

On Our Best Days

Research tells us that actively searching for happiness actually decreases our chances of achieving it. Here's another option.

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"Our true character can be discovered by simply remembering who we were in the moments that mattered most."

Bookshelves are lined with thousands of years of spirited inquiry about how human beings thrive — as men and as women, as patients, parents, adult children, young people, seniors, foreigners, minorities, leaders, laborers, professionals, activists and change agents. It's as if we've all been looking — for centuries — for the magic manual for how to be happy. Aristotle and Plato tried their pens at this quest, and many do the same today.

"Who am I really?"

"What am I doing here?"

"How can I be happy?"

And, for many whose lives have shifted due to illness, frailty, caregiving demands, and other heavy burdens of life, "How can I possibly enjoy my life now, with all I've lost and am longing for?"

Is being happy the holy grail of human experience? Many of our spiritual traditions suggest that we are more likely to thrive when we live meaningful lives; happiness shows up in sparks and memorable moments, but it isn't a steady state or something we can attain and sustain. In fact, modern researchers tell us that actively searching for happiness decreases our chances of actually achieving it. (Anderson, Mauss, Savino and Tamir, 2011)

Instead of asking, "How can I be happy?" maybe it's time to ask, "How do I want to invest my life energy each day?" After all, we have less energy available to us as we age, making it more precious every day. Perhaps spending it more wisely is the key to fulfillment.

Let's take an "inner hike" down memory lane; ponder the paths you've taken in your life and recall the moments that mattered more than most. At first you might remember what you were doing, as we often do when we remember the past. Zoom deeper into yourself; search for how your character played a role in the story. Who were you being in that moment? What mattered to you in the memory? How did you show up, and how did you feel? What about the memory led to the happiness or satisfaction you recall?

The insights that come forth through this memory excavation are usually strong indicators of your values or virtues. Our essential character (from the Latin root that means "engraved") can be discovered by remembering who we were on our best days, or in our best moments.

You may be thinking about how your actions benefited others. Your gratitude or love or appreciation for someone, some cause, or God. Your commitment to being a loving presence, without judgment, without needing anything in return. Your satisfaction with some success — that you persevered toward a challenging goal

using all of your strengths and resources. That you value hard work. The list of possibilities may reveal acts of courage, loyalty, diligence, honesty, humility, gratitude and love.

Now come back to the present and your wish to feel happier more of the time. How can you bring those gorgeous character strengths into each of your days? Chances are if they contributed to the best memories you can recall, then they can bless you today with more of the same.

If it's courage, find one way you can be courageous today, or notice courage in another person nearby, and point it out to them.

If it's loyalty, communicate your own accountability in an interaction, or notice it in another, even if it's the server at lunch who remembers to bring you your favorite flavor of jam.

Diligence? Make an effort, steadily over time, toward something you want or a habit you want to change.

Honesty can be so difficult at times because we feel vulnerable. But honest talk is what helps us connect to others. And your honesty invites the same in others, all of which leads to positive energy and better relationships. We know that on our deathbeds, most of us care more about our relationships than about our achievements.

Humility? Give credit where it is due. Recognize someone's achievement today.

Gratitude is the most powerful way to shift mood when we're feeling blue. Say a little more than the automatic "thank you" and feel thankful as you say, "I really appreciate that."

And last but not least, love. An expansive heart, one that both gives and receives love, can be the engine that makes even the blandest day gratifying. Holding a loving and appreciative gaze has power, and we can do it even when the well of energy is so depleted. I love when I feel "smiling eyes" resting on me!

Your "inner hike" can lead you to these and other discoveries about your own character. How are these things engraved in you? These etchings don't change with age, although with wisdom we may recognize and appreciate them more.

Feeling good about our lives is an inside job. Stay connected to what makes your personal clock do the ticking. When we wake each day and dedicate our precious energy to whatever matters most, we can generate the same inner "fullness" that has contributed to our happiness in the past. ♦

Source:

Anderson, Craig L.; Mauss, Iris B.; Savino, Nicole S.; and Tamir, Maya. (2011). "Can Seeking Happiness Make People Unhappy? Paradoxical Effects of Valuing Happiness." *American Psychological Association*, Vol. 11, pp. 807-815.