

# Let the Joy Shine Through

THE BEST-SELLING AUTHORS OF  
*Happy for No Reason* SHARE THE  
SECRETS OF TRUE HAPPINESS

A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO, AFTER DECADES OF HARD work, I finally had everything I thought I wanted. My first book became a number one *New York Times* best-seller. I met and married Sergio, my Italian Prince Charming, and we bought a lovely house. I had every reason to be happy. And I was happy about the things in my life. But I wasn't really happy inside.

Looking around, I saw that some of the happiest people I knew weren't the ones who "had it all." Some had health challenges. Others didn't have a dime. What was their secret? I was determined to find out.

I threw myself into the study of happiness, consulting experts and scientific research. I also found and interviewed 100 people whose happiness isn't dependent on external circumstances. I call them the Happy 100. It's not that they are always euphoric—they may have sadness, fear, anger or pain. But they still experience the underlying peace and well-being that's the essence of true happiness, where you bring happiness *to* your experiences, rather than trying to extract happiness *from* them. I call this state Happy for No Reason.

I came away from my interviews with clear evidence that happy people live their lives differently. Some of the Happy 100 were simply born with happy dispositions. But most *learned* to be happy by thinking and living in a particular way.

In fact, I found 21 "happiness habits" that all these deeply happy people share.

Our habits do affect our happiness, and neuroscientists have recently discovered why. Habitual thoughts and behaviors create specific neural pathways in the wiring in our brains, the way water flowing downhill creates a groove in the earth. When we think or behave a certain way over and over, the neural pathway is strengthened and the groove becomes deeper. Unhappy people tend to have more negative neural pathways—their minds are literally stuck in a rut.

Scientists used to think these neural pathways were set in stone. But new research shows that when you repeatedly think, feel and act in a different way, the brain actually rewires itself. This means you can change your happiness set point.

Leading brain researcher Richard Davidson, Ph.D., of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, said, "Based on what we know about the plasticity of the brain, we can think of happiness as a skill no different from learning to play a musical instrument . . . it is possible to train our minds to be happy."

When acquiring a new skill, it pays to learn from the pros. Here are five key things I've learned from the Happy 100:

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## 1 Don't Believe Everything You Think

According to medical experts, we have an average of 60,000 thoughts a day—about one thought per second during every waking hour. And of those 60,000 thoughts, 95 percent are the same thoughts we had yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that. What's worse is that for the average person, the vast majority of those habitual thoughts are negative.

Not surprisingly, when your mind is swarming with these automatic negative thoughts, it has a profound physiological effect. Researchers at the National Institutes of Health, among others, have found that having negative thoughts can stimulate the areas of the brain involved in depression and anxiety.

But here's an important fact: Our thoughts aren't always true.

I can remember the time many years ago I first made this discovery. I was well into giving a presentation to 450 people packed into a hotel ballroom, and I was bombing big-time. How was I so sure? Because the man in the third row was letting me know in no uncertain terms. He sat rigidly, arms crossed. My stomach churned. He hated me!

After my talk the man made a beeline for the stage. I braced myself for his scathing critique. Instead, he thrust out his hand. "That talk changed my life," he said.

I almost fell over—he hadn't hated me at all! It was my own negative thoughts that had been freaking me out. Moreover, I had managed to tune out the 449 people who'd been laughing, smiling and nodding so I could focus exclusively on the one

guy I thought—wrongly—didn't like what I was saying.

Psychologists call this our "negativity bias." For adaptive reasons, we humans have an inborn tendency to register negative thoughts, feelings and experiences more deeply than positive ones. Our caveman ancestors were the Nervous Nellies and Fearful Franks of the tribe—and consequently the ones who avoided the saber-toothed tigers long enough to pass on their genes.

We're hardwired for negativity: If you get 10 compliments and one criticism, what do you remember? But we can linker with the wiring. The Happy 100 are skeptical of their negative thoughts and have learned not to let false alarms hijack their happiness.

## 2 Notice the Happy Things in Your Life—No Matter How Small

One evening a Cherokee elder told his grandson about the battle that goes on inside people's heads. He said, "My son, the battle is between the two 'wolves' that live inside us all. One is Unhappiness. It is fear, worry, anger, jealousy, sorrow, self-pity, resentment and inferiority. The other is Happiness. It is joy, love, hope, serenity, kindness, generosity, truth and compassion."

The grandson thought about it for a

minute and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf wins?"

The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed."

Because of our negativity bias, we often feed the wrong wolf. To be happier, you need to even up the score. The Happy 100 make a point of noticing everything good that happens to them: any positive thought they have, anything they see, feel, taste, hear or smell that brings them pleasure. This

intention activates the reticular activating system (RAS), a group of cells at the base of the brain stem that's responsible for turning on your memory system and allowing it to bring anything important to your attention. Have you ever bought a car and then suddenly started noticing the same make of car everywhere? It's the RAS at work. Now you can purposefully use it to be happier.

When you decide to look for the

positive, your RAS makes sure that's what you see. One member of the Happy 100 told me she made this into a game, giving out "awards" in her mind for the good things she noticed throughout the day: the best-behaved dog award; the most-courteous driver award.

Once you notice something positive, take a few moments to savor it—making a habit of feeding happiness, as the Cherokee grandfather might say.

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What's the secret to your own happiness? Take our quiz at [www.lhj.com/happyquiz](http://www.lhj.com/happyquiz) to find out

### 3 Choose the Happier Thought

The next time you're faced with a challenging situation that gives rise to negative thoughts and bad feelings, find an *equally true* thought about the situation that makes you feel better—and lean into it. This doesn't mean deny the negative—just pay more attention to the positive part of the truth. The classic measure of optimism, seeing the glass as half full rather than half empty, is the perfect example of leaning into the equally true but happier thought. The Happy 100 are a glass-half-full bunch.

Here's a real-life example: Have you ever been on a deadline and thought, *I can't get this done in time*? The next time you are having a negative, self-defeating thought like that, search your mind for positive thoughts that are equally true, like *I always manage to get things done. I can ask for help. The more I relax, the more the ideas flow through me.* Lean into these thoughts and you'll find yourself feeling better.

### 4 Tend to Your Relationships

Scores of studies have demonstrated that having good social relationships is one of the strongest predictors of happiness. I found that although the Happy 100 vary in the number of relationships they have, each relationship is a healthy one that supports their happiness.

For women, relationships may be even more important. Though men and women both release adrenaline and cortisol when under stress, scientists found in a landmark UCLA study that women's brains

also release oxytocin, the bonding hormone. This is why women who are going through a rough time often want to have a good, long yak-fest with a close girlfriend. The more women engage in bonding activities, the more oxytocin they release, producing a calming influence and further lowering their stress. So the next time you're upset or feeling stressed, don't say you don't have time for friends and family. This is when you need them the most!

The best way to keep relationships happy, healthy and supportive can be summed up in one

word: appreciation. "One of the most important things a person can do to raise his or her happiness level is to acknowledge those around them," says Judith W. Umlas, author of *The Power of Acknowledgment*. "According to a recent *Gallup Management Journal* article, when someone is acknowledged, dopamine is released—a neurochemical that's directly linked to being happy!" When we demonstrate our appreciation for the support we receive from others, it reinforces that behavior and deepens our connection to them.

### 5 Find Passion and Purpose

One day an old woman walked up to a building site where three men were laying bricks. She asked the first man what he was doing. "Can't you see?" he replied. "I'm laying bricks. This is what I do all day—I just lay bricks." She then asked the second man what he was doing. He replied, "I'm a bricklayer and I'm doing my work. I take pride in my craft, and I'm happy that what I do here feeds my family." Walking up to the third man, she could see his eyes were full of joy. When she posed the same question, he replied with great enthusiasm, "Oh, I'm building the most beautiful cathedral in the whole world."

Like the third bricklayer, the Happy 100 bring a sense of purpose to any activity.

Bringing a sense of passion to mundane activities will boost your happiness, but so will taking the time to find your true passions. Think about what activities most absorb you and analyze what it is about those activities that makes you happy. For example, my dad loved being a dentist. When he retired, he realized it wasn't about the teeth—it was doing intricate work that made dentistry so absorbing to him. So he took up needlepoint, loved it and ended up winning awards for his art!

The Happy 100 (and my dad would have qualified for membership) incorporate passion into their daily lives, whether at work or at home.

SO WHAT ABOUT ME, THE EVER-SEARCHING ONE WHO MANAGED TO HAVE LOTS OF REASONS TO BE HAPPY BUT still needed something more? By using the tools and techniques I learned from the Happy 100, I've been able to move from a D+ to an A- on the happiness scale. Now, when life tosses my boat around, I return to an even keel more easily; I don't capsize anymore. I'm still on the journey, but I'm living proof that these steps can move you in the right direction, and that anyone can become Happy for No Reason. 11

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