

"To be happy is a choice you make every day, every hour. And refining and renewing that state is a constant pursuit."

- Julia Roberts

I've been giving a lot of thought to happiness lately, for many reasons. I keep coming back to something my dad told me. "Happiness is a choice." I remember rolling my eyes and thinking he just didn't get it. But as I've grappled with some pretty intense grief, I realized he was right. Being happy is a choice. Just like being sad, mad and hurt are choices. Once you realize you have the POWER to make that choice, the choice should be simple. But the reality is it's not. So I figured if I'm struggling with this "happiness is a choice" business, others probably are too. So I did what I always do: if I need more information, I search for it. I think I found some good stuff that will hopefully be helpful. If you have any questions or want to know more, please contact me.

Yours in health,



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Is There a Key to Happiness?



I wish it were as simple as my dad said it was. And maybe for some people it is. But I always thought my dad was superhuman and capable of so much more than the rest of us mere mortals. I do however, think he had a point and I'm going to tell you why it's probably easier than we think.

Life throws us a lot of hurdles and curve balls. A majority of them are unexpected, which makes grappling with them so hard. My brother dying unexpectedly and much too young is just one example. Even though it's been nearly a year since he was taken from us, there are moments when the grief is still overwhelming. It's the same with my dad, who's been gone now for eight years. There are still times I want to call him to ask his advice and the cruel fact is that I can't. Sometimes, it still makes me sad. While I know he's with me in spirit, as is my brother, it's just not the same as having them here. When sadness attempts to take its hold on me, I can hear my dad whispering in my ear that happiness is a choice. Is it really that easy?

Face it. Bad things happen to good people. Is it fair? No. But it's reality. So how do we get through those times when we want to lock ourselves in a room or curl up in a ball and just cry? Here's what I think.

Each time we are faced with something negative, whether it's emotional, physical, financial or even just circumstantial, we have a choice: Learn and grow from it or get stuck and be sad. What helps us grow? I think it's resilience, which by definition is "the ability to adapt in the face of tragedy, trauma and ongoing significant life stressors." While it was common belief that resilience was something only certain people had, events like 9/11 and soldiers returning from war, as well as the aftermath of the recent Las Vegas massacre, reveal that resilience is more common than most people think. Thomas Kelley, a researcher at Wayne State University, says that we're all born with the tendency for resilience and that most of us are stronger than we give ourselves credit for being.

That's what's so amazing about tough times. We all do just about everything we can do to avoid them. Then when we encounter them, we doubt we have the capability of living through them. But when we're confronted by them, somehow, we reach down into some deep place inside ourselves and find the strength to run (or walk) back into the light.

The Declaration of Independence describes the "pursuit of happiness" as an inalienable right. But how many of us actually pursue happiness on a regular basis? Think about what makes you happy. For me, going on a hike, walking on the beach, working to stay physically fit and spending time with people I care about are ways I find happiness. They're examples of me pursuing it. Exercise helps both our body and mind break away from negative thoughts and patterns. It also produces feel-good brain chemicals like endorphins, adrenaline, serotonin and dopamine. Exercise also helps promote feelings of accomplishment and can help break through any tiredness or depression you may be feeling. According to a study in the "American Journal of Preventative Medicine," 30-40 minutes of aerobic activity 3-5 times per week can reduce the symptoms of minor to moderate depression by nearly ONE-HALF! That's pretty amazing and a great reason to get moving.

We've all heard the old saying "Money can't buy happiness." Research seems to confirm that. Some people who are unhappy with their job think it's because they don't earn enough. So how does that explain why there are happy people in very low-paying jobs? A person's title doesn't seem to create happiness either. Think about the coworker who got that desperately desired promotion, yet despite the initial joyful feeling, his or her mood basically returned to where it was after just a couple weeks or months....maybe even days. It does appear that gratifying employment helps, as does feeling valued and believing in what you do. For some people, it's important to be able to make some kind of impact.

One thing that seems particularly important is love...or at the very least, close personal connections...either with friends, a significant other or even children. People who say they value close relationships with others were more likely to rate themselves as happy. In general, it appears that having a larger number of solid relationships translates to a bit more life happiness. The University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center found that 38% of people with at least 5 close relationships considered themselves very happy as compared to 26% of those with less than 5.

Clearly, gratifying work, close and personal relationships as well as doing "good" are pretty significant, but the more research I did, the more I realized something. My dad was actually right. What unites these points is ultimately the ability to have some control over the CHOICES you make and the things you do. It seems as if the more you believe YOU are driving/controlling your life, the greater the chances you'll feel happy.

I think taking responsibility for all your decisions....your CHOICES, both good ones and bad ones, can help you find and feel happiness. Begin by looking at what you have rather than what you don't, and you just might start to feel some of your lost joy return. Start a gratitude journal. Every day, write down at least one thing in your life for which you are grateful. At the end of the week, the month, even the year, look back over that list and absorb all the wonderful people and things in your life. While those things can't MAKE you happy, understanding what you have may help you make the CHOICE to be happy. If you feel bad or unhappy because of some mistakes you made along your path of life, try this exercise:

1. Write down a decision you made that you REALLY regret.
2. Don't beat yourself up about it. Ask yourself what was going on in your life at the time that caused you make that decision.
3. Appreciate the fact that you survived it.
4. Forgive yourself. That decision helped mold you into the person you are today. Ask what you learned from it and think about the good things that ultimately came out of it.

Stop wasting today because you don't feel happy. Don't wait for something like a terminal illness or the death of a loved one to help you seize today and enjoy it. Tomorrow isn't promised to any of us. All we have is today. Spend time with the people you love. Stop holding grudges. Apologize if you hurt someone. And most importantly, make the CHOICE to be happy. No one else can do that for you but you.

Have a wonderful month.