



Employee Assistance Program
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Finding Joy and Engaging in the Dance of Life

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Seven practical ways to achieve more happiness in adulthood.

Why is it so challenging for adults to find joy in the everyday, yet so easy for children? We enter the world with a sense of wonder and curiosity. Because we are constantly in the present moment, our eyes see only what is right in front of us, making us little masters of mindfulness. We engage freely and smile easily. As we move from infancy through toddlerhood, we play ceaselessly and ask endless questions.

By the time many of us reach adulthood, however, that sense of wonder has diminished from an everyday phenomenon to something we must actively cultivate. For some, finding joy becomes an elusive endeavor. This is especially true in cases of depression.

With adulthood come responsibilities and the mundane practicalities of daily life. Perhaps most significantly, with adulthood comes a lifetime's accumulation of slights, rejections, and disappointments. We may have experienced traumas that have shaken our sense of safety in the world and ourselves.

So, can we reclaim some of our innate childlike wonder in adulthood? Can we cultivate more joy and happiness regardless of our external circumstances, and even in the direst of situations? Thankfully, an emerging field of research finds that we can indeed increase our baseline levels of happiness.

Raising our happiness setpoint

According to studies, about 50 percent of our potential for happiness is determined by our genetics and only 10 percent by our external circumstances. That leaves 40

percent of our capacity for sustained happiness in our own hands. Just realizing that we have that much agency is the first step. With that awareness comes the next step: looking for opportunities and taking action to care for yourself. The caveat is that this takes hard work and a strong willingness to do that work.

Cultivating positive emotions, engaging in enjoyable activities, maintaining social connections, finding meaning in our lives, and experiencing a sense of accomplishment are five building blocks to raising our baseline levels of joy, referred to by researchers as our happiness setpoint. Psychologist Martin Seligman, one of the founders of positive psychology, refers to this as the PERMA model of well-being, for Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning (or purpose), and Accomplishment (or achievement).

Below are a few practical exercises to work on if your goal is to bring more joy into your world, each exercise engaging one or more of the five facets of the PERMA model.

Find a gratitude partner (positive emotions, social connection)

More than just a buzzword, gratitude is an empirically based method shown to improve mood and increase levels of joy. We are wired to be on the lookout for the negative. This is how our ancestors survived and why many of us must make a conscious effort to seek out the positive — to look for what is right rather than what is wrong. One gratitude practice can be as simple as writing down three positive things in a gratitude journal at the end of each day. Having a gratitude partner — or joy partner — with whom you could exchange texts, emails, or even phone calls sharing your three positive things can offer accountability as well as connection.

Strengthen social connections (relationships)

As social beings, we are wired for connection with others. The need for love and belonging is not far

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behind basic needs such as food and water. Having a positive support system is vital to well-being. This does not necessitate having a large group of friends or a large family. A support network can consist of just one or two close friends or a good therapist. If you struggle with isolation, sign up to volunteer or join a meetup to meet like-minded people. Make an intention to form new connections or to deepen your current ones.

Search for the positive (meaning or purpose)

We always have a choice, even in the worst of circumstances. We can choose to focus solely on the bad, or we can choose to seek out the good. We can also look for meaning in the bad, which is one way we build resilience. To be sure, this is not the same as burying our heads in the sand and denying reality; instead, it involves maintaining a balanced perspective and not over-indexing on the negative. Further, there is enormous power in having a purpose in life, whether that is having a vocation, parenthood, or being a loving partner or pet owner.

Recall a moment of joy (positive emotions, engagement)

When was the last time you experienced pure joy? Was it on vacation, sitting on a beach, or during a special occasion surrounded by good friends and family? Visualize yourself in that situation or setting. Pay attention to all the feelings and sensations that arise, both physical and emotional. Engage all your senses. What do you see, smell, feel? Allow those feelings to wash over you. Whenever you experience a moment of joy, take a mental snapshot to capture the experience so that you may reconnect with it when most needed. In addition to visualization, you can also write down those favorite memories and re-read them later on. There is power in recording the positive on paper.

Reconnect with your child-self (engagement, achievement)

What were some of your favorite things from when you were a child? Did you have hobbies, games that you enjoyed, or extracurricular activities at which you excelled? Did you achieve something that brought you a sense of pride or accomplishment? If you have trouble recalling, ask a parent, sibling, or anyone who knew you when you were younger. Similar to the above, make a list of all the things you have felt passionate about throughout your life. Then, try to reengage in one of those activities.

Plan something to look forward to (meaning, positive emotions)

Have you ever noticed that when you think about an enjoyable event or occasion that is coming up soon, you get an instant boost in your mood? This can be a trip or an activity that can be done solo or with loved ones. Having something to look forward to can engender positive emotions and cultivate meaning.

References:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/nurturing-self-compassion/202301/finding-joy-and-engaging-in-the-dance-of-life>

