

Mary's Musings, thoughts on making a life...

Kick the Complaining Habit

*Happiness does not have to depend on an event.
It is also not solely an emotional response. It can be a way of being.*

She runs barefoot around the yard, arms outspread, hair streaming behind her, face upturned to the rain. I am witnessing radiant, unadulterated joy, completely expressed by my nine-year-old daughter. I stand transfixed at the kitchen window, soapy plate in my hands, moved by her happiness. She celebrates wind, too. And sunsets and moonrises and flowers and kittens and, well, life.

Some people say that joy is not an emotion. They claim it is our natural state. This certainly seems to be true of my daughter. If this is so, then why are so many of us unhappy, or at best, marginally happy? What happens to joy as we grow up?

Perhaps our recognition of its presence around and within us is what determines the amount of joy we experience. I don't need to tell you about all the research that's been done on health and long life and it's correlation with happiness. You've probably read about it in everything from *Discover* magazine to *Reader's Digest*! But, the research doesn't tell us how to find and reconnect with joy. So, here are some suggestions.

First, **pay attention to your habitual level of joy.** That is, how joyful are you on a daily basis? Go ahead and give yourself a rating on a scale from 1 to 10, 1 being dangerously depressed and 10 being obnoxiously happy. Of course, we all fluctuate (and sometimes we *can* blame those fluctuations on our biorhythms or

the moon phase or something else outside of our control. Many of us are at the mercy of our reactions, rather than the master of our responses, but that is a subject for another article!) I'm not talking about those swing times; I'm talking about your overall average. Are you essentially an upbeat, optimistic, positive type? Rank yourself above 5. Are you generally a melancholy, "life is hard and things rarely go right," type? Put yourself somewhere below 5. (Yes, you can use a decimal point!)

Next, **set a goal.** How much would the quality of your life improve if you increased your average joyfulness by two points? It's ok to take this in baby steps - if two feels like too many, then aim for one or even a half. You are working to "reset your joy thermostat!" You can raise the bar higher after you've experienced some success.

Start every morning by saying to your reflection in the mirror, "Today, I choose joy." Speak your intention out loud to remind you of your goal and get your conscious mind on board with you. Say it again each time you do some regular thing like washing your hands or starting your car. Most importantly, say it again as you are falling asleep at night. "Tonight, I choose joy." When you notice yourself slipping into negativity, gently remind yourself of your goal to experience more joy and shift your attention something happy. Go easy on yourself. It takes time,

attention, and patience to change a habit.

Wake up to your surroundings. Every minute of every day, our bodies give us information, much of it pleasurable, about the world outside of our skin. Become aware of the beauty of nature, the scent of rain, the taste of your food. Feel how soft your dog's ear is as you pet him instead of revisiting the argument you had with your co-worker. Taste your morning coffee rather than rehearsing your day. Notice the changing colors of the landscape instead of cussing the other drivers.

When you greet others, smile, no matter how you feel inside. When they ask how you are doing, talk about the good things in your life instead of that day's horror story on the news, your latest aches, current worries, and most recent annoyances. Even when your body is not well, your spirits can be. You can say, "My body has a cold, but I am great!" It is unusual and powerful to distinguish between one's body and one's self in conversation. Most of us know that we are not our bodies but we often speak as though we are.

Focus on the ways you are blessed. Joy and gratitude go hand-in-hand. Consider starting a gratitude notebook in which you write down two or more things each day for which you are grateful. No matter how gray your day is, there is something for which to be grateful. This practice will really help you focus on the positive, which is always present but often unacknowledged. For example:

- A stranger invited me to step in front of him in the checkout line.
- My husband scraped my car windows before he left for work.

- I found a new favorite coffee and it was on sale!
- My sister called just to say she loves me.

Sometimes, **contrast is useful.** So, take a few moments to dwell on the "It could be worse" alternatives. Spin these out into soap-opera-like proportions. "I'm going to be late for work. My boss will blow a gasket and fire me. I'll be so devastated I won't be able to pull myself together enough to find another job. I won't be able to pay my bills. We'll end up living in a cardboard box, dumpster diving." At some point, you'll find yourself laughing, feeling relieved and grateful for your life just as it is. As my dad always says about birthdays, getting older sure beats the alternative!

Stop procrastinating. Most of us put off -- even resist -- being joyful. Yes, it sounds ridiculous but how often have you said, "I'll be happy/satisfied/Content/joyful/ your choice of adjective here when . . ." (Fill in the blank here. Examples could include "I get that promotion," "I'm out of debt," or "the kids are out of diapers, out of daycare, out of the house.") Happiness does not have to depend on an event. It is also not solely an emotional response. It can be a way of being.

Make lemonade out of lemons. When you take your family and two other families to Hulled for a dinosaur dig and you forget to bring the directions and you follow several blind leads but never figure out where you are supposed to go (yes, this really happened!), take everyone to Devil's Tower for a picnic and a hike. When your toddler paints the kitchen floor with tomatoes, grab your camera and take off your socks so you can capture the moment

and feel the ooze between your toes, too. Then, clean up together. Sometimes, we have a choice between laughing or crying / getting pissed/blaming others about a situation. Which choice takes you closer to your goal of experiencing more joy?

Invent reasons to celebrate. Your African violet bloomed. Your child remembered to make his bed. Gas prices dropped three cents. Notice how good it feels to feel happy. When you catch yourself backsliding into speaking/ thinking/feeling that life is too hard, you

can return to these happy thoughts (and to your gratitude journal.)

In the beginning, it can be helpful to have "reasons" to be joyful. Six months from now, (even six weeks from now, if you are diligent and conscious,) you will notice that your inner thermostat for joy has changed. Eventually, happiness can become your default setting, your natural way of being, like my daughter. So, read joyful stuff. Hang out with happy people. Don't take yourself too seriously since none of us will come out of this alive! Live well. Love much. Laugh often. **Choose joy.**

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Because life coaching involves a certain amount of chemistry, she offers a **complimentary first session**. Call or email to schedule yours.

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