

Please Try This at Home

Monthly Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life

Latest Device Does Just About Everything!

Let's say that some nerds at MIT or Harvey Mudd or somewhere came out with a device called the "A-Game." You could wear on your belt or carry it in your purse. It's specifically tailored to you and it tells you, with at least 90% accuracy:

- how much sleep and rest you really need
- when to eat, what to eat, and how much to have the most energy and be optimally fit
- how active you need to be, when to push harder and when to lay off
- how much to work on which days
- how spiritually connected you are
- whether someone is taking advantage of you
- whether a person is safe to relate to
- which situations to avoid and which to get more of
- which decision would be the best for you out of several choices.

Would you want an A-Game? How much would you pay for it? Hundreds? Thousands? I mean, imagine the money, stress, and effort that it would save on diet and exercise gimmicks, on purchasing "lemon" products, dodging scary relationships, or paying therapists to figure out what's going on with us. Think of all the extra energy, attractiveness, and years of life we'd have! I think I would pay quite a bit for such a thing. Sure, I might choose to ignore it sometimes, but I think I'd want to know what it said, nonetheless.

Your A-Game: Already Purchased and Delivered

The thing is, most of us already have one of these devices, mostly or fully operational: our body. Careful attention to slight stomach pains and energy drops or stomach stretching tells us when we are hungry for what foods, how much, and when we are satisfied. A "blah" feeling somewhere between sleepy and energetic can tell us we need some more activity or endorphins. Pain that gets worse with activity and doesn't fade in a few days tells us we need to stop that type of activity until we heal. Shoulder tension, clenched teeth, or a constriction in our "gut" can tell us there is something not right about a situation. A "dropping feeling" in our core area and shoulders may tell us that a choice we are considering is not the best for us. A tingly/restful/awake feeling toward the top of the brain or near the heart can reflect how deeply we feel connected spiritually.

When we are paying attention to our body, listening to its signals, obeying whatever it indicates, and then noticing the rewards it gave us for our obedience, it can tell us some amazing things. So why don't we 1) notice what it is saying to us or 2) follow the instructions it provides? I mean, we've got this awesome tool, totally unique and tailored to us. It can accomplish a collection of things that psychics and mentors and an army of professionals hardly have a prayer of matching. So why don't we use it like we could?

Device Duller #1: Contradictory Outside Messages

I bet pressure from other people has a lot to do with it, especially early on. You've probably seen the ways infants or toddlers eat, for example. They tend to know when they are hungry and also when hunger is not a big enough deal to trump the desire to go play. But then adults say things like, "If you don't finish your plate now, you're not getting anything till breakfast" or "Eat up, there are starving kids in Whereverland."

Now, I get that there are lots of good reasons adults give these kinds of messages to kids: concerns about a balanced diet, exhaustion from fetching meals all the live-long day, wanting the little one to learn to accommodate other people's needs, etc. At the same time, the underlying message so many of us pick up is: Don't pay attention to the cues your body is giving you about hunger, the timing for eating, and what you want to eat; take your eating cues from other people, the time on the clock, the amount someone put on your plate, and the ways other people are eating. Without some training or encouragement regarding paying attention to our body's cues about hunger and satisfaction, *in addition to* learning to accommodate the needs of others, we can eventually numb out our awareness of what we need and want because we have overridden it to accommodate other people so many times.

Or what about when you meet someone and they just weird you out? Period. When you are with them, you feel tense and your gut knots up, even though you can't put your finger on what it is about them that makes you feel that way. Your body is telling you to avoid them even if your mind can't find a legitimate reason for doing so. But then other people come in with messages like, "Give everyone a chance," "Be nice and reach out," and "Everyone needs a friend." Of course I am not disagreeing with these messages! I think they are *usually* true. But there seems to be a difference between deciding you will reach out to someone even though you don't feel a natural connection with them, and overriding your body's gut message to steer clear of someone because something is *not right* about them, not just inconvenient or annoying.

I've had experience with overriding a gut feeling in order to be nice: hiring people out of pity/obligation who turned out to be a disaster, including people in intimate friend groups who destroyed the group's ability to be together, continuing to hang out with people who later turned out to be hiding dangerous and illegal habits. After getting smacked around by ignoring my gut for years, I'm starting to notice when it goes off and pay attention! There are so many people to care for and very few people really weird me out that way. Other people can care for and be friends with people with whom my gut is not okay.

Device Duller #2: Personal Fears

Maybe the other main reason we don't pay attention to our body's messages is that we are afraid of what it is telling us. The tension in our shoulders and our recent accident-proneness shouts, "Slow down! Your schedule is too much for you!" But we are afraid that if we slow down, we won't feel successful and valued, so we ignore it. The heaviness of our eyes in the afternoon, our snappiness at others, and our lack of focus says, "Forget the recommended 7-8 hour sleep recommendations, *your* system needs 8.5 hours to function well." We fear that sleeping that much would mean we would have to relinquish our view of ourselves as busy, fun, and energetic, so we keep sleeping 6 hours per night and abusing coffee (and those closest to us) to make up for it. The fact that we can't feel any sensation in our stomach—not stretched to full and not feeling flat and empty—reports that we are already satisfied and don't need more

food, but if we stop eating, we'll be bored, or have to do that yucky task, or have to feel the sadness we've been running from, so we just keep eating.

I realize that the forces that numb out our ability to notice our body's cues and respond to them are significant! Going against long-term caretaker programming, risking offending other people because we are listening to our body instead of (or at least in addition to) what they want us to do, being thought odd or unkind because we dodge a few people who freak us out, facing our fears about our self worth and value that get linked to activities that don't fit our body's needs, feeling our negative emotions instead of running from them—all of these are really difficult.

In fact, they probably wouldn't be worth tackling at all if the alternative to ignoring them weren't worse: health decline from obesity or nutritional imbalance, injured body parts, exhaustion, bad relationships, dangerous situations, spiritual atrophy, bad decisions, or inability to notice negative internal states and external circumstances while they can still be changed.

Increasing Body Message Awareness, Not Guilt

With all these negative consequences, I'll bet you thought I was going to recommend just soldiering through all the fear and shifting your whole life to be responsive to what your body is saying, huh? Well, I'm not.

I think that the "everything must change *now*" approach usually results in feelings of obligation and guilt that eventually sabotage the whole effort. But just making a habit of *noticing* what our bodies are saying, without any obligation to respond, can nurture awareness over time of how helpful our body's messages can be. Once we become grateful for what it is saying, *that* is usually the time to respond because only then can we respond out of desire and gratitude rather than obligation. And *those* are typically the changes that stick.

To start this process, see if for one week, once per day, in a quiet and daily-visited place like the bathroom or another place where you are alone, you can notice what your body is saying:

1. Starting with your toes and moving up gradually to the crown of your head, notice any part of your body that is experiencing a particular sensation: warmth, pain, tension, relaxation, constriction, discomfort, creaks or gurgles, pressure, fatigue, etc.
2. For each sensation you notice, ask yourself what circumstance or event might be related to it, and what your body might be asking you to do regarding that.

Example: The ache in my heel tells me my running injury is not healed yet and I should stretch and keep biking instead of running. The tension in my lower back tells me I've been sitting in an awkward way all day and I need to bring a back pillow to work. The constricted feeling in my stomach tells me I need to eat within the next 30-60 minutes. The tension in my shoulders tells me I'm worried about whether I will have what I need to meet tomorrow's deadline, while having to care for my sick child tonight. I may need to bite the bullet and ask my mom to help care for my child to lower my stress tonight.

3. Resisting the urge to obey your body's wishes unless you *really* want to and *really* feel that you can, simply thank your body for all the information it is giving you at that moment.

During the next week, see if you can do this same exercise 2-3 times a day instead of just once. During the week after, try up to 5 times per day. If you are at all like me, you may need to use Outlook, Google Calendar, your phone alarm, or another program to remind you to notice your body throughout the day. As your daily awareness of your body's messages increases, see if you can wait to respond to its messages until you feel grateful for them and really *want* to make a change.

And for a good read on listening to your body's cues about hunger, nutrition, and fitness, instead of dieting, I recommend [*Am I Hungry: What to Do When Diets Don't Work*](#) by May, Galper, & Carr.

If you or someone you know would like help tuning in to or responding to the body's messages, free to *call me at 303-931-4284 for a free 20-minute consultation or email info@jenniferdiebel.com*.

Thanks for reading!

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