

CHAPTER 6

GIVE YOURSELF THE GIFTS OF HAPPINESS AND PEACE OF MIND

Shortly after the birth of our daughter Nikki 27 years ago, it became evident that she was not developing typically. She made no eye contact, was very rigid in her body movements and often screamed nonstop for days at a time. Anita and I felt totally overwhelmed as we struggled to figure out how to meet her needs and overcome our feelings of parental inadequacy and uncertainty. We had no choice but to shut out the world around us and focus all of our energy on making it through each day as best we could.

Although we longed for a perspective that enabled us to celebrate rather than worry about Nikki's life, we were stuck in the despair we felt when she seemed beyond our reach and trapped in our fears that she would never be able to develop her abilities or live independently. Most importantly, we found ourselves in an unknown territory where our attitudes and beliefs had not adapted to the landscape.

When Nikki was almost 2-years-old, we attended a program at the Option Institute in Massachusetts, which helps children with special needs and their families. Shortly after we arrived, one of the program leaders asked us what we were afraid would happen if we let go of all of the unhappiness we were experiencing concerning Nikki's situation. I was puzzled by this question because it had never occurred to me that I had any option other than to be stressed out and anxious. I responded that maybe if I wasn't unhappy, I wouldn't be motivated to do everything I could to take good care of Nikki or people would think I was not concerned about her lack of development.

The leader then changed my life by asking a simple question, "Why don't you choose to be happy, regardless of the challenges you face with Nikki?" It was as if a door opened up in the maze of negative emotions we had been experiencing, allowing us to escape to a better place. In that moment, I realized that my unhappiness was not benefitting Nikki or anyone else.

I decided to take the risk of being happier and quickly realized that I did not need my unhappiness and stress to take effective care of Nikki. On the contrary, my increased happiness gave me a renewed sense of energy and possibility about my ability to make a difference in Nikki's life. I also finally recognized that I had the capacity to make each day a happy one, regardless of Nikki's level of development. In fact, when I returned home, my mother told me that I was a completely different person.

The staff at the Option Institute also taught us how to join Nikki in her world and stimulate her development through an intensive home-based treatment program that we eagerly began as soon as we arrived home. We worked with her many hours a day for the next couple of years to help her stand, make eye contact, pick up food and do many other new things. Eventually, she took her first step, which has been the most exciting event in my life.

Although Nikki has never learned to talk and continues to need a great deal of care, her relentless spirit and goodwill inspire me every day and I relish having her as a “soul mate.” The privilege of being her father has taught me that a powerfully motivating and healing energy is created when I am able to provide her and everyone else in my life with unconditional acceptance. I have also learned to slow down and appreciate the importance of living in the present moment. Most importantly, I now know that my unhappiness doesn’t benefit me, Nikki or anyone else, and I am much more effective when I give myself the gift of happiness.

This life-changing epiphany has compelled me to let go of the unhappiness I used to “give” myself because I mistakenly believed it would motivate me to make the changes I wanted to in my life. Clearly, there is nothing I can do better when I am unhappy than when I am happy. The knowledge that I can achieve happiness regardless of the challenges I face provides me with a deep sense of emotional freedom that I treasure.

In fact, whenever I feel unhappy I remind myself that this is my choice, rather than something beyond my control. Although this awareness does not usually give me instant happiness, my unhappiness is tempered and I make the conscious choice to do whatever I need to feel better such as talking to myself in a loving manner, taking better care of myself or finding solutions to whatever problems I am facing.

Why We Don’t Choose Happiness

People often don’t choose happiness because they believe they need their unhappiness to motivate them to overcome difficulties, become the person they want to be, etc. However, this is not the case. Unhappiness drains our spirit and impairs our ability to achieve our goals in contrast to happiness, which is energizing.

Although it is satisfying to complete a challenging task such as losing weight or finishing writing a book (I am not there yet), people who always look for something else to happen in their lives to “make” them happy usually only enjoy momentary satisfaction when they achieve one goal before they are unhappy they have not achieved another. They live their lives on an emotional roller coaster, always pushing the bar for happiness a bit higher. In fact, I fear that many people never reach this bar before taking their last breath and therefore never experience genuine fulfillment in their lives.

Even our nation's Founding Fathers thought we only had the right to the pursuit of happiness rather than happiness itself. However, at the risk of being a bit grandiose as well as over two-hundred years late, I declare that we have the right to be happy, with no limitations or conditions. In fact, this is one of the most important choices we can ever make because it has such a profound impact on the quality of our lives and our ability to be helpful to others.

I recently had a client inform me that she was "happy for no reason." When I inquired about how she achieved this highly desirable state of mind, she explained that she had always thought she needed to "earn" her happiness by being a good mother and having a successful career. However, as with all happy people, she finally realized she deserved the gift of happiness, regardless of how well her life was going.

If you are stuck on tying your happiness to your achievements, it's much better to shoot for an intrinsic goal such as being a more loving person, which you have a great deal of control over, rather than an extrinsic goal such as being the highest achiever in your field, which you have much less control over. In addition, goals that are driven by our ego such as the need to be the best at something generally separate us from others, whereas goals such as being kind and sensitive connect us to other people.

I remember my father telling me when I was a teenager that he would be happy when he had completed all the household tasks on his "to do" list. When I asked him why he couldn't be happy even as he was working towards his goals, he explained that he had to earn his happiness. Clearly, the concept of simply being happy without conditions was foreign to him and perhaps even threatening because it conflicted with one of his core beliefs.

However, during the last year of his life when he was in the late stages of Alzheimer's disease, I enjoyed a profound experience with my father when I took him for a drive just outside of the small town where I grew up. He spotted windmills on a distant hill and shouted, "Let's find them!" When we eventually wound up right underneath the windmills, he joyfully stared at them. Repeatedly, he exclaimed, "Wow!" I told him that I was enjoying being in this moment with him because he had spent so much of his life putting off his happiness. In a loving voice I will still remember even if I live a thousand years, he put his hand on my leg and said, "I like it too, son."

It is also difficult for people to give up their unhappiness because they believe it demonstrates that they are a caring person. For instance, a person might report that she or he is unhappy about children living in poverty. However, this is of no benefit to anyone, including the unfortunate children who would be better off if this person was completely happy, but sent them some food.

Finally, people sometimes choose to be unhappy in an attempt to control others. For instance, a wife might tell her husband that she is upset by his excessive drinking to motivate him to drink less. Although this type of emotional manipulation is common in most relationships and often works to some extent, it is not self-compassionate to base our level of happiness on someone else's behavior, over which we generally have limited, if any, control.

A more effective strategy is for this wife to instead maintain her happiness while she calmly informs her husband that she is concerned about his drinking because it is detrimental to his health and their marriage. She can also request that he stop drinking or alert him to what she intends to do if he does not change his drinking habits, such as leave the relationship. Regardless of whether or not this approach decreases his drinking, at least she is providing herself with excellent self-care by not giving up something as important as her happiness.

Let Go of Expectations

Our ability to choose happiness is largely contingent on our ability to let go of our expectations for how others should behave, how the events in our lives should unfold, etc. We are then free from the inevitable frustration we experience when these expectations are not met. We are also able to enjoy our life as it is rather than being frustrated that it doesn't measure up to some preconceived ideal. In fact, I have long observed that the happiest people I know expect the least and are consequently grateful for everything positive that comes their way, in contrast to people who expect the most and consequently suffer from a chronic sense of disappointment.

This doesn't mean that we shouldn't have a vision of who we want to be and what we want out of our lives. Indeed, a sense of direction in life gives us a good reason to get out of bed each morning and excitement about our future. However, when we believe that things should be a certain way for us to be happy, we set ourselves up for regret. The Chinese sage, Lao Tzu, summed it up well when he wrote, "Act without expectation."

Overcoming Trauma

I do not mean to suggest that it is possible to always be happy in life. Highly traumatic events almost always cause us to experience varying degrees of anxiety, sadness, despair, etc., which we initially have little or no control over. In fact, when I am working with a client who has recently experienced a traumatic event, it would be insensitive to suggest that he or she simply choose happiness while still in the midst of the grieving process. Instead, I listen to and join the client in his or her pain since trauma sticks to our soul until it is released through interactions with an attentive and caring human being.

I also encourage my clients to be self-compassionate by accepting their upset feelings rather than judging them, which only exacerbates their suffering. Clearly, there is no way we “should feel” following the death of a child or a sexual assault. In fact, our ability to still love ourselves regardless of what we are experiencing helps these feelings pass through us and dissipate rather than be blocked by our belief that we shouldn’t be having them.

This was illustrated to me in my work with Lisa, who sought help due to the anguish and depression she was experiencing after her son’s tragic death in a car crash. She had always viewed herself as a strong person who could overcome any challenge and frequently beat herself up for not being able to rid herself of her intense negative emotions. Rather than increase her pain through self-flagellation, I encouraged her to be self-compassionate by completely accepting everything she was feeling and bathing herself in self-love rather than criticism.

This was very difficult for Lisa because she had always judged herself harshly and put the needs of others ahead of her own. However, she realized that she had no choice but to focus on self-care because she had been emotionally deserted by her relatives, who told her in no uncertain terms she should “buck up” and “get over it.” Although we had many sessions that left both of us in tears, the focus of our work gradually shifted to the important steps Lisa was taking on her journey to achieve self-compassion.

These steps included Lisa’s new-found ability to recognize that she was still a strong person despite her painful emotions, talk to herself in a loving manner and develop strong emotional connections with people who supported rather than condemned her. She also took a trip by herself up a mountain where she performed a ritual that we had carefully planned, which enabled her to both celebrate and say goodbye to her son on a deeper level. It also provided her with an adventure to help her get “out of her head” and into the moment.

Although Lisa continued to feel the pain of her son’s death, the intensity of her grief eventually diminished and she was able to experience moments of happiness and inner peace. For the first time in her life, she accepted herself as she was and became her own cheerleader rather than inner critic. It is ironic that the worst thing that ever happened to her also provided her with the stimulus she needed to rid herself of her inner demons and finally take great care of herself. In fact, she had no other choice if she was to climb out of her despair and heal her severe emotional wounds.

Lisa’s experience is not unique. Life shattering events often give us a clearer view of what is most important in our lives and force us to find pathways to emotional healing in our efforts to recover from our unbearable pain. Although I certainly would not wish hard times on anyone, they can teach us valuable lessons, help us become more sensitive

to the suffering of others and compel us to choose as much happiness and peace of mind as we can.

I learned that it is possible to move through the grief process following a trauma and still focus on choosing happiness after the death of my mother, who I will always treasure for the unconditional love she gave me throughout my life. In fact, she provided me with the approval I needed to accomplish this challenge.

During the last few years of her life, my mother often told me that she was worried about how I would cope with her death because we were extremely close. Each time, I responded by saying that it would be very hard, and then asking her if it would be okay for me to try to be happy even as I grappled with the pain of her death. She always responded emphatically that she always wanted me to be happy. Just before she died, I asked her one more time about this issue just to be sure. She responded, “Good Lord, son! Do we have to go through this again?”

Although I miss my mother every day, her permission to be happy despite my enormous loss has been her final gift to me and one that I long to thank her for in person. I often feel her presence and visualize that she is cheering me on in life and joyful that I have learned how to be self-compassionate. Rather than demonstrate my loyalty to her through unhappiness, I am honoring her wish for me to be happy to my benefit and the benefit of everyone around me.

Choose Peace of Mind Over Stress

Just as it is possible to choose happiness, we can also let go of stress and choose peace of mind, regardless of the challenges we face. An important component of this process is to recognize that *we generally cause our own stress* rather than outside events. For instance, traffic jams do not cause stress. If they did, everyone around us in this situation would experience stress. Although many people brim with impatience or anger, others sit patiently and peacefully, knowing that they have no control over the situation - only their reaction to it.

Many people have difficulty choosing peace of mind over stress because they believe that their stress helps them live their lives more effectively. In fact, stress depletes our energy and does not help us except in highly dangerous situations, when our limbic systems are automatically aroused to help us protect ourselves.

I learned this experientially many years ago when I used to feel a high level of stress before I conducted training for large groups of people. My queasy stomach and intense anxiety made it difficult for me to sleep the night before and the sleep I did achieve was often filled with dreams of public humiliation. After years of self-imposed and unnecessary suffering, I finally decided to take the risk of letting go of my stress. I

quickly realized that I did not need stress to carefully prepare for and conduct my trainings. In fact, I was much more effective when I was relaxed and peaceful.

I encourage my clients to take the risk of letting go of stress to prove to themselves that it does not serve them in any way. I assure them that if their inner peace leads them to stay in bed all day and ignore their responsibilities, they can always return to being stressed. However, this never happens. On the contrary, clients who choose peace of mind always report that they accomplish more, are better at finding effective solutions to difficult problems and simply feel better.

People also have difficulty letting go of stress because they believe it is a badge of honor in our fast-paced society, proving to themselves and others that they are responsible and hardworking. They often relish telling others about how stressed out they feel and view peaceful people with suspicion because they are clearly not “in the game.”

However, being stressed out does not prove we are worthy or competent. It only reduces our quality of life and significantly increases the chances that we will suffer from high blood pressure, heart disease and other serious health problems. It also puts us at risk for addictions, which temporarily dull our emotional pain. Finally, it takes a huge toll on our relationships, because most people eventually get tired of hearing about our stress when they have their own challenges to overcome.

Try These Strategies on for Size

- Recognize that we “give” ourselves unhappiness because we mistakenly believe that we need it to make changes in our lives.
- Choose as much happiness and peace of mind as you can at any given moment.
- Understand that you do not need to be unhappy to prove that you are a caring person.
- Do not use your unhappiness to control others. Instead, maintain your happiness even as you assert your needs or make requests of others.
- Know that happiness is your inherent right rather than something you have to earn.
- When you are experiencing intense emotions following a traumatic event, accept all of your feelings rather than judging them and focus on being highly self-compassionate.
- Let go of all of your expectations for life so you can enjoy it as it is rather than compare it to some preconceived ideal, which leads to disappointment.
- Understand that stress drains your energy and serves no purpose outside of highly dangerous situations.
- Recognize that it is generally a waste of energy to tell others how stressed out you are because they have their own challenges to grapple with.

