixteenth century, observed, “Patience attains all that it strives for.” The enlightened teacher Siddhartha Gautama Buddha (c.563-c.483 B.C.E.) observed over two thousand years ago, “The greatest prayer is patience.” Patience is the antidote for *hurry sickness*, which is a disorder in which a person feels chronically short of time, and thus tends to perform every task faster and to get flustered when encountering any kind of delay. Stress occurs when we have a distorted relationship with time, whereas patience helps us develop a healthy relationship with time.

Recommendation: *To create happiness, develop a sense of patience in life.*

Lose yourself in an activity. In contrast to savoring the experience of a single moment, one of the paradoxes of happiness is the idea of losing oneself in the moment. In the field of positive psychology, the term *flow* has been used to refer to a mental state in which a person is immersed in what he or she is doing by a feeling of intense focus. The concept of flow has little to do with the New Age slogan of “going with the flow.” Instead, flow can be defined by eight characteristics (Csikszentmihályi, 1990, 1999). First, flow involves an intrinsically rewarding activity that is challenging--neither too easy nor too difficult. Second, the person experiencing flow becomes part of the activity rather than standing outside of it. Flow involves the pursuit of a specific goal (third) that depends on immediate feedback (fourth). Flow requires a high degree of focus and concentration (fifth). Sixth, flow involves a sense of control without striving for control, which Csikszentmihályi describes as the paradox of control. Seventh, flow results in a loss of the feeling of self-consciousness and a disappearance of a sense of self. Finally, one’s sense of time is altered, so that there is essentially a loss of a sense of time during the activity (Csikszentmihályi, 1990). In other words, if you are so absorbed in an activity that you forget to look at your watch, you may be experiencing flow.

Recommendation: *Spend some time engaged in a healthy activity in which you lose your self-consciousness, lose your sense of time, and lose yourself in the activity itself.*

Get out of yourself and get into others. One activity that has been consistently shown to contribute to life satisfaction involves a meaningful activity with another person or group. The degree to which a person is engaged in society is positively correlated with measures

of happiness, optimism, life satisfaction, and a sense of safety in one’s environment (Keyes, 1998; Keyes & Lopez, 2002). As social psychologist David Myers has observed, “There are few stronger predictors of happiness than a close, nurturing, equitable, intimate, lifelong companionship with one’s best friend” (Myers, 2000, p. 43). In other words, people often benefit from spending less time at the office and more time with the ones they love. Make a commitment to spend more time with people who are important to you. Ask a friend how his or her day was, and then actually listen and respond to your friend--before describing your own day.

Recommendation: *Find a community event that is meaningful to you personally, and then actively participate in the event. If you are not close to anyone, then write down a list of your interests and look for activities that involve these interests. For example, if you enjoy reading, then consider joining a book club. If you like animals, then consider volunteering at an animal shelter.*

Give yourself to others. Psychological research has shown that people who are happy are also altruistic, and people who are altruistic are also happier than others. People often benefit from focusing away from thinking about their own problems to focusing toward helping with the problems of others. There is a strong correlation between the well-being, happiness, health, and longevity of people who are emotionally and behaviorally compassionate (Posta, 2005). Giving oneself to others can range from a single act of kindness toward another person to multiple acts of volunteering time to a larger cause.

Recommendation: *Do something for someone else that requires time and effort on your part. Find a charitable activity that is meaningful to you personally and volunteer some of your time. The next time you dine at a restaurant, leave a large tip for a small check. When*

someone admires something of yours that you can afford to do without it, give it away. Commit yourself to performing a random act of kindness each day and, when possible, make it anonymous.

Admit when you are wrong. Psychological research and theological writings have shown that relationships are enriched by the processes of forgiveness and reconciliation (Worthington, 2001, 2006). The 10th Step of Alcoholics Anonymous reads, “Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.” This step has been described as “relationship glue” for those who are living a life of intentionality. In contrast, one of the best ways to ruin a relationship is to never admit when you are wrong. To create more harmony in your relationships, be sure to say you are sorry when you have hurt or offended someone. Even better, make amends to the person whom you have offended. Rather than focusing on the things that others have done to hurt you, consider making a list of all the things that you have done to hurt other people in your life. We can ask forgiveness for the things we have said or done that have hurt someone (acts of *commission*), as well as for the things we have not said or done that otherwise could have helped someone (acts of *omission*). Asking for forgiveness involves offering an *apology* (“I am sorry”), stating an *acknowledgement* (“I was wrong”), providing an *amendment* (“How can I make it right?”), making a *commitment* (“I will not to do it again”), and making a *request* (“Will you please forgive me?”). Admitting when we are wrong and making amends for our wrongs go a long way toward improving any relationship.

Recommendation: *Rather than focusing on those who have hurt you, consider making a list of all those whom you have harmed. Think about what it would be like to make amends to others without causing them further harm. If focusing on making amends to those in the past seems like an insurmountable task, then start*

today with making “living amends” to those who are part of your life each day.

Develop a realistic sense of hope. Psychological research has shown that hope is one of the most important variables in creating positive changes in one’s life (Hanna, 2002; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). *Hope* can be defined as a belief in a positive outcome related to the events or circumstances in one’s life. Hope is not the same as wishing, longing, desiring, or yearning. It is the unseen evidence of a brighter day, no matter how dark one’s present day may be. It is the realistic expectation of a positive outcome, regardless of how dire one’s present circumstances may seem. On the other hand, hopelessness is one of the most significant psychological risk factors associated with suicide (Beck, Brown, Berchick, Stewart, & Steer, 1990; Bongar, 2002). An attitude of hopelessness is usually associated with greater misery in life.

Recommendation: *Develop a realistic sense of hope regarding the future.*

Find a sense of meaning in life. In *Man’s Search for Meaning*, expanded from its original title, *From Death-Camp To Existentialism*, Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist Viktor Frankl wrote, “Suffering ceases to be suffering in some way in the moment that it finds a meaning” (1969, p. 179). Frankl’s understanding of suffering was forged out of his survival of three years in four different Nazi concentration camps. In living to reconstruct his lifetime achievement, which had once been a crumpled manuscript destroyed on a floor in Auschwitz, Frankl completed a book which eventually sold more than 9 million copies in 23 different languages. In an interview shortly before his death at the age of 92, Frankl noted that he was still receiving an average of 23 letters each day, mostly from those thanking him for writing a book that changed their lives (“Frankl dies”, 1997). Half a century after Frankl had written his monumental book,

researchers in the field of positive psychology observed that people who are happy tend to have a sense of purpose and meaning in their lives (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). A sense of meaning can be found in living one's values, practicing a spiritual discipline, and giving oneself to a high purpose in life. In his forward to Frankl's (2006, p. xii) classic *Man's Search for Meaning*, Rabbi Harold Kushner stated, "The greatest task for any person is to find meaning in his or her life. Frankl saw three possible sources for meaning: in work (doing something significant), in love (caring for another person), and in courage during difficult times. Suffering in and of itself is meaningless; we give our suffering meaning by the way in which we respond to it."

Recommendation: *Look for opportunities each day to live by principles, be true to your highest values, find a sense of purpose, and search for deeper meaning in life.*

Invest in spirituality and consider religion. It is no wonder that religion and spirituality play a major part in the satisfaction and happiness of so many lives. In fact, the correlation between faith and well-being has been seen both in surveys taken of the general public and in empirical research on specific population groups. For example, one Gallup poll found that people with high religious involvement are *twice* as likely as those without such involvement to say that they are "very happy" (Myers & Diener, 1997). Similarly, a review of the scientific literature reveals that religiousness is one of the best predictors of life satisfaction (Myers, 2000; Myers & Diener, 1996; Myers & Diener, 2006).

Recommendation: *Consider redirecting your focus from the material to the spiritual, whether it is through religion or through a secular sense of connection to humanity. Find a church, synagogue, or temple that fits your style and then actively participate in it.*

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