

# ***Please Try This at Home***

## ***Monthly Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life***

### **The Happiness of Pursuit**

Have you ever noticed that when you are in the process of pursuing a goal—whether it's retirement, a career transition, buying your dream house, or even watching your home team win the Superbowl—you imagine that, on average, you will be happier once you have reached your goal? Right after you reach your goal, of course you're happy! You did it! But not too long after, you notice amidst the day to day grind that your happiness, on average, has not increased quite as much as you expected. Has that ever happened to you?

Recently, I was listening to Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert present some of his research findings about happiness.\* He pointed out that when we imagine how our life will be after we reach a goal, our imagination is a bit too efficient. It only focuses on the particular aspect of life that we expect to change, not on all the other parts of life that will stay the same or even become more difficult after that goal has been reached. While we're scrimping by each month to pay off the credit card, we imagine the relief we'll experience once we've paid it off—the movies we will watch, the restaurants we will go to, the golf we will play. We're not imagining that, regardless of whether our debt is paid down, we'll still be getting up too early to go to a job that we're not totally excited about, the neighbor kid will still be blasting hip hop music at 2 AM, etc.

Since we forget to include all the annoyances of real life in our goal achievement fantasies, when we arrive in post goal achievement land, we don't simply experience an increase in happiness as expected, we also face several losses:

- 1) The disappointment that improvement in one area of life didn't solve all the other areas;
- 2) The end of the happiness that came from our pre-goal expectation that we would be consistently happier once we achieved our goal, since positive expectation about the future adds to present happiness and now that's done;
- 3) The reminder that no matter what goals we attain, we can't quite get our circumstances to admit us into that place of sustained peace and permanently increased joy that we suspect must exist, though we can never quite make it there.

Who knew that attaining a major life goal could be so disappointing!?

### **Three Mind Shifts for Increasing Post-Goal and Post-Event Happiness**

Since I know you are savvy folks, I bet you're already thinking ahead to at least one fix for this problem, right? Stopping to...

#### **1) Imagine the Details**

When we imagine how post-goal life will be, we need to take the time to fill in some of the nitty-gritty details so that our expectation more closely matches the reality. We can do this for any positive expectation we have about the future or an event that we're anticipating, whether it's holidays, vacations, retirement, marriage, the new Batman movie, etc. If reality turns out to be better than expected, with a lesser concentration of the ever-present annoyances of life, we'll be

happily surprised. If not, the expectation hangover following the excitement of the event won't be quite so painful—after all, some of it was expected!

For example, say we're excited about shuffling the moody teen off to college and having some time to do all those things we've been putting off for 18 years. Once we realize we've got an expectation about what that time will be like, that would be our clue to ask ourselves what logistics and frustrations will still remain or even increase once Johnny is well into freshman year. Will completing those put-off projects stress us out? What will it be like to talk to our spouse now, without the logistics, consequences, and driving schedules we talked about when Johnny was home? Will we have to do some relationship maintenance that we've put off in favor of caring for the kids? How will it feel to not be needed quite so often? What friends will we have time to reconnect with? Will we need to make new ones?

Realizing we have an expectation about the future and then taking time to flesh out more of the details around it gives us a better idea about what to expect so we're not taken by surprise by things that don't change or that get worse once our goal is completed.

## **2) Always have a goal**

Maintaining and working toward a variety of short and long-term goals contributes to present happiness, sometimes even more than goal completion. The process of working towards something makes us feel meaningful and valuable. Our imaginations are entertained by the possibilities that could come from the positive changes we are making, giving us some temporary distraction relief from current difficult circumstances. Even if we imagine in the details and ongoing annoyances to keep our expectations reasonable, we still get to hope for a positive future. Goals keep us active, which gives us more endorphins: the non-prescription antidepressant.

Retirement researchers talk about how people who, years in advance of retirement, begin setting goals for what they will do in retirement find themselves happier and more fulfilled once they retire than those who just figure out what to do after they have retired. Already having goals in the midst of that major transition helps to protect people against the loss of meaning and connection that often emerge as soon as the excitement of not having to go to work wears off.

People who continually set and work toward short and long-term goals know how to milk positive future expectation for all the happiness it's worth.

## **3) Arrive Either Now or Never**

Many of us live with the conscious or unconscious belief that if we can only work hard enough or be lucky enough to attain the perfect combination of career achievement, relational need meeting, personal maturity, financial contentment, spiritual growth, meaningful life contribution, and \_\_\_you fill in the blank\_\_\_, that we could finally "arrive" at a state of permanently elevated contentment, peace, and joy. According to this logic, if we haven't "arrived" yet, it's simply because we have a deficit in one or more of the key areas of contentment and we need to work harder to overcome it. If we achieve a goal in one of these areas and still don't feel that we have "arrived," we're missing something and need to find out what it is.

The problem is that as we get older, if we've been lucky enough to achieve at least some of our goals, then we've a growing list of things we've tried that haven't made us "arrive." We've had some good times along the way, but it's never *stuck*. It's always been temporary. If we're *very*

wealthy or *very* famous (a curse I have *not* had to face) we may start running low on options for things to try that would finally push us over the tipping point to the land of permanent “arrival.” At some point, we may begin to suspect that “arriving” just isn’t going to happen for us. And what would *that* mean? Have we missed the boat? Wasted our lives? Been failures? Been part of the “unlucky” group? None of these are very happiness-enhancing conclusions.

But what if there is no such thing as permanent “arrival”? What if, as C.S. Lewis says, in *The Problem of Pain*, life “refreshes us on the journey with some pleasant inns, but will not encourage us to mistake them for home”? If we stopped expecting goal attainment to do something permanent to us, we’d be less disappointed when that didn’t happen. But more importantly, freed from our imprisonment to expectations of what the future should do for us, we’d be more free to notice the temporary joy and contentment that come our way on a day to day basis.

If we changed our beliefs about arrival and decided either 1) that our feelings will *never* allow us to remain in an elevated state—that the *feeling* of arrival will never permanently remain—or 2) that we *have* arrived in life simply by being born and our time to be in “permanent arrival” is *now*, both of those belief changes would free us to pay closer attention to the temporary feelings of joy and contentment that occur in the present moment, without that happiness being stolen by the fact that we know we won’t always feel that way. If we don’t expect *permanent* joy before we die, we may be freer to experience *temporary* joy.

Now I’ll be the first to admit that juggling these three mind shifts is not easy. It’s a challenge to have positive goals and expectations for the future, but keep them within the range of what is possible amidst the annoyances of life so we’re not guaranteeing disappointment. It’s hard to enjoy the present without not trying to force that joy to be permanent. It takes skill to look forward to future changes while knowing they won’t change everything. But I think these ways of looking at the future fit reality. So I think they’re worth it. They open us up to experience more real, present joy and realistic hope, without the repeated crashes of imagining fantasy states of being that this plane of reality just can’t sustain.

If you or others you know repeatedly struggle with the disappointment of failed expectations, feel free to *call me at 303-931-4284 for a free 20-minute consultation or email [info@jenniferdiebel.com](mailto:info@jenniferdiebel.com)*.

\*Listen to Daniel Gilbert’s lecture online at [http://www.aifestival.org/audio-video-library.php?menu=3&title=552&action=full\\_info](http://www.aifestival.org/audio-video-library.php?menu=3&title=552&action=full_info)

Thanks for reading!

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