

4 Ways of Choosing Happiness from Within

by Javy Galindo

Reflect on what you've done today. *What do your behaviors say about your approach to happiness?*

These are the question I usually ask students on the first day of my psychology courses. Often, their responses sound something like this: food, shopping, a new car, a better job, money, sex, an honest spouse, and nice teachers.

For many, this is a very familiar list as it represents a very common approach to happiness.

All of these answers refer to something *outside* of us. Hence, the common approach is to change the external conditions of our lives, and we end up treating happiness like buried treasure: something that we have to find, attain, and pursue.

However, this may not be a very effective approach. It might be hard to believe, but studies indicate that the circumstances of our lives only account for approximately 10% of our long-term happiness. Sure, we may get a happiness high after buying the new shoes or electronic device, but (as your closet may attest to) that high does not last very long.

Instead of enhancing our happiness, the common approach may be a detriment, since shortly after attaining our pursuits we may begin craving even more of it in order to recreate our previous emotional boost. We can become trapped in what positive psychologists (those who study human happiness) refer to as the *hedonic treadmill*—the non-stop desire for more or greater pleasures: the bigger house, bank account, sound system, etc...

It's no wonder some of us never feel truly fulfilled. If we think getting *more* will make us happy, we can never be happy, since there's always *more* to be had.

This is not to say that we shouldn't strive to improve our lives. It's only saying that if we believe our happiness is solely dependent on crossing the finish line, it may be impossible to have a happy life if we continually push that line further out with each step.

Instead of the conditions of our lives, research indicates that our long-term level of happiness is more influenced by *how* we choose to think and *what* we choose to think about.

So based on this research, instead of searching for happiness on the outside, what can we do to choose happiness from within?

Don't be Your Own Worst Enemy

While some of our suffering is the result of unpleasant experiences, if you take an emotional inventory of your day, you may notice that much of your suffering is actually self-induced—judgments about oneself or others, replaying unpleasant past experiences, or fixating on possible problems that have yet to occur. Even when rain does ruin your party, how much of your suffering is the result of you prolonging the misery with your own negative judgments about the experience? So choosing happiness from within includes choosing the contents of your own mind, directing your attention away from exaggerated negative assessments and imagined conflicts and towards more neutral or joyful thoughts.

Practice Gratitude

Due to our bias to focus on past failings, we often fail to give all the positive events in our lives their just due. In order to compensate, we can choose to dedicate some time to remembering what has gone well for us. Make it a habit to reflect on your day and take a short account of what experiences you may have taken for granted.

Savor Pleasant Experiences

How frequently do you choose to savor an experience? Did you actually savor your warm shower this morning or your most recent meal, or did the experience just pass you by? While gratitude helps to refocus our perception of our past, choosing to savor pleasant experiences gives us a way to appreciate that which fills our present, thereby building our repertoire of positive memories.

Exercise Optimism

We don't know the future. So, why choose to only focus on negative possibilities when neutral or positive events are often *more* likely? Instead, make an effort to exercise optimism. Choose to imagine what could go right with tomorrow and anticipate positive occurrences since we can often miss them if we aren't open to seeing them. Choosing to be optimistic is not only more realistic, but it can invigorate our lives as we become more aware of the wonderful possibilities that lay before us.

These choices are not always easy since we are going against some natural tendencies, including our tendency to search outside ourselves for a happy life. It's a difficult habit to break since at every turn advertisements advocate "happiness from without" rather than the less profitable "happiness from within" approach.

Yet, through practice, choosing happiness can also become habit. Through practice we can more deeply realize that happiness is not the result of *what*

we bring into our life, but the consequence of *how we choose to experience* our life.

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