

“Joy; the kind of happiness that doesn’t depend on what happens.”
– David Steindl-Rast

I love this quote because it hits the nail on the head and really got me thinking about whether there IS a difference between joy and happiness. I’d never given it much thought because I always thought they were one in the same. However, the more I thought about it, I realized they’re not. Since this is a difficult time and season for many people, this month, I wanted to get away from my “*food as medicine*” focus and turn your attention to something positive. The Christmas and holiday seasons are tough for many of us. They’re a not-so-subtle reminder of those friends and family members who are no longer with us, for one reason or another. While many of you are arranging big get-togethers for immediate and extended families, there are many people, like me, who’ve lost family members, and perhaps it’ll be just you and one or two other people, sitting at the Christmas dinner table looking around at all the empty seats. It’s not easy and you may wind up thinking about what you DON’T have instead of what you DO have. I’ve long said that happiness is a CHOICE. But even more importantly, so is joy. I’m excited about this topic and encourage you to join me this year in choosing JOY.

Yours in health,
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Choose Joy



What’s the difference between joy and happiness? I’m going to give you my thoughts on this very important question. As you know, I’ve often said that happiness is a choice, but the reality is that joy is the real choice you have. See, I think joy is internal, so it can’t be impacted by exterior forces. Happiness typically comes from things outside of us and our control. However, you choose joy regardless of what’s going on around you, what happened or what didn’t happen. Joy materializes when you make peace with who you are. Joy isn’t simply just a byproduct of happiness because happiness doesn’t BRING us joy. We can and should CHOOSE to live in joy, which is a much more positive place. The reason why is because happiness exists in places where sadness isn’t. When sadness shows up, happiness disappears. Joy actually has the ability to rise from sadness and therefore, it can ultimately withstand that negative emotion.

The biggest difference is that happiness tends to be based on what happens TO us. Did we get the job we wanted? Did we lose the weight we gained? Did our significant other get us the gift we’d been hinting we wanted? If not, we’ll likely be unhappy. I don’t know about you, but I don’t want my happiness to be impacted by outside events. That’s why I’m choosing joy.

Here’s what I think is another interesting difference between happiness and joy. Happiness seems to be something we are always pursuing, while joy seems to be something we experience more naturally. This goes back to what I said above about outside forces potentially impacting our happiness. I think when someone is experiencing joy, it results in a smile that’s truly genuine and not forced. It’s a smile that can actually be seen in our eyes. This is a different type of smile than one that shows up when we’re merely happy. When we’re feeling joy, our heart beats a bit faster, our breathing gets a bit heavier and our entire body seems to get warmer. This is likely a direct result of some chemical releases brought about by joy, which I’m going to tell you about below. The other interesting thing about joy is when we’re joyful, it doesn’t mean we can’t experience other emotions such as anger, fear or sadness at the same time. The great thing about joy is that it can actually share a space with other emotions we may be feeling. Happiness doesn’t do that. Joy brings you peace and contentment, even in the face of sadness.

Not only is joy an emotional win, but it’s also a physical one. One of the positive physical effects is that when we choose or do things that bring us joy, our brain releases several chemicals. These include oxytocin (known as the love chemical), serotonin (known as the mood booster), endorphins (known as the energizers) and dopamine (known as the motivator). These are the chemicals that can be activated by pharmaceuticals, which cause side effects and make the corrupt companies who make them even richer. I’d much rather get their positive effects from choosing joy.

Another benefit of choosing joy is everything in the world seems better. Colors seem brighter. I see this when I look at the green trees against the blue sky. Sounds seem more distinct. I hear this when I'm hiking past a waterfall or along a rippling stream. Food tastes better. Think about how much more flavorful your meal seems when you're eating while you're feeling joyful versus when you're feeling upset.

Take a few moments and think about or write down what brings you joy. Here are just a few of mine:

- Spending the day hiking with friends and ending up at a winery.
- Remembering special times or conversations with people I love, especially with those who are no longer here.
- Watching my son's car pull up the driveway after a much too long separation.
- Hearing a baby laugh.
- Reconnecting with old friends I hadn't seen in forever and feeling as if we'd just seen each other yesterday.
- Receiving an unsolicited hug from my son.
- Witnessing the beauty of a sunrise or a sunset.
- Doing something that makes someone else smile.
- Knowing that I'm loved because I FEEL it, not because I was told.

Joy goes hand-in-hand with gratitude and thankfulness. Once you start being grateful, choosing joy isn't far behind. I wrote about practicing gratitude in May 2020 and in December 2022. Those two newsletters are probably worth another read.

I guess the bottom line about joy is that it's truly untouched by circumstance. Nothing and no one can take it away from you. Joy is in US, it's not in things. In closing I'll say this: to have joy in your heart, you have to know how to appreciate the small things. If you can't find joy on the path you're currently on, how on earth do you expect to find joy once you get to where you're going? Spread joy and chase your wildest dreams.

Have a wonderful month and a blessed Christmas and New Year! But most importantly, be joyful!