



by Nancy Gertz

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I'm not sure how old I was when I became aware of my fascination with human behavior. My friends were engaged in much more concrete studies, like getting their bikes to go faster, finding better hiding places in the field nearby, conjuring up rides to go get ice cream in town, and designing the most "efficient" ways to complete homework so there would be more phone time before bed. I was definitely involved in all that, but, at the same time, I was keenly interested in how we were all behaving. I had to understand what we were thinking and feeling, because some of the things we did just didn't make sense. Not to mention what the adults were doing!

By the age of 13, I had saved up enough money to join the Psychology Book of the Month club. To my delight, every month two very grown-up

books arrived in their cardboard zip box, and I'd abscond with them to my room behind a locked door. Excited, filled with hope and possibility, I was sure the books held answers for me about what makes humans tick and, especially, why they behave the way they do. The truth is I didn't understand most of what I was reading in those books. While the strategy I chose at the time wasn't terribly successful at helping me find answers, it did clarify that I would always be fascinated with the quest.

Decades later, after all kinds of learning and living, I can humbly say I realize one thing — there will always be more to learn, and the quest for answers will continue. Still, I am pretty sure that I've nailed three key things that drive human behavior in a positive direction.

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1.

Take Agency

We all need to feel that we have the power to act on our own behalf. Can you make your own choices and take action in the direction of your goals and needs? Can you proclaim, “I can take care of this” and “Here’s what I’ll do about this”?

When we are on a roll, flourishing in life, chances are we are empowered and engaged in activities that are meaningful to us. When life has us in a tighter grip — when illness, tensions or persistent struggle are leading us to feel anxious and depressed — we lose our sense of personal agency. It’s as if we’ve let go of the wheel and nobody’s driving. We don’t feel we can take control of it, and we might have no idea what to do next.

The key to getting our hands back on the wheel and kickstarting the good feelings again is to take an action, even a small one. One small action leads to another, and once we are in action again, we reconnect with our own self-generated energy.

In other words, when life’s got you down, do something!

2.

Connect With Others

Loneliness is a silent plague, sometimes invisible, that affects far too many of us. Studies show that it leads to deteriorating health, both mental and physical. On the flipside, being in relationships with other people does far more for us than improve our health status. Having meaningful connection with others opens the gate to truly flourishing. Love heals, expressing gratitude makes us happier, kindness improves our sense of well-being, and the warmth we bring to others improves our overall sense of life satisfaction.

What’s amazing about the research in this area of psychology is the simplicity of putting it into practice. Other people matter. Let them know, and treat them as if they do.

The secret sauce here applies to all kinds of people in life — not just those closest to us, but even those whose lives are not intertwined with ours, like the cashier in the grocery store, the person who brought the coffee, or the guy who walks down the hallway each morning. A kind gesture in any direction has its own rewards. And nurturing our closest connections gives back to us in immeasurable ways. We all benefit from opening and expanding our hearts. Be the pack animal you were meant to be!

3.

Savor the Good

We’ve all probably figured out by now that our minds tilt in the direction of what is troubling or disturbing. We aren’t inclined to dwell on what’s going well. That was fine when stressors were dangerous and infrequent, way back when tigers leapt out from behind the trees. Now our stresses are many and persistent. There are no more tigers for most of us, yet our brains still act as if there are. Our minds search for things we can worry about, problems that need to be fixed. And, naturally, since we are wired this way, we are compelled to think about these things.

We now know that our brains are more malleable than we previously thought, and with re-training and persistence, we can develop our minds to attend to the good stuff of life. This changes our brains, making it easier to do more of this over time. I’ve gotten pretty good at catching myself in a negative rant, and that’s when I force myself to come up with at least three good things to focus on, think about and, yes, savor. I begin every coaching session with the same request: Tell me something good!

By turning our attention to the positive, we kick our minds and our neurophysiology into a more resourceful and capable mode, and this enables us to better handle the tough stuff that will inevitably arise. We have to become skilled drivers of our own attention, and our best lives happen when we shine the spotlight on the positive as much as possible.

I still wonder at people’s behavior; it’s a source of endless study and reflection. Yet I’ve come to realize one critical thing about us humans — we can change for the better. ♦

