

# Happiness - balancing a healthy mind and a well-nourished soul

• By BATYA L. LUDMAN

**H**appiness is difficult concept to define and clearly does not mean the same thing to everyone. I find myself especially aware of the elusive nature of “happiness” around holiday time. As a clinical psychologist I see so many unhappy people who truly dread the holidays. They come to my office wondering how they can possibly manage to get through them, let alone enjoy them.

Whether this is due to watching others celebrate when they don't feel any joy, remembering the loss of a loved one, being alone in a paired world, or feeling stuck with people they just don't want to be with – for some people the holidays simply lack joy. They remind us all the more that we need to focus on creating our own happiness, rather than passively waiting for it to happen. How many times have you said, “I'll be happy when...?” This suggests that your happiness is dependent on the something external.

If you're waiting to be happy based on some specific future occurrence, you might be very disappointed. Your role in experiencing happiness is an active one, and this in itself can be a real gift. For the most part, how you choose “to be” and choose to feel is under your control. How empowering is that?

The words you use speak volumes about how you feel and will feel. How positively you are able to remember your past and express that will influence your ability to feel happiness in this moment, right now. Two people can experience the same event and create entirely different stories, one positive and the other negative. Your ability to re-frame a situation and not passively wait for happiness to arrive at your doorstep has a tremendous impact on how you feel.



(Los Angeles Times/TNS)

Isn't this a perfect time to make your goals the letting go of anger, learning how to forgive and finding joy in life? Perhaps the real *ness*, or "miracle" of happy-ness, is simply "being," learning to feel blessed with all we have and what we have created for ourselves in life.

While writing this, I was informed of the death of a good friend, a very special woman, who had experienced multiple losses in her life and who dealt with serious illness. A few short weeks ago when I visited her, she wanted to spend our time together hearing about me and not, as so often happens as one nears death, talking about herself. Totally a realist, she always managed to exude positivity in all that she said and did, in part because this is what she saw.

The ability to see the good in life, in spite of the difficulties we encounter, is a sign of strength. It is no accident that the words "happiness" and "happen" are related. My friend had a way of making things happen – and as someone who did so much for others, she brought about her own happiness.

Happiness comes from how you, and you alone, put meaning into your life. This may involve letting go of accumulated emotional baggage (such as hurtful past relationships) and requires flexibility, adaptability and creativity, all while finding and enjoying a sense of balance. It also means being able to cope when your equilibrium is off. This requires resilience, the ability to bounce back when knocked off balance.

The creation of meaning is never static, but a work in progress, constantly evolving. It is an ongoing process that can vary by the day, hour, minute or second. While one might think being happy requires keeping outside stresses and internal stressors to a minimum, for some, the adrenalin rush of dealing with stress actually provides a thrill. There is no one right way to create your happiness.

HERE ARE a few ideas of how you might create happiness in your life, along with some questions to help you successfully navigate the journey toward physical and emotional health and well-being.

- Look after your body. A healthy body contributes to your emotional well-being through an awareness of both what you put into it and what you take out. Nutritious food and drink, exercise, good sleep hygiene, and fulfillment of your basic needs are all part of a successful

package. Learning something as basic as proper breathing is one of the best things you can do for yourself and an underappreciated secret to achieving balance and calm. How do you make this happen? Start by using your senses to observe your body and simply notice how you are feeling.

Ask yourself: Is what you are doing good for you and your body? Are you well rested and are you treating your body with the respect it deserves?

- Nourish your soul. Know what turns you on. Find the purpose and the passion in your life and go after it.

Ask yourself: How are you putting meaning into your life? Are you spending your days in the way that you would like? Do you like and feel good about who you are and what you do? Are you proud of all that you accomplish? Do you feel appreciated and valued? In what ways are you struggling and are you getting help?

- Create your internal place of calm. We all need to find our calm place, where we feel truly at peace.

Ask yourself: What calms your mind and your body? What are you doing to increase your sense of inner peace? Have you considered meditation or prayer? How can you reduce pressure and manage your time more effectively? How much of the chaos in your life is self-induced? Are you willing to make changes to improve things? What would you like to do differently? Do activities such as reading, music, or a good conversation make you feel good?

- Surround yourself with people you love who love you and make you feel good. Notice and appreciate the people and relationships in your life that make you feel good.

Ask yourself: In what ways do your loved ones bring you joy and make you laugh? How do you treat others and how does this impact how you feel? Does caring and being there for someone else enable you to feel connected and good?

- Be mindfully aware. Look at the world around you and appreciate all that has been created – in this moment – not the past or the future. Be present in the present. Put away your cellphone and look up and outward. Use all your senses to see the full range of colors, hear the birds, smell the flowers and appreciate your surroundings to the fullest, right now, this moment.

Ask yourself: Can you enjoy what you have been given in life, taking pleasure from each and

every little thing?

- Make each moment count. Actively choose to do what you want to do and not do what you don't want to do, when you have that option. It is important to re-frame your world to see the positive, to see challenges as opportunities and not as obstacles, and to act intentionally and not by simply reacting. You can learn to let go of your anger and your need to be right.

Ask yourself: Are you embracing life to the fullest or just getting through the day? What can you change?

- Experience the true beauty of Shabbat (in whatever way you choose). This is a time to refuel, prioritize what is really important, slow down and take time to breathe. This is a real gift we can give to ourselves and help us achieve the ultimate in balance. Both make and take the time for the important things in your life, giving yourself a break from the daily grind and the mundane.

Ask yourself: Do you elevate yourself and your life to the fullest to enjoy the spiritual and non-material joys in your life? Do you use your down time to honor yourself and your loved ones in ways that helps you be the best you can be? If not, ask what else you can do to achieve greater balance and a happier and healthier mind.

LIFE INVOLVES balance. Some look for an express route to happiness through the acquisition of material wealth or the use of mood-altering substances. Others know that in order to be content with who we are, the journey begins by holding a mirror up and learning to first like, and then love, the person reflected back. Creating happiness is not easy in a world where allowing for self-compassion and imperfection is difficult. Striving to be comfortable within yourself and to be happy with who you are and what you have, will always be a work in progress.

When you can feel good about yourself and learn to be your own best friend, you will radiate that contentment to others through your actions.

This year, during these holidays of rejoicing and reflection, may you work toward achieving true balance in life, a gift that only you are able to give to yourself.

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