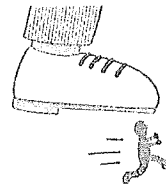


way you want. Simply find the people who most represent what you would like to become and spend as much time with them as you can without trespassing, kidnapping, or stalking. Their good habits and good energy will rub off on you.



Chapter Thirty

Happiness

The only reasonable goal in life is maximizing your total lifetime experience of something called happiness. That might sound selfish, but it's not. Only a sociopath or a hermit can find happiness through extreme selfishness. A normal person needs to treat others well in order to enjoy life. For the sake of argument, let's assume you're normal(ish).



If you want to boost your happiness, it helps to understand what happiness is and how it works. You might think the science of happiness is fairly obvious, but it's not. Pursuing happiness without understanding the mechanisms behind it is like planting a garden without knowing the basics of fertilization, pest control, watering, and frost. It's easy to pop a seed in the ground, but it takes a deeper understanding of the gardening arts to grow something wonderful. Happiness,



like gardening, only *seems* simple. If you don't believe me, take a look at the tomato plant in my garden. I gave it water and sunlight. What more could it need?

Let's start by defining happiness and agreeing on what causes it. My definition of happiness is that it's a feeling you get when your body chemistry is producing pleasant sensations in your mind. That definition is compatible with the science of happiness.¹

It's tempting to imagine happiness as a state of mind caused by whatever is happening in your life. By that way of thinking, we're largely victims of the cold, cold world that sometimes rewards our good work and sometimes punishes us for no reason. That's a helpless worldview and it can blind you to a simple system for being happier.

Science has done a good job in recent years of demonstrating that happiness isn't as dependent on your circumstances as you might think. For example, amputees often return to whatever level of happiness they enjoyed before losing a limb.² And you know from your own experience that some people seem to be happy no matter what is going on in their lives, while others can't find happiness no matter how many things are going right. We're all born with a limited range of happiness, and the circumstances of life can only jiggle us around within the range.

The good news is that anyone who has experienced happiness probably has the capacity to spend more time at the top of his or her personal range and less time near the bottom. In my case, my baseline is on the fence between happy and unhappy, so staying near the top

of my narrow range makes all the difference. To do that I treat myself like the moist robot I am and manipulate my body chemistry as needed. I also try to improve my situation and circumstances wherever I can, but I see that as 20 percent of the solution. The big part—the 80 percent of happiness—is nothing but a chemistry experiment. And it's hugely helpful to think of it that way. You can't always quickly fix whatever is wrong in your environment, and you can't prevent negative thoughts from drifting into your head. But you can easily control your body chemistry through lifestyle, and that in turn will cause your thoughts to turn positive, while making the bumps in your path feel *less important*.

Let's get to the mechanics of manipulating your body chemistry. Obviously your doctor can give you a pill to change your mood. Antidepressants are big business. And you can change your chemistry by drinking alcohol or doing recreational drugs. The problem with each of those methods is that it comes with risks and side effects you'd rather avoid. I advocate a more natural approach.

For starters, the single biggest trick for manipulating your happiness chemistry is being able to do what you want, *when* you want. I'm contrasting that with the more common situation, in which you might be able to do all the things you want, but you can't often do them *when* you want.

For example, you might enjoy eating a delicious meal. But if the only time you were allowed to eat delicious food was right after you'd already filled your stomach with junk food, the delicious meal would not make you happy. A mediocre meal when you're starving will contribute more to your happiness than an extraordinary meal when you're not hungry. The timing of things can be more important than the intrinsic value of the things.

Napping is another perfect example of the importance of timing. A good nap can be a wonderful thing, but if the only available time to nap is an hour before bedtime, a nap would do you little good. You need to control the order and timing of things to be happy. It's important to look at happiness in terms of timing because timing is easier to control than resources. It's hard to become rich enough to buy your own private island but, relatively speaking, it's easier to find a job with flexible hours. A person with a flexible schedule and average resources will be happier than a rich person who has everything ex-

cept a flexible schedule. Step one in your search for happiness is to continually work toward having control of your schedule.

Parents understand what I'm talking about. Most parents love their kids and are glad they had them. At the same time, kids remove almost all of the flexibility in your schedule, especially if you're the stay-at-home parent. It's no wonder that parents who seem to have everything—nice house, great kids, and good friends—still find themselves in misery during the years their kids are young. Those parents might have all the “stuff” they could ask for but no flexibility to enjoy what they want when they want.

As I write this chapter, I'm sitting in a comfortable chair with my trusty dog, Snickers, while enjoying a warm cup of coffee. I just came from a good workout, so I'm feeling relaxed and in the mood to write. By any definition, what I'm doing is work, but because I can control the timing of it on this particular day, it doesn't feel like work. I've transformed work into pleasure simply by having control over *when* I do it.

In your personal life and your career, consider schedule flexibility when making any big decision. Realistically, sometimes you need to suck it up and work long hours, watch the kids, and do your duty. Just remember to keep your eye out for ways to maximize your schedule freedom in the long term. It's something you want to work toward. You won't all become work-at-home cartoonists, but you can certainly find a boss who values your productivity over your attendance.

That brings me to the next important mechanism for happiness. Happiness has more to do with where you're heading than where you are. A person who is worth two billion dollars will feel sad if he suddenly loses one billion because he's moving in the wrong direction, even if the change has no impact on his ability to buy what he wants. But a street person will celebrate discovering a new Dumpster behind an upscale restaurant because it means good eating ahead. We tend to feel happy when things are moving in the right direction and unhappy when things are trending bad.

The directional nature of happiness is one reason it's a good idea to have a sport or hobby that leaves you plenty of room to improve every year. Tennis and golf are two perfect examples. With either sport, an average player can continue improving well past the age of sixty. Slow and steady improvement at anything makes you feel that

you are on the right track. The feeling of progress stimulates your body to create the chemicals that make you feel happy.

When you choose a career, consider whether it will lead to a lifetime of ever-improved performance, a plateau, or a steady decline in your skills. As a cartoonist, my drawing skills have slowly improved over most of my career, and that is a source of happiness for me. If you are lucky enough to have career options, and only one of them affords a path of continual improvement, choose that one, all else being equal.

The next element of happiness you need to master is imagination. I wrote about this in the context of raising your energy, which is closely related to happiness, but it bears repeating in this chapter. Pessimism is often a failure of imagination. If you can imagine the future being brighter, it lifts your energy and gooses the chemistry in your body that produces a sensation of happiness. If you can't even *imagine* an improved future, you won't be happy no matter how well your life is going right now.

I find it useful to daydream that the future will be better than today, by far. I like to imagine a future that is spectacular and breathtaking. The daydreams need not be accurate in terms of predicting the future. Simply imagining a better future hacks your brain chemistry and provides you with the sensation of happiness today. Being happy raises your energy level and makes it easier to pursue the steps toward real-world happiness. This is another case in which your imagination can influence the real world. Don't let reality control your imagination. Let your imagination be the user interface to steer your reality.

The next important thing to remember about happiness is that it's not a mystery of the mind and it's not magic. Happiness is the natural state for most people whenever they feel healthy, have flexible schedules, and expect the future to be good.

As I write this next paragraph, a few days have passed, and now I'm sitting at a table in my health club. I exercised, I had my healthy reward snack, and now I'm thoroughly happy, even though I'm working at rewriting and tweaking this chapter. Taking care of my body always influences my happiness more than whatever task I'm involved in. That's an important point because normally when you feel unhappy, you blame your mood on whatever your environment is serving up to you. It's easy to blame your environment because you know you can inter-

pret almost anything as bad news or potential bad news. Just add pessimism and cynicism to any observation and you can manufacture bad news out of thin air. If you know anyone who routinely interprets good news as bad, you know how easily it can be done. I'm here to tell you that the primary culprit in your bad moods is a deficit in one of the big five: flexible schedule, imagination, sleep, diet, and exercise.

I've explained to a number of people my observations about how exercise, diet, and sleep influence mood. The usual reaction is a blank expression followed by a change of topic. No one wants to believe that the formula for happiness is as simple as daydreaming, controlling your schedule, napping, eating right, and being active every day. You'd feel like an idiot for suffering so many unhappy days while not knowing the cure was so accessible. I know from experience that you might accept the idea that daily lifestyle choices are perhaps a small part of what causes your bad moods. But you probably think the majority of your crabbiness is caused by the idiots and sociopaths in your life plus your inexplicable bad luck on any given day. Based on a lifetime of observation, my best estimate is that 80 percent of your mood is based on how your body feels and only 20 percent is based on your genes and your circumstances, particularly your health.

Ask yourself this question: At times when you've exercised earlier in the day, eaten well, hydrated, and had enough sleep, what percentage of those times have you found yourself in a good mood? I'll bet you don't know the answer to that question because it's not the sort of thing anyone pays attention to. But now that I've put the idea in your head, you'll automatically find yourself noticing the link between daily body maintenance and your not-so-mysterious happiness. I predict you'll observe that your good moods are highly correlated with exercise, diet, and sleep.



Exercise has two very different benefits that are hard to untangle. The exercise itself releases natural pain-relieving substances, endorphins,³ and that gives you a direct feeling of well-being. But exercise is also a mental escape from whatever was stressing you before you laced your athletic shoes. That's why I recommend forms of exercises that occupy your mind at the same time as your muscles.

Exercise also helps you sleep better, so that's a double benefit.⁴ Of the big five factors in happiness—flexible schedule, imagination, diet, exercise, and sleep—my pick for the most important is exercise. If exercise sounds like a lot of work, wait for my chapter on the easiest way to become active.

If the list of five elements for happiness seems incomplete, that's intentional. I know you might also want sex, a soul mate, fame, recognition, a feeling of importance, career success, and lots more. My contention is that your five-pronged pursuit of happiness will act as a magnet for the other components of happiness you need. When you're fit, happy, and full of energy, people are far more likely to have sex with you, be your friend, and hire you, sometimes all in the same day.

If you're chubby, tired, horny, and unhappy, then your best long-term solution probably isn't Match.com. I'm a proponent of online dating services because the evidence shows they work. But a smarter approach is to take care of yourself first and use that success as leverage to get everything else you need.

I'll cap this discussion by telling you the story of how I felt when my cartooning career reached its high point. It was the late nineties and I had just deposited the biggest check of my life, thanks largely to a multibook publishing deal. I had the precise job I had wanted since childhood. I was officially rich. I was as famous as I wanted to be. And I was suddenly and profoundly sad. What the hell was going on?

After some self-reflection I realized that I was feeling adrift. I no longer had a primary purpose in life because I'd already achieved it. It was an eerie feeling, unreal and unsettling. I had no kids at the time, so I had no reason to achieve anything more. I'd dipped well below my baseline happiness and I wasn't rebounding.

The way I climbed out of my funk was by realizing that my newly acquired resources could help me change the world in some small but positive ways. That was the motivation for creating the Dilberito, which I hoped would make nutrition convenient and perhaps contribute to a trend. In the long run, the Dilberito didn't work out. But it

was 100 percent successful in giving me a meaningful purpose, which allowed my optimism and energy to return.

Unhappiness that is caused by too much success is a high-class problem. That's the sort of unhappiness people work all of their lives to get. If you find yourself there, and I hope you do, you'll find your attention naturally turning outward. You'll seek happiness through service to others. I promise it will feel wonderful.

Routine

Barry Schwartz, author of *The Paradox of Choice*, tells us that people become unhappy if they have too many options in life. The problem with options is that choosing any path can leave you plagued with self-doubt. You quite rationally think that one of the paths not chosen might have worked out better. That can eat at you.

Choosing among attractive alternatives can also be exhausting. You want to feel as if you researched and considered all of your options. That's why I find great comfort in routine. If you ask me today where I will be at 6:20 A.M. on a Saturday morning in the year 2017, I'll tell you I will be at my desk finishing the artwork on some comics I drew earlier in the week. That's what I was doing last Saturday at that time and what I plan to do this Saturday as well. I can't recall the last time I woke up and looked at my options for what to do first. It's always the same, at least for the first few hours of my day.

Likewise, I always have a banana at about 6:05 A.M., my first sip of coffee at about 6:10 A.M., and a protein bar to keep me from getting hungry again until late afternoon. I never waste a brain cell in the morning trying to figure out what to do when. Compare that with some people you know who spend two hours planning and deciding for every task that takes one hour to complete. I'm happier than those people.

Recapping the happiness formula:

Eat right.

Exercise.

Get enough sleep.

Imagine an incredible future (even if you don't believe it).

Work toward a flexible schedule.

Do things you can steadily improve at.
Help others (if you've already helped yourself).
Reduce daily decisions to routine.

If you do those eight things, the rest of what you need to stimulate the chemistry of happiness in your brain will be a lot easier to find. In fact, the other components of happiness that you seek—such as career opportunities, love, and friends—might find their way to you if you make yourself an attractive target.