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How to Support Your Own Happiness

When you were little and the teacher asked what you wanted to be when you grew up, you surely didn't answer "miserable!"

At every stage in life, unhappiness is not a state to which we aspire. But with the economy rolling downhill, the vision of our own prosperity can seem like a tiny, inflatable raft in an ocean of fear. In such unstable times, the pursuit of happiness can feel like a taunt rather than an inalienable right.

Still, it's worth the effort. Emerging research shows that while trauma has a profound impact on the brain, the brain is not as hard-wired as previously thought. *We can learn to be happier.* In fact, the most popular class at Harvard University is one in which students learn to train their brains to cultivate what instructor Tal Ben-Shahar calls the ultimate currency: happiness.

Why Happiness Matters

Medical evidence suggests being unhappy affects our memory and our capacity to learn, while increasing the risk of illness.

On the flip side, happier people are more likely to:

- be more creative, confident and productive.
- have a stronger network of allies and friends.
- be sick less often and get well faster.

How to Support Your Own Happiness

If you would like to train your brain for happiness, consider some of these ideas:

Decide that you want to be happier. When you make that decision, you start to notice choices for happiness that you may have missed before. Those choices may be small, such as lying

down for 10 minutes when you're tired rather than powering through a task, but you start to create a habit of seeking happiness that grows.

Acknowledge your feelings. When you feel distressed, don't make it worse by beating yourself up for being upset. Do your best to accept your feelings. When you give your feelings respect and attention, they usually begin to shift on their own, and you start to feel better.

Work with your thoughts. If you're having thoughts that are hurtful to you, try reaching for a better thought or scenario that you can actually believe. For instance, if you're worried about losing your job, recall something stable in your life, whether it's your partner's income or your healthy savings account. When your mind returns to the worry, bring it back to the better-feeling thought.

Celebrate success. Whether it's the achievement of a major goal or a week when your children got along, take in the accomplishment, and give yourself and your children a pat on the back.

Seek meaning. Happiness comes from doing something that gives us pleasure and meaning. If your job doesn't provide that, find something that does. It could be a hobby, volunteering, taking a course, or allowing time to read a book or cook something tasty.

Express gratitude. Be grateful for everything that makes your day better, from a colleague's smile to your morning latte.

As you practice happiness and make it a habit, you'll find yourself in a lovely upward spiral that will support you through challenging times. *

10 Ways to Practice Acceptance

Self-acceptance is an action; it is something we do, not just something we feel. Try these 10 ways to practice acceptance.

- 1. Your body.** Stand naked before a full-length mirror and notice your feelings. If you never would do something like that, notice and accept that, too.
- 2. Difficult emotions.** When anger, fear or jealousy arises, focus on it. Breathe into it and notice how the feelings begin to subside.
- 3. Resistance.** If you are resisting—tightening your muscles, holding your breath—allow that to be okay. Take a deep breath.
- 4. Imperfections.** Fill in the blank: "I don't want to be _____, but I am and I am willing to grow."
- 5. Actions.** What past action do you regret? Without judging others or yourself, write about it. If appropriate, make amends.
- 6. Life conditions.** Describe an area of your life that you wish were different and allow your feelings to arise. Explore alternatives through writing or with someone you trust.
- 7. Opinions.** Write about a current situation about which you have strong feelings. It's okay to disagree with friends, family and organizations.
- 8. Uniqueness.** Fill this in: "Some people don't appreciate that I am _____, but I am and nothing is wrong with me."
- 9. Your bright side.** Write about your joy, beauty, brilliance, vision.
- 10. Your dreams.** Without regard to practicality, write about what you really want in your life. *

A Letter From

Maqie Freeman, LCSW, CEAP



No one wants to be unhappy, yet when times are tough, happiness can feel like an impossible dream.

Conventional wisdom used to say that some people are optimists and others will always see the glass as half empty. However, new research on the brain suggests that's not exactly so. It turns out that happiness can be viewed as a skill that we all can learn. The cover article explores the issue of happiness and offers several ways to encourage its growth in you.

Some people feel a compulsion to engage in sexual acts that bring harm to themselves and/or others. Sex takes over their lives as they either act out their compulsion or try to control it. The article on page 3 explores what sex addiction looks like, what may cause it and where sex addicts and families of sex addicts can seek help.

Also in this issue are 10 ways to practice self-acceptance, as well as the quiz, which asks if you fight fairly. Rounding out this issue is an article about the challenges of co-parenting and how you can provide a safe, nurturing home for your children.

Enjoy this issue of the newsletter. If you have questions about any of the articles or would like more copies, please don't hesitate to call.

Best wishes for a season of increasing happiness, self-acceptance and harmony.

Do You Fight Fairly?

Most of us would avoid fighting if we could. After all, it's not very comfortable. However, personal growth is often attained through some kind of challenge. Fighting fairly and skillfully is the key to allowing conflict to serve us rather than do harm. Answer the following questions to discover if you are fighting fairly:



True False

Set 1

- 1. When people hurt me or make me angry, I'm likely to fight back or be defensive.
- 2. If someone brings up a subject I don't want to discuss, I ignore him or her, or refuse to talk about it.
- 3. I tend to build up resentments over time, and then let them all out in one big blow-up.
- 4. I sometimes cut people out of my life when they don't agree with me or give me what I want.
- 5. I'll be taken advantage of or hurt if I show any vulnerability.
- 6. I withhold love and connection when I don't get my way.
- 7. I try to get more support for my point of view by getting others on my side.
- 8. I have a tendency to "leak" my resentments rather than being open and direct about my feelings.

Set 2

- 1. I use "I" statements to express my feelings and thus avoid blaming and telling the other person what he or she feels.
- 2. I am committed to listening and being open-heartedly curious when quarreling so that I can truly understand what the other person is feeling, thinking and experiencing.
- 3. I am able to express my anger, and I hold a safe, respectful space for others to express their anger towards me.
- 4. I consciously create time and space for resolving conflicts rather than arguing when either of us is in the midst of other things.
- 5. Resolving conflicts successfully often leads to greater intimacy and authenticity.
- 6. It's important that the other person and I each have time to share our feelings without being interrupted.
- 7. I avoid holding grudges by expressing my feelings as soon as possible—that way resentments don't build up.
- 8. I try to find a win-win solution in any conflict; I'm willing to negotiate until both of us are satisfied.

*If you answered true more often in Set 1 and false more often in Set 2, you may want to learn some communication skills to help you fight fairly. Please don't hesitate to call if you'd like support in exploring this further. **

Sex Addiction

When actor David Duchovny was treated for sex addiction in 2008, it brought attention to a topic that few people had ever discussed at a water cooler before.

Similar to food addiction, sex addiction (sometimes referred to as “sex and love addiction”) involves a natural part of life that the afflicted individual takes to extremes, harming self and sometimes others.

Drawing another parallel to food, sex addicts may over-indulge in sex or sexual activities (similar to binge eating) or they may isolate themselves to the point where they curtail almost all activities where they might face temptation or opportunity (similar to anorexia).

Some people are suspicious about sex addiction and don't want it used as an explanation or excuse for criminal sexual behavior. The *New York Times*, however, reported in 2008 that sex addiction is being considered for inclusion in the 2012 version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), a widely accepted reference in the medical industry.

What Does Sex Addiction Look Like?

Sex addicts find themselves unable to control or manage behaviors, such as compulsive sex, masturbation or viewing pornography. Some sex addicts also engage in illegal acts such as child pornography, voyeurism, molestation, rape or incest.

Sex addiction does not necessarily lead to sex offending. Moreover, not all sex offenders are sex addicts. Roughly 55 percent of convicted sex offenders can be considered sex addicts.

Sex addicts may feel so compulsive about carrying out certain behaviors that they become extremely anxious or irrational if they don't do them. Sex takes over their entire lives, and they spend practically every waking moment either acting on their urges or trying to control them.

Decades after the sexual revolution of the 1960s, many sexual behaviors are still stigmatized in various communities; that stigma leads people with sex addiction to feel even more ashamed, isolated and depressed about their feelings and actions.

What Causes Sex Addiction?

There are different theories as to what causes sex

addiction. In an article for the PsychCentral website, Michael Herkov, Ph.D, cites research that shows that as many as 82% of sex addicts suffered sexual abuse as children.

Much research has been done to support a biochemical explanation. The rush of good feelings that people experience from sexual acts may be exaggerated in the brains of sex addicts. It's similar to how alcoholics can be triggered to want more by even a small taste of alcohol.

Once the compulsion is triggered by exposure, the obsession takes over. And that exposure doesn't have to be physical; it could be thinking about or seeing something that reminds the addict of that rush.

Addicts also have other issues or problems in their life that they feel incapable of dealing with. The preoccupation with sex provides an escape from those problems.

How Does Someone Recover from Sex Addiction?

1. If you are struggling with sex addiction, the first step is to admit there is a problem and ask for help.
2. Be kind to yourself. You didn't choose to have this problem, but you can choose to do something about it.
3. There are many resources available that promote sexual health and offer assistance to sex addicts who want to recover, including your therapist and 12-Step programs such as Sex Addicts Anonymous, and Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous.
4. You can also speak to your doctor, a clinic or an anonymous help line for resources in your area.

If Someone You Love Is a Sex Addict

It is very troubling to suspect that someone you love is a sex addict. If it is your partner, then the issue encroaches on your own intimate relationship with the person. If it is another family member or friend, you may be embarrassed or ashamed to be connected with the problem.

In all cases, sex addiction is affecting your relationship and your life. And you need as much help and support as the person with the addiction. There are meetings and support programs available for you as well, including S-Anon.

Seeking help for sex addiction takes courage, but it can mean the end of suffering in silence, and the beginning of a new life, including healthy, loving relationships and hope for the future. *



Good Co(operative)-Parenting

To be a good parent demands untold commitment and requires that you make countless decisions every day—about babysitters, schools, friends, bedtime and homework routines. It's not a glamorous job, but it promises the greatest reward one could ever ask for: a child's love.

But when separation, divorce or remarriage occurs, parenting becomes co-parenting, and what is a tough job can seem unbearable. Everything is more complicated and you are likely, at times, to feel overwhelmed and exhausted. Co-parenting can be a breeding ground for hostility and conflict. Feelings of anger, sadness and bitterness can be intense.

With all the extra juggling, it's easy to forget that, at these times, children's needs intensify. They have been robbed of security and stability, their loyalty is being tested, and they are often bewildered, frightened and distressed.

Studies show that there are no

formulas. Specific arrangements do not guarantee success. What does work is for children to have:

- **Parents who are not in a state of conflict.**

Remember the rule: not within earshot. Your co-parent may call and say, "Can you pick up the kids from school tomorrow? I know it's my turn but I have to work late." However infuriating that is, don't shout "NO" in front of the children and hang

up. Resolve conflicts away from children and without involving them. Children know more than we usually realize, and they are sensitive to hostility.

- **Good relations with both parents.**

If your children come back from a weekend with their co-parent looking upset and telling you how mean the co-parent is, resist the urge to make negative statements. Instead, take time to seek information. Talk to the co-parent: "The kids seemed upset yesterday. Can you tell me what happened?" If

the problem is chronic, try facilitating a family meeting where everyone is encouraged to work through issues. On special occasions, foster thoughtfulness by helping your child make a card for his or her co-parent.

- **Stability in the home(s).**

A stable home life is your child's lifeline. Develop routines and consistency. Make sure you and your co-parent agree about chores, rewards and discipline. Pledge to never threaten or direct your frustration at the children. Know that creating peaceful and compatible homes decreases stress for everyone and provides children with a protective cushion.

The golden rule of co-parenting is this: let your children's well-being be your guiding light. Children are resilient and can flourish in a co-parenting arrangement. It can be hard work that demands constant communication, but your children are the beneficiaries. They learn that conflicts can be resolved, and they feel loved and cherished. Those are the best gifts you could ever give to your children. ✧



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