

WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE HAPPIER?

A Newsletter That Supports Your Mindfulness Practice



“Yesterday is history,
tomorrow is a mystery, and
today is a gift; that’s why
they call it the present.”

– Loretta LaRouche

Defining happiness as “a sense of contentment that comes from living a rich, full, and meaningful life” is more realistic than always needing to feel good. Researchers have found that learning to accept thoughts and feelings helps us to feel happier and more satisfied with our lives.

Step back from your thoughts: Acceptance strategies

These exercises help “defuse,” or take the power out of an unhelpful thought. By practicing the exercises, you can gain ability to maintain a healthy perspective and mental flexibility.

What to do: Pick a thought, irritation, or worry. Focus on it for 20 seconds and then try the following experiments for 20 seconds. Alternate the “worry thought” with these perspective-changers.

1. Visualize the thought as words on a giant-screen TV. Now zoom out in your mind, until the words become tiny and then disappear.
2. Sing the words of your thoughts to a simple tune, like “Happy Birthday.” This reminds us that thoughts are only words like the lyrics to a song and can sound pretty silly when we do this.

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3. Surf your thoughts. Like a hot flash, thoughts come and go. Often you don't need to do anything except notice that you are having a thought.

When you have an upsetting thought:

- Notice how you feel in your body – where are you feeling tense?
- Acknowledge (by saying aloud), “I’m having the thought that . . .”
- Breathe into that thought; make room for it.
- Say a number from 1 to 10 to show the intensity of upset.
- Watch as the wave rises, crests, and falls. Like all waves, it will peak and pass.
- Say a number again, noticing that it decreases as you notice your breath and time passes.

It can help to remind yourself: “It’s only a thought, just words in my head.”

- Remember, the aim is not to “feel good” or to get rid of “bad” thoughts;
- The aim is to learn to notice and accept thoughts and feelings without getting caught up in stressful emotional reactions.
- It can be very powerful to realize that you don’t have to listen to every thought your brain produces.
- As you realize that thoughts are not the truth, do not need to be obeyed, and do not need to be avoided or even debated, you can focus on what’s really important in your life.

Challenge: Try to use these techniques between 5 and 10 times each day. They take only seconds.

There will be times you forget to use these skills. That’s okay and perfectly normal; just realize that you’ve been caught in the net of unhelpful thoughts and use one of these techniques to unhook yourself. Like any skill, the more you practice, the better you get.

The 3 Blessings exercise

The 3 Blessings exercise helps people increase positive emotion and decrease depressive symptoms. Even people who scored as “naturally pessimistic” were able to maintain these improvements in their mood six months after learning it, according to research.

What to do: Every night for the next week, right before you go to bed, write down three things that went really well that day. These things can be small and ordinary, as simple as remembering how you enjoyed the colors of a beautiful flower or a pleasant conversation with a friend. Think about why this good thing happened.

Why it works: Keeping a blessings journal reeducates your attention toward the positive. Even severely depressed people can find three small things that went well every day. When they do, their depression starts to lift. The key is to do it daily.

Here are other steps to lasting happiness based on the research of Positive Psychology (www.authentichappiness.com).

The gratitude visit

Write a testimonial of gratitude to someone who had a major positive impact on your life. If the person is still alive, call him/her and hand deliver the letter in person. If the person has died, deliver it in person to the next of kin.

Acts of random kindness

Perform three acts of random kindness before noon and three more before sundown. Surprisingly, this works even better if you get no credit for these actions. Some suggestions:

- Make three apologies for wrongs you have committed.
- Buy three books for three friends and send them anonymously.
- Fill out three thank-you cards every morning.

Practice daily appreciation and acceptance of yourself as you observe how far you have come, the obstacles you have overcome, and the good things you have done. Smile as you think about this.

Mindful breathing

Find your breath; notice it going out as you exhale and coming in as you inhale. Observe the natural rhythm of your breath and the gentle movement of your belly.

You might enjoy saying to yourself (aloud or inside your mind): “Breathing in, I calm myself; breathing out, I smile.” Continue for 3 minutes, building up to 5 or 10 minutes.

Content adapted from West Virginia Extension Service.