

Fleeting Moments of Joy

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During Christmas we talk about the “Joy of the Season.” Our spirits are lifted by the kindness and generosity of family and friends. We open our hearts and wallets to others spreading joy to people who may be less fortunate or have run into tough times. And as parents, we look forward to seeing the joy on our children’s faces on Christmas morning. It’s awesome to see their eyes light up as they enter a room filled with the delights of stockings and presents wrapped in bright, shiny paper with big red and green bows. Children are filled with joy at Christmas and often by simple moments throughout their daily lives. Have you ever wondered how to harness some of that joy? I’m sure if you reflect on moments from your childhood you will remember simple things that brought you great joy... the excitement of a snow day, the sight of candy at the local candy shop, the thrill of a friend calling to talk. Joy is one of many positive emotions that can bring us happiness, contentment, and overall well-being in our lives. However, at times it seems elusive and fleeting. But can fleeting moments of joy bring us closer to a deeper level and longer lasting state of well-being. Studies completed by researchers such as Barbara Fredrickson at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, show us that those fleeting moments can help broaden our outlook, see new possibilities, bounce back from setbacks, connect with others, and become the best version of ourselves. As a parent I think it’s important for us to learn to capture or create those joyful moments so we can enhance our daily lives, improve family relationships, and model positive emotions for our children. Ultimately this will help them grow toward healthy, well-adjusted adults.

The Reality of Joy

When I talk about bringing more joy into our lives, it’s not an attempt to have us all become a naïve, Pollyanna, who is out of touch with reality. But to become more aware and mindful of the positive and joyful moments that naturally happen in a day. These moments are often overlooked or disregarded because we are too busy.

So why is it so important to notice the joyful moments and why do we have to make an effort. We are all born with different temperaments. Some of us are easy going and happy naturally, while others are more particular and serious. We have different strengths, experiences, family backgrounds and cultural upbringing. Current life situations also factor in such as finances, health, and job. All these variables can make it tough for us to notice and recognize the simple joys in life. We go though our day focused on tasks and responsibilities and forget to see the joy. Our brains are also “sticky” for the negative. Our survival instincts teach us to watch out for trouble and push the positive emotions aside. All of this can lead us into a negativity rut leaving

little time for the positive. If we can start to bring into our awareness the joyful moments each day it can have positive effects on both physical and mental health. Research shows us that we are able to develop new strengths and skills by making new connections in the brain through practicing positive strategies. This is not only healthy for us but healthy for our children as well. Children with happy parents are more likely to be happy themselves.

Bring on the Joy

In the beginning of your joyful journey you will want to become more mindful or aware of the presence or absence of joy in your life. Initially taking an inventory, if you will, of your joy. Pick a day to really focus on and take a baseline of your emotions. One strategy might be to take an hourly record of your emotions by setting a reminder/alarm on your phone to stop and reflect. In either a handwritten journal or a journal on your phone record the emotions that you experienced over the last hour. First, note whether the hour was filled with moments of stress, worry, serious focus, busyness, sadness, excitement, joy, contentment etc. Second, in each journal entry note whether any moments occurred that could have been opportunities of joy that you allowed to pass you by. Third, if you experience moments of joy in your day take note of what that feels like for you. "Joy feels bright and light. Colors seem more vivid. There's a spring in your step. And your face lights up with a smile and inner glow. You feel like taking it all in. You feel playful- you want to jump in and get involved" (Fredrickson, 2009). I know that for me true heartfelt joy starts with a warm feeling in my stomach that spreads to my chest. You want to become aware of what true joy feels like for you. After you have become aware of your emotional profile you can consciously start to bring more opportunities of joy into each day. Keep in mind that joy is different for each person and your joyful day will look different than others. For example, I find joy in writing this article today but I know that others might find this process grueling and frustrating.

Joy is just one positive emotion in the happiness picture but a very important one that I believed should be nurtured. Key thoughts that I have gained from reading the work of Robert Biswas-Diener is that happiness is liquid, it's not an emotional finish line, and there are bursts of it throughout the day. As a parent, you want to find moments of joy for yourself and bring moments of joy to your child.

Simple Strategies for Joy

1. Connect with others: Spending time with your children, friends, and other family members that bring you joy can boost moments of joy. Adults are busy and spend less time socializing. It's important to schedule social time into your week. Keep in mind negative people will bring negativity so surround yourself with positive people as much as possible.

2. Connect with nature: Taking a walk in nature can help bring peace and beauty into your life. As you're walking be sure to follow the saying "stop and smell the roses" this isn't necessarily literal but be sure to savor the beauty of nature by observing, listening, and smelling. Take it all in.

3. Connect with animals: If you're an animal lover this is a definite for you. There is research showing the positive effects of an animal's relationship with people and that's why therapy dogs and service dogs are so beneficial. There was a study completed with dogs that showed an increased release of oxytocin (the hormone that plays a role in maternal bonding, trust, and altruism) among dogs and humans when they look into each other's eyes. Sounds corny to look into your dogs eyes but if it activates hormones related to happiness, I say go for it.

4. Spend time laughing: Laughter releases dopamine and endorphins in the brain, our feel good neurotransmitters. Laughter has also been linked to an improved immune system. <http://www.yalescientific.org/2011/05/can-laughter-be-therapeutic/>. Think about the times that you have spent with friends laughing so hard that your cheeks hurt and tears were streaming down your face. The feeling that you experience during that time is magnificent. It lightens your heart, eases your worries, and just makes you feel... happy. In addition to that you are connecting with other people (as mentioned in #1). If you can't catch a dose of humor with your friends at the moment try to watch a your favorite funny movie or show or crazy videos that make you laugh. I also like to listen to Comedy radio for a boost while I'm driving.

5. Savor the moment: When you notice moments in your day that you know bring you joy take time to savor them. Really focus and be in the moment with it. Examples of this might include taking a few extra moments to soak in the beauty of a sunrise or sunset, really spend time watching your children laugh or smile, or feel the excitement a little longer of a job well done. Instead of rushing through something or onto the next task just take a moment to really savor the joy in that moment.

6. Engage your spirituality: Nurture your faith and the support of this community. It can provide a sense of purpose, hope, and increased happiness. For people who are involved and committed to their religious faith, research shows an increase health and life span. People tend to benefit from the social support, positive emotions, and a healthy lifestyle (Myers & Dewall, 2014).

7. Dream about the future: Take time to visualize what might be in your future and all that goes along with that dream. Picture the details of the dream... how does it look, smell, and feel. You might even create a vision/dream journal with pictures.

8. Sing & Dance: Even if you don't do it well, singing and dancing can have many positive effects. Singing calms the nerves, elevates the spirit, and may decrease depression and loneliness. It releases endorphins (feel good neurotransmitter) and oxytocin (hormone related to trust and bonding). Dancing can increase mood,

cognitive skills, and neural connections. It can also decrease stress. Dancing also increases serotonin in the brain (feel good neurotransmitter).

9. Meditate: Meditating can help improve awareness, insight, and compassion. The awareness that we need to bring more joy into our lives and the compassion we need as parents. Meditation can reduce stress, depression, anxiety, and improves the immune system. In the brain it strengthens connections related to attention, emotional regulation, and calming (Myers & DeWall, 2014).

10. Exercise: Not all people like to exercise but there is no doubt about the positive benefits it can have in your life. If we want more joy in our lives it makes sense that we need to reduce stress depression, and anxiety. Aerobic exercise for 30 minutes 3 times per week can move us toward the goal of improving well-being.