

Becoming Happier

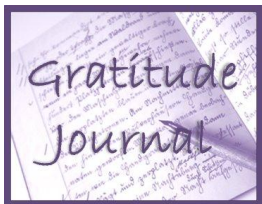
By Gwen Kesten, Ph.D., Solutions EAP Coordinator-Middlesex Hospital

This etips summary will focus on the work of Tal Ben-Shahar, a psychologist and one of the most popular lecturers ever at Harvard University. His work has been featured on CNN, CBS, in the *New York Times* and *Boston Globe* and now in the monthly TIPS from SOLUTIONS EAP. Ben-Shahar's research is in the field of "positive psychology". He teaches about becoming *happier* which he describes as 'an unlimited resource and a lifelong pursuit'.

The first thing to do to become happier, paradoxically, is to accept painful emotions as a part of being alive, says Ben-Shahar. He explains that by fully experiencing the range of human emotions including anxiety, disappointment and envy, we more fully feel emotions such as excitement, pride and joy. Ideally one can aspire to find balance in the level of focus on positive vs. negative emotions and a balance in emphasis on past, present and future. Ben-Shahar describes 3 prototypes with unbalanced focus on either past, present or future, all of which interfere with more comprehensive happiness. The "Rat Racer" focuses all efforts toward the future without enjoying what is happening in the present is often disappointed when even goals that he has worked hard to achieve don't lead to the level of lasting satisfaction he had anticipated.

The person who is chained only to the past may believe that nothing he can do will change his fate so he comes to develop a helpless approach to life. The hedonistic view in which all energy goes toward seeking pleasure and avoiding pain is completely present oriented. This view has no regard for longer term goals and the satisfaction that they may bring.

Optimally the person who finds balance in devoting some energy to remembering and learning from the past, some to mindfully enjoying the present and some to incorporating a sense of future purpose, is most fully able to experience happiness.

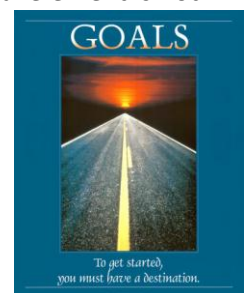


Once we allow ourselves to experience our full range of emotions and have worked toward a balanced focus on past, present and future, what else can we concretely do to become happier? Ben-Shahar defines happiness as "the overall experience of pleasure *and* meaning."

One seemingly obvious way to increase pleasure is to participate in more pleasurable activities. A more potent way to enhance pleasure is to *appreciate* the things we have and are already experiencing. We often tend to appreciate things most when they are taken away. Ben-Shahar encourages *cultivating gratitude* through simple rituals such as setting aside a particular time

each day or week to take note of things in our lives for which we are grateful. Research has shown that by devoting a few minutes to regularly recognize those things for which we are grateful we can become more optimistic, more successful, more benevolent toward others, and indeed happier.

Setting **goals**, big or small, is the most effective way to optimize a sense of **meaning**. Here, the critical element is not in attaining the goals but in setting and then working toward them. All goals are not created equal, however. For example, for those whose primary goal is to accrue wealth it's interesting to note that there is little research support for a connection between wealth and happiness except in cases where a person's basic needs are not met. So a primary goal of achieving wealth is unlikely to lead to happiness. Goals that have been most strongly linked with happiness involve personal growth, interpersonal connection and contribution rather than money, beauty, or popularity. Certainly, financial assets can be utilized for personal growth or to contribute to community. When these are the overriding goals, wealth becomes a means to a broader end, and happiness is more likely to be an outcome.



Moreover, there is a synergy between pleasure and meaning. When we experience a sense of purpose in activities, pleasure is intensified. When we feel pleasure in an experience, it becomes more meaningful. Hence, the whole (happiness) is greater than the sum of the parts.



Most of us spend a substantial portion of our time in the workplace. We devote significant emotional, intellectual, and physical energy to our jobs. Unfortunately, in the United States only about 50% of employees report that they are satisfied with their work.

Consistent with what we've addressed in TIPS segments thus far a satisfying work experience is usually one in which we find pleasure and meaning and one that we feel utilizes our strengths. It can be useful to inventory the kinds of things that you personally enjoy and find meaningful to see where they overlap. Next ask yourself the following questions.

- *What are my strengths?*
- *What tasks / functions can I perform in my workplace? Which ones take advantage of my strengths, while providing pleasure and meaning?*
- *How can I highlight these?*
- *Can I focus more time on these types of tasks?*
- *Can I approach certain other work functions with extra attention to these factors?*
- *In which specific work situations have I felt fulfilled? What about those situations can I recreate?*

Answering these questions can help you take more control over the way you do your work and bring enhanced job satisfaction. Understand that the answers to these questions will likely change over time, so conducting this inventory is not a "one-shot deal," but rather a process that should be an ongoing activity. The important thing is to keep asking the questions and to think about your answers. They may lead you to try new approaches. Some will be extremely gratifying.

Some will lead to dead ends. Remember, dead ends provide valuable information that can help you discover more fruitful paths. Ben-Shahar relates a story in which an interviewer speaks to Thomas Edison as Edison is working on one of his inventions. The interviewer exclaimed, "Edison, you have failed a thousand times; give it up." Edison responded, "I haven't failed a thousand times; I've succeeded a thousand times. I've succeeded in showing what doesn't work...I failed my way to success."

Happiness in Relationships:

When research was conducted comparing 'very happy people' with those who were less happy, one external variable distinguished the two groups from each other. This key difference was ***the presence (or absence) of rich and satisfying social relationships***. Relationships can refer to interactions with coworkers, with friends and /or with a romantic partner. Each type of relationship provides potential for meaningful connection. Connection, however, is not automatic, regardless of how compatible the members of the relationship may be. Deep connections must be cultivated. They grow over time and shared experiences. They include ups and downs, conflicts, and the working through of conflicts, and joy. One common illusion is that healthy relationships have minimal conflict. In fact, too little conflict can be a sign of indifference in a relationship. For intimacy to develop, you must work to truly get to know the other person with all the flaws and imperfections that are part of him or her. As well, you must work to allow / invite the other person to fully know you with all your flaws and imperfections. At times this can feel vulnerable. It is, however, the cornerstone of authentic intimacy. This sentiment is expressed in the poem below by Roy Croft.



incorporate happiness boosters into your days. They fuel you as you pursue long term goals.

Terminally ill individuals often acquire a unique perspective about the journey toward happiness. Ben-Shahar quotes Irvin Yalom, a well-known psychiatrist who spent part of his career working with cancer patients, who writes that...

“An open confrontation with death allows many patients to move into a mode of existence that is richer than the one they experienced prior to their illness. Many patients report dramatic shifts in life perspective. They are able to trivialize the trivial, to assume a sense of control, to stop doing things they do not wish to do, to communicate more openly with families and close friends... Over and over we hear our patients say, “Why did we have to wait until now, till we are riddled with cancer, to learn about how to value and appreciate life?”

Ben-Shahar points-out that the essential change for these patients, faced directly with their own mortality, was one of awareness. They had gained no new mental or emotional capacities. They simply developed a much deeper understanding of the critical elements for their individual happiness.

He concludes that to lead a happier life requires *awareness of what brings us pleasure and provides meaning*. All there is to life, he asserts, is “the day-to-day, the ordinary, and the details to the mosaic.” We get to make choices about how to fit the pieces together.



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