

Please Try This at Home

Monthly Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life

Is *That* Why You're So Busy?

Have you been through some particularly difficult or stressful things in the past few months? And now, do you find yourself scheduling just about every moment of your week and then squeezing tasks or strongly-distracting entertainment into every non-scheduled moment? Ever put off going to bed until you are absolutely exhausted because you don't like where your mind goes, laying there waiting for sleep? Are you drinking a bit more than normal to "take the edge off"? When forced to wait for awhile in silence, with nothing going on, do you feel pretty nervous, like something unpleasant is going to catch up with you if you don't do something *right now*? Boy, do I know what that feels like.

From my own experiences and conversations with other people about this, it seems like this "gotta occupy every moment" way of life often occurs when our emotions are trying to give us a message about something, but we fear what will happen to us if we actually hear that message. So rather than listening to it, we try to fill all our thought time with busy productivity, numbing, or loud entertainment so we don't have to hear the message we fear. Here are some of the examples I've heard. See if you can spot the hurt that each person's emotions are reporting and the fear that's preventing them from hearing the message:

- I'm trying not to think about how badly my boyfriend's treating me because if I really stop to think about it, I'll have to break up with him. I'm just not quite ready to do that.
- I lost a child who meant the world to me. If I stop to let myself be sad, I'm afraid the grief will overwhelm me. I'll never stop crying and I'll never be functional in my life again.
- I've been wanting to connect with God by slowing down to pray or meditate, but there are quite a few things in my life I'm not proud of right now. If stop to pray, I'll have to be honest with myself and with God about those things.
- I can't get a romantic relationship to work, no matter how hard I try. If I let myself think about how disappointed I am about that, I'm afraid loneliness will just suck me up like a black hole and I will never, ever escape.
- Even though I went through school and residency to become a surgeon, I don't like the work. If I really stop to think about how much I dislike it, I'm afraid I'll have to change careers, which means I will have wasted half of my life.

The theory each of these folks are operating under is that if they only stay occupied for long enough, the painful message and whatever grief or change they fear might follow it will never catch them.

Distracting Ourselves Feels Good, So What's Wrong with *That*?

I'll readily admit that in the short term, this way of handling painful emotional messages works! The distraction pushes down the painful thoughts and the anxiety. And anything that makes anxiety go away for a bit is rewarding. But long term, this method for handling painful emotions misses several important things:

1. Having to stay occupied *produces* painful anxiety that robs us of real rest and joy. We can't relax into a joyful moment when we have to be thinking about the next thing to occupy us to make sure the feared emotional message won't catch up with us.
2. As any suspense movie director knows, the unseen enemy hiding in darkness or mystery is *always* scarier than that same actual enemy seen in broad daylight (for proof, compare *Alien* (1979) to *Alien Resurrection* (1997)). As soon as we stop, turn, and take a good, long look at our fear, we get to shed the fear of the *unknown*, even if the actual thing we are afraid of remains.
3. Just because we let ourselves know about the message our emotions are giving us does not mean we have to go forward with the painful grief or change our emotions are recommending. We can be fully aware of the emotional message and still say "no" to it if we want to.
4. Sometimes, when we take the time to face our fear about grief or change, we notice ways to make that process less painful, strategies we were not aware of when we were running from the whole topic.

Because of these reasons, refusing to slow down and let ourselves really feel whatever emotion is chasing us actually *maximizes* the overall pain we experience. So what's a better alternative? How do we *actually* minimize the pain around emotional messages that stalk us?

Minimizing Pain through Consciously Listening and Deciding

First, we need to notice our own unique strategies of running from the messages our emotions are trying to tell us. Is it long hours at work? A million coffee dates with friends? Video games until the wee hours? Daily margaritas? Getting others to need us almost every moment of the day? A combo of all of these?

Then, after noticing that we're engaging in to our favorite "occupy every thought" activity combo, we need to schedule some undistracted time away from those distracting activities to stop and listen to the message we are running from. Some people do this by writing down whatever thoughts come to mind in a journal, a blog, or an email to someone else or to themselves. Others find another person who is willing to listen for awhile, asking helpful questions but not interrupting with advice or turning the focus onto themselves. Others may do a mindless task slowly in silence to just let thoughts come up: fishing, scrubbing the bathtub, walking for miles, doodling. Still others may go to a hotel for 24 hours to rest and just sit alone, letting the feelings come up. For some people, emotions are right on the surface and an hour of non-distracted time suffices. For others, it might take a long time to let feelings come up and then figure out what message they are trying to convey.

Now, if your fear is that if you really feel what you are running from, that it will totally overwhelm you and you will never be functional again, it may be good to start with a very limited time to intentionally feel whatever comes up, maybe 15 minutes. Then, after 15 minutes, return to a strong distraction: going to a fast-paced movie, taking a very hot or cold shower, holding an ice cube for several minutes, going swimming, etc. If you know you need to grieve longer, but you just don't want it to last forever, you might schedule a period of several hours, followed by a scheduled appointment with a trusted person or a strong distraction to help get you out of that scary place. The important thing, here, is to give yourself some experiences of actually feeling whatever emotion has been pursuing you and then coming out of it over and over to increase your confidence that you can indeed be functional on the other side.

Once you've actually gotten in touch with whatever feeling has been haunting you and giving you no real rest, *then* you get to decide what to do with it. If it's grief, you could decide to pull back from some responsibilities for awhile, either now or at some date in the future, to allow yourself to feel what you need to feel intensely, with fewer interruptions for an extended period of time. Or, you could schedule brief periods to grieve gradually: two hours every Monday afternoon, 10 minutes each morning in the shower, during support group meetings, etc.

If what you are feeling is a hurt coming from an ongoing behavior or situation that continues to affect you, you could decide to leave the situation now or at a future date, look for ways to get more of your needs met while staying in the situation, or decide that the hurt is worth it right now and even though you know you are hurting, now is not the time for a change. You might set another time in a week, a month, or a year to check in again and see if you feel the same about the change.

Now, the good thing about this approach of feeling what we are fleeing from and then making a conscious decision about it is that from the point we make the decision forward, whenever we notice the feeling again, 1) it's not a surprise, with all the fear of the unknown that that involves and 2) we can remind ourselves of the decision we've made for that season of life so that we don't have to be *constantly* deciding what to do, since indecision brings a lot of pain with it as well. Does consciously feeling our pain and then deciding what to do with it for now make the pain go away totally? Usually not. But does it minimize the pain so that we can have more rest and feel less scared and functional even before the pain is totally gone? Absolutely!

If you or someone you know would like help grieving or facing other disturbing emotions, feel 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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