

THE HAPPINESS CURE

31 Days to a Happier Life

by

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SAMPLE TRANSLATION

Contents

Introduction

1. Happiness is close at hand
2. Happiness can be learned
3. Future navigation
4. Planting happiness
5. The happiness landscape is large
6. Turning daily happiness thieves into happiness sources
7. Matchmaking
8. Five ways to wellbeing
9. Connect
10. Stay active
11. Be attentive
12. Keep learning
13. Give, contribute
14. Meaning
15. Go for bronze
16. Gratitude
17. Pleasure
18. Acceptance
19. Weak ties
20. Nature
21. Balance
22. Flow
23. *Hygge* and *kos*
24. The quest for variation
25. Leaf through your mental happiness album
26. Play and create memories
27. Perspective
28. Happiness is contagious
29. Values
30. Aesthetic experiences

31. Coherence and humility
32. References

Introduction

Happiness is a kind of biochemistry and neurophysiology that feels magical. Magically good. A positive, often deep and overwhelming sensation that most of us seek out, dream of and want to last. And happiness *can* endure, like a sustained, emotional tone echoing through long stretches of our life. But most often, it arrives in glimpses, at irregular intervals and in doses that feel far too small.

Where does it come from and what awakens it? That varies – for you and me, over time, and over the course of one’s life. Some of us find more joy in music and art than others. Some find joy most frequently in the company of others, in the chat and cosiness of the dinner table, in shared experiences. For others again, joy comes from making Christmas cookies or repairing a car, from meditation or solitary mountain hikes. And we may find that our sources of happiness change over the course of our lives – in play as a child, in a comfy armchair reading a book in older age. The sensation of happiness also varies. It may be an experience of *feeling good* or *functioning well*. It may be experienced as a deep sense of belonging, joy and satisfaction, but also as excited interest, intense enthusiasm and engagement – like being completely caught up in an all-absorbing task or activity. The hallmark of a good life tends to be having a whole steady stream of such experiences. It doesn’t always happen this way. Life consists of both light and lead-heavy days. Conflicts and ruptures arise, we become ill and lose people we care about. Perhaps what an ordinary life most resembles is a slightly rugged terrain. For some it is more hilly; for some, the valleys will be longer and deeper, while others will find that the high points arrive in a constant, reliable stream. Happiness, joy and positive experiences help us through the terrain, no matter how inhospitable it may be.

My first encounter with happiness research happened more or less by chance. After studying psychology, I spent some years working in a temporary post as a clinical neuropsychologist at Oslo University Hospital. When that work eventually ended, I had no specific demands for my next job other than wanting to work on something that would allow me to pursue what piqued my curiosity, to learn and above all to do research. And then a doctoral project came up at the Norwegian Institute of Public Health (NIPH) and the topic was happiness. Seventeen years later, I am still at the NIPH, still working on the same topic. Along the way, this absorbing journey has taken me from behaviour genetics and twin studies to public health measures and policy – always with some variant or another of happiness as the common theme. It has also been a journey through time, in which happiness and quality-of-life research has gone from being a niche field to a major area of focus for policy and the health system. Good quality of life promotes public health as well as positive and sustainable social development, and this, fortunately, has been widely acknowledged over the past decade. Because quality of life is not just an individual practice: democracy, opportunities to participate and make an impact and the even distribution of resources create happiness for both individuals and society as a whole.

I rarely use the term happiness myself, at least not in professional contexts. On the other hand, everyday joy and quality of life are concepts I often use. *Everyday joy* or everyday happiness, because the words remind us that joy and happiness are often to be found in ordinary everyday activities, which are close at hand, easily accessible. And *quality of life* because this term underlines the fact that a good life involves many different types of positive experiences, both internal emotional responses and external circumstances.

My interest in the field of happiness probably stems most of all from my desire to contribute to a better understanding of what strengthens us *in* and *for* life: what is it that

makes us take on challenges and seize opportunities, overcome difficulties, cope with burdens and rise again after crises and defeat? What best equips us – both as individuals and societies – for a good journey through life and time? How can we best facilitate good lives? Our positive experiences, whether we call them happiness or everyday joys, quality of life or well-being, are hopes and values most of us share. What's more, they contribute to better health, better friendships and longer lives. They enable us to build resources – mental, social and physical. They make us more creative, spark initiative and drive, and prompt us to open ourselves up to other people and see new opportunities. Positive feelings also seem to eliminate the negative health impact of sadness, anxiety and worry, and act as an antidote to stress. In other words, they have important functions that offer major benefits to every single one of us. Research also shows that positivity is contagious. Our own happiness can therefore contribute to the happiness of other people, as well as to better friendships and communities, to more secure families and better schools and workplaces. Broadly speaking, if more people were feeling better, we would probably all be feeling better.

So how can we feel better? There is no single recipe for happiness but a lot of research has been done in the field and there are actually some answers – quite specific things people can do to become happier. Both single studies and meta-studies indicate that happiness exercises work as well or even better than antidepressants. The aim of *The Happiness Cure* is to share some of these exercises with you; exercises that can be seen as practical measures for creating more joy, mastery and meaning in everyday life. Feel free to use the book as a knowledge-based toolkit, a catalogue of ideas you can flip through when happiness feels far away or you're in need of a boost. It is structured as a four-week cure with a programme for every day. The daily programmes contain stories and knowledge for

reflection and consideration, as well as concrete tips for exercises and activities that can generate good feelings. Most sources of happiness are personal, what we call subjective, so the cure must suit your own qualities, needs, desires, interests, talents and circumstances. You can see it as a challenge, an opportunity to become better acquainted with yourself by trying something new or feeling your way towards what really gives *you* joy. However, variation is a key word here, because when we do things habitually, the joy they yield diminishes over time. In happiness research, this is called ‘hedonic adaptation’: what we think will make us happier forever rarely seems to do so.

I hope this book will give you a broader view of happiness, help you stretch out the entire canvas and discover that happiness is diverse, ranging from everyday glimmers of joy to complex experiences of meaning and connection. That opens up new paths to a good life.

[original page 49–55]

6

Turning daily happiness thieves into happiness sources

Is there something you wish you’d done ages ago? Something left undone that has turned into a mental weed, niggling away at the back of your mind? One of the most common happiness thieves is all those tasks we haven’t managed to complete – things we’ve put off until tomorrow, until motivation blossoms and we’re bubbling with energy, or which we hope will vanish if we look elsewhere. The brilliant thing about these happiness thieves is that they can easily be transformed into happiness sources, not by sticking your head in the

sand but by carrying them through, expediting them and reaping the joy when you finally complete them. So, today's topic is the transformation of such happiness thieves!

I have a whole bunch of them. The overflowing laundry basket, the mountain of clothes that should have been folded or ironed, and the flowerbed full of weeds. I have drawers whose contents have gradually become an eclectic mixture of trash and treasures. Bills and body are both in need of attention, there are articles to be read, bushy eyebrows to be plucked and nails to be polished. What's more, I haven't completed that raw food week I was so keen on, visited the new station café at Spikkestad or taken a sunset dip. Nor have I enrolled on that painting course I'd been planning to do or written the promised book. And then there's that glass bowl I should have glued back together, the wall that should have had a fresh lick of paint and the telephone call I should have made – to switch insurance plans, thank somebody for an invitation or arrange a visit from the chimney sweep. On top of that the lawn has become a carpet of moss, there are crumbs in the cutlery drawer and the car looks as if it has been on a safari across a newly ploughed field. Faced with this situation, the temptation is to put on my hiking boots and simply abandon the crime scene – or make a cup of coffee, curl up on the sofa and surf the net aimlessly. For a long time.

This urge to flee from our countless unfinished tasks and the steady stream of constant incoming duties will be familiar to most. But these tasks, small and large alike, can also be seen as a whole warehouse of opportunities for happiness. Tasks we have completed are a source of extra joy – and what we fail to do often tires us out more than what we actually *do* get done. Things we have promised ourselves or others have an annoying tendency to pop up in our consciousness, especially at times when it is especially pointless for them to do so. What good does it do to remember you need to buy super glue or lime for the lawn while you are having sex or in the middle of a demanding meeting at

work? And often the thoughts aren't just pointless either, but downright unpleasant and persistent – like a swarm of horseflies.

The Zeigarnik effect is a psychological phenomenon related to our tendency to remember what we have started but not finished. Put simply, our brain tends to continue working on a task until it is finished, as if it has an innate need to complete everything it has started, sometimes without us being aware of it. Have you ever had the experience of working on a problem so tough, or an issue so tricky, that you eventually just give up and go to bed – only to wake up the next morning knowing precisely what you need to do? Or you go out and weed a flowerbed, take a wander through the park or have a shower and – hey presto! – there's the solution! Yet the tasks we actually complete vanish, like the details of a curriculum once the exam has been taken. The Zeigarnik effect is named after the Lithuanian-Soviet psychologist Bluma Zeigarnik (1901-88) and is about precisely that. Bluma was one of the very first Soviet women to get a university education and ended up becoming a successful scientist. In the 1920s, she studied in Berlin, under the renowned gestalt psychologist Kurt Lewin among others. The starting point for the Zeigarnik effect is said to have been a trip Bluma made to a restaurant with Kurt Lewin and some colleagues. The scientists noticed that the waiter serving them had a truly astonishing memory. Even without taking notes, he remembered everything they ordered. But what most fascinated them was that as soon as the food had been served and the bill settled, the orders appeared to be wiped from his memory. According to one version of the story, a member of Bluma's party returned to the restaurant to fetch something they had forgotten. Surprisingly enough, the waiter barely recalled that they had been there shortly before. When he was asked how he could forget so quickly, he replied that he only remembered the orders and guests until they had paid. This experience led to a series of discussions in the research

group: How was it possible that a man who clearly had a fantastic memory one moment could barely remember a thing the next?

Bluma started to research the phenomenon in her laboratory, embarking on a series of experiments in which she used her students as subjects. They were set relatively simple brain teasers, like jigsaw puzzles and sums. Sometimes she would interrupt them partway through before they had finished the task and other times they were left to work uninterrupted until the task was complete. The results were striking: the students remembered up to 90 per cent more from the tasks they hadn't been allowed to complete.

Why does it work like this? Probably because our brain is constructed in such a way that it keeps ongoing tasks active in the memory or the unconscious to ensure that we eventually complete them, resolve them or find an answer to them. Many people also think that incomplete tasks create a kind of cognitive tension that is best described as stress or a mental itch. Perhaps you've noticed that episodes of TV series often end at the point where the tension is at its height, or that a thriller typically switches scene just as the novel's plot is at its most intense. Films, computer games, literature and advertising often consciously exploit the Zeigarnik effect through the use of cliff-hangers to maintain people's curiosity and increase the tension. When there is a new twist in a story or a TV series abruptly stops at the most exciting moment, readers are more likely to continue reading and viewers to tune in for the rest of the series because they just *have* to know what happens next, *have* to find out how it all ends. And ultimately they are relieved, soothed and satisfied when the mystery is explained or the continuation provides the answer they were puzzling over.

That's the way it is with the daily happiness thieves too: they create tension and often develop into a mental itch, yet it is surprisingly easy to transform them into sources of happiness. The laundry basket can be emptied and its contents transformed into piles of

sweetly scented, freshly ironed clothes – and a sense of victory and achievement. Taking a neatly ironed garment out of my wardrobe in the morning is definitely one of my everyday joys. It is a daily treasure that instantly makes it slightly easier to buckle down to the day ahead. Flowerbeds can be weeded, cars washed – and the result enjoyed. Completing a task that has been hanging over us for a long time is nothing short of uplifting! A trip to the store will get you the glue you need to restore that glass bowl to its former glory and perhaps you can repair something else while you're at it. And that evening dip can be taken: get out your bike or trainers and head off – maybe you'll catch the sunset too! It doesn't matter where you start, the important thing is to start somewhere. Find a task that has been left undone for a while and is hanging over you. But choose one that is doable – writing a book or achieving world peace will quickly become overwhelming and unrealistic, at least if attempted on one perfectly ordinary day. Mopping the floor or washing the car will do just fine, or making that call to somebody you promised to phone, as long as it's something you want to get done. Then you can surf the news sites or go for a run afterwards instead.

If you're not that keen on getting started with the job, it's often best to just begin before you have time to hesitate too long. Mel Robbins, the author and public speaker, has come up with a five-second rule: as soon as you notice yourself hesitating over a task you know you ought to do, count down from five and get started! According to Robbins, there is only a tiny window of time between the moment you feel an instinct to act and the moment when your thoughts kill it. The window is just five seconds but is available to all. That's why Robbins swears by counting backwards from 5 to 1: 5-4-3-2-1. The countdown helps you focus on your goal and distracts you from competing thoughts and desires. I have tried this with good results – marching down to the gym for a spinning class. I pretty much surprised myself: before I knew it, I found myself sitting on a training bike with a slightly confused

feeling of delight, as if I'd won the lottery but couldn't entirely grasp it. I'll certainly try that again!

But usually I write lists – every day, in fact. In part, this is to get an overview of the jungle of unfinished tasks but most of all I do it because it's so marvellous to cross out and check off the tasks that have been carried out, completed and achieved. I certainly don't always manage to cross out all the items on my to-do list but every single one that I do finish gives me a tiny happiness boost. A long journey starts with a single step. Part of the point must be to take pleasure in the things we get done and come to terms with the idea that what we didn't manage today can become a source of happiness some other day. If you are too much of a perfectionist the Zeigarnik effect is your nemesis, so it is important to focus on what you actually manage to do and how satisfying it is to achieve ordinary everyday goals. Find something you should have done and just get started: 5-4-3-2-1!

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