

# SEARCHING FOR HAPPINESS? EMBRACE MISERY!

This column sponsored by:



Affiliated Clinical Services Inc.  
38 Sell Drive, Hartford WI 53027  
262-673-0301

Ask people what they desire in life and happiness is usually at the top of the list. Songs tell us "Don't Worry Be Happy". However, many of us find happiness to be as elusive as finding a unicorn.

As I listened to the news over the past few months, I thought about what a person would feel if their only experience of the world is through the news broadcasts. They would live in terror and despair waiting for inevitable demise. Let's face it, the world right now is often a negative and frightening place. Though I know there is more to our world than terrible events, I briefly thought I should unplug – throw out the TV, radio, Internet, cell phone and newspapers. Why was I thinking this way? National and international events were causing my feelings of stress to increase and interfering with any joy. Add how "Nothing is simple" in daily life and I was ready for an island tree house. I was unhappy.

I thought about happiness. Is it possible to be happy in spite of overwhelming negative news and personal obstacles we encounter? Can we find that unicorn of joy? There are standard happiness formulas. Being a therapist I know most of them. Countless self-help books, therapies and medications offer tips and strategies to reach that state we call "happiness". However, many are just temporary Band-Aids and often backfire. We endlessly search to find that one gem of wisdom only to realize it is fools gold. We still feel anxious and negative.

Is it realistic to think we should try to seek happiness in an unhappy world? Are we expecting too much to want a life of joy? No!!! The pursuit of happiness is worth striving for and possible to achieve. We need to start by embracing the negatives!

Happiness is a by-product of an engaged and meaningful life.

My idea of unplugging would never work. Happiness cannot thrive in isolation. However if we pursue happiness as the ultimate goal or if we expect to be happy all of the time we will be disappointed. To find happiness we need to be involved with all of the good AND bad details of our lives. Convention says we should think positive thoughts, practice feeling good emotions, avoid worst-case scenarios, and set happiness goals. However, if somebody tells you to think about pretty flowers but not about the spider on the flower petal what do you think about? The spider, of course! Tell someone to think only positive thoughts and what do they think about? Those negative thoughts racing through their minds in endless loops. Worse, they get mad at themselves for thinking them. Adrenaline increases and they have another sleepless night!

Instead accept negative thoughts and learn to look at them in a neutral non-emotional way. They are just thoughts and don't rule us. Envision worst-case scenarios, like that bad news we keep hearing. Use these thoughts to remind us that 1) we can find ways to cope with negative outcomes, and 2) things rarely go as wrong as we fear. Anticipating unpleasant events can minimize their impact. We can use these thoughts to plan effective ways to cope. This builds self confidence.

Avoid unrealistic goals and focus on the steps needed to attain a goal. Don't promise to lose fifty pounds in five months (95% of people fail weight loss goals). Practice going for a daily walk to enjoy

the day and do something physically and emotionally pleasant. We are happier if we don't fixate on the singular goal (lose fifty pounds) and we take pleasure in beneficial performance (enjoying a brisk walk).

**Happiness = action.**

Self-help literature, and motivational speakers lecture about "how to feel in the mood for getting things done." I don't know about you but I rarely feel in the mood to clean house or pull weeds. Feeling like doing something, and actually doing it are two different things. Don't wait for inspiration. Develop a non-attached stance towards procrastination. Your reluctance about work doesn't need to be eradicated. Accept procrastination feelings and act anyway. Avoid the set up. Don't think, "I have to weed the garden, mow the lawn, and wash the windows". You won't leave the couch and you will feel like a failure. This is not the road to happiness. Even if you did all those jobs it will be miserable as you focus on how much you still have to do. Instead think, "Even though I don't feel like it I will weed for fifteen minutes and enjoy the sunshine." You are more likely to do this small task and then add another small task while enjoying being outdoors. You will feel happy with yourself because you were successful.

**What are the keys to happiness?**

1. Accept happiness as only one part of a balanced life.
2. Tolerate uncertainty and learn coping skills from negative thoughts.
3. Believe failure is part of becoming successful.
4. Act no matter how you feel.
5. Sometimes turn off the news and enjoy the view.