

Please Try This at Home

Monthly Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life

When the Past is Always Greener

Any of these sound familiar?

You're picking up socks on the floor for the umpteenth time, after you've asked repeatedly that they be put in the hamper. "Man," you're thinking, "life was sure easier when I was single. I cleaned things and they stayed clean. Scheduling things was a breeze. I just did what I wanted. Those were the days..."

Or you go for a run, notice the ache in your left hip and feel things flopping around that used to hold firm and steady. You find yourself thinking, "When I was 20, I could run all day and feel great the next day. It felt like a truck could have run over me and I could have jumped up without a scratch. Now, I can hurt myself sleeping! Oh, to be 20 again..."

Or maybe you find yourself listening to the news, thinking, "Wow, just a few decades ago, people didn't lock their doors at night. Back then, people's word counted for something. That's when the Greatest Generation lived. None of these entitled, pampered whipper-snappers moping about in those days."

Most of us get nostalgic (literally: past/home-aching) now and then, yearning for a time that was simpler, riskier, prettier, whatever-ier. Typically, it starts when we become aware of something we don't like in our present circumstances and suddenly up pops a memory of a time when whatever we don't like now was not there, or did not bug us so much.

What many of us aren't thinking about at memory pop-up times is that what we do next with our thoughts will largely determine how joyful, skillful, hopeful, and loving we are able to be in our present lives. Some ways of thinking about the past are joy boosters, making our current lives more rich and full. Some are joy suckers, draining our ability to notice or enjoy the beauty and goodness of our present experiences and relationships.

Past Apples and Present Oranges

Let's say we respond to nostalgia by going further with the "those were the days" line of thinking, letting our minds really fill in the imaginary picture of the past with the best and brightest details we can remember. After basking in the glow of that long lost goodness for awhile, we return to present thoughts and notice how dull, sad, lonely, and awful our life today feels in comparison.

Since our brains are efficient, they build more and stronger neural connections for things we think about frequently and let the connections for those things we don't think about much gradually weaken or fade away. That means that the longer we let our minds go back and forth between the good that we remember and the bad that we currently experience, the more we teach our brains to seek out and remember *only* the good in the past and compare it to *only* the bad of the present. Soon, it becomes difficult to even notice things about the present that are good or even better than the past. Plus, we forget about all the less-than-delightful things that

were true of the times we remember so fondly *now*, though it may not actually have been as great as we remember them being *then*.

This apples-to-oranges comparison is a joy stealer. It makes us miss out on the adventures and good challenges of the present and the people who are loving us well now because we simply stop noticing, responding to, and enhancing what's good about now.

The cure to this is to compare apples to apples. If we are fleshing out the good details of the past, we need to do the same for the present by looking for things we are currently grateful for. We need to think not only about the socks all over the floor, but the kids and spouse we love who left them there and all the many, many things we love about them. We need to remember not only the aching hip of age 40, but also the increased freedom and perspective that's come from the maturity gained since age 20.

But that's not quite enough. We need to go on to compare oranges to oranges by noticing the negative of the past along with that of the present. We need to recall that during the same period of time when people didn't lock their doors and may have had a strong sense of duty and work ethic, chores took five times as long and people's ability to navigate careers, gender roles, race, and relationships in accordance with their personalities and skills was much more limited by social and technological constraints.

We can guard and enhance our joy in the present by effortfully training our minds to remember *both* the negative and the positive in *both* the past and the present.

Get Your Needs Met Now!

Nostalgia's second big temptation is to let the past become a place that we go to hide from the pain of the present, rather than allowing that pain to motivate us to change the present.

Consider a dad with a teenage daughter trying on her growing independence accompanied by hormone-induced mood swings. Faced with these difficulties, dad might have thoughts about the times when his daughter would seek him out and follow him around like he was her hero. The temptation here would be to spend lots of time with old photos and wonky crafts she brought home for him, talking with her or other people about how fun it was when she was little. As dad focuses on the past to escape the pain of the present, his daughter will probably feel like growing up is not okay with him because he clearly prefers that she remain a child. Majoring in the past in this way makes dad's relationship with his daughter in the present even worse, since she perceives that he doesn't like her as she is.

Or consider a woman who could get any guy she wanted in college and was known for getting away with some spectacular pranks and brushes with the law. Now at 29, she's struggling to really engage with any particular career or lasting relationship. Feeling left behind by her friends, who are shifting their focus from partying to careers, marriage, and parenthood, her temptation may be to hang out with younger and younger folks, telling stories about her college days over and over to try to recapture that time. Meanwhile, she's missing out on the different kinds of adventures that later stages of life can offer. Trying to relive the past is stalling her present and future.

To dodge this tendency to escape into the past and miss the present, we need to ask ourselves three questions:

What *exactly* is it that we miss about the past? If we're the nostalgic dad, was it feeling like a hero we miss? Feeling more in control? Not feeling overwhelmed? Being with a child that age? Does the college risk taker miss the rush of almost being caught at something? Or feeling special because she felt wanted? Feeling unique in comparison to others? Depending on what the answer is to our particular brand of nostalgia, the next question would be...

What in the present could give us that particular feeling or experience? The present longing for something the past contains could be a very legitimate message about something that we need today. This question helps us identify how we could meet that need *now*. So if the dad figures out he wants to feel less overwhelmed, he might be able to read a book, take a class, or go to a parenting group to figure out some skills for connecting with teenagers so his daughter is less of a mystery to him. If he learns that he loves being with kids of a certain age, he might volunteer for an after school or faith program that would let him use his skills with that age group. If the college risk taker realizes she misses feeling unique, she might explore some new fashion trends or an atypical hobby that would throw her friends for a loop. If she realizes she wants to feel a rush, she might take up an adrenaline-producing sport or a career that lets her help with emergency situations. After figuring out ways in which the present could meet more of our longings, we'd also need to ask...

What fear blocks us from pursuing things that would meet our needs in the present?

Let's do ourselves a favor and not pretend that change is easy. If it were easy to get our needs met in the present, we would not be tempted to escape into the past to feel better rather than fixing the present. Usually, when something is difficult, it's because it taps into a fear that our unconscious mind may be lugging around, though we may not have taken the time to let our conscious mind really understand what that fear is. When we do take the time to really think about the fear that keeps us from running an after school program for fourth graders or pursuing a career in ER nursing, often, at least a part of our mind can come to realize that what we fear is not fatal.

For example, if the dad becomes fully aware that he's nervous that the fourth graders won't like him because he wasn't popular in grade school, he can go, "Oh yeah, I'm an adult now. If they don't like me, I can get a class helper, or quit, or try another group of fourth graders. I think I can live through that!" The fully-aware college risk-taker can think, "I'm nervous that if I settle into a career, I will be trapped in the same-old-same-old and will have to give up being unique. But ER nursing would give me some nice chunks of time to pursue some unique adventures. I guess careers aren't the only way to be unique."

By allowing the past to provide us with information about what our current needs are, we can equip ourselves to better overcome our present fears and ultimately infuse the present with more of what we loved about the past.

If you or someone you know would like help with bringing past joys into the present, feel free to *call me at 303-931-4284 for a free 20-minute consultation or email info@jenniferdiebel.com.*

Thanks for reading!

Jennifer Diebel, MA, LPC
Licensed Professional Counselor

303-931-4284
info@jenniferdiebel.com

www.jenniferdiebel.com

5370 Manhattan Circle, Suite 203
Boulder, CO 80303

Jennifer Diebel, MA, LPC is a Licensed Professional Counselor who works with adolescents, adults, couples, and families in her private practice in Boulder, Colorado. For more information about her areas of expertise, background, and methods, as well as additional helpful resources and past newsletters, go to www.jenniferdiebel.com.

Please Try This at Home is a monthly newsletter containing tips for increasing the joy in your life, as well as information about counseling discounts and helpful local seminars and resources. To request a future newsletter topic, include a friend on the subscription list, ask a question, or offer feedback, email Jennifer at info@jenniferdiebel.com.