

The pursuit of happiness

It's no wonder contentment can be so elusive. Getting there is hard work, says writer Jenny McPhee.

I HAVE HAD MY SHARE OF STRUGGLES WITH depression, but my greatest battle has been with happiness. Growing up one of four sisters, I was deemed the "happy" child. My father and mother called me their Sunshine Girl. I had such an easy-going disposition, the family lore goes, that my parents used to wake me up after my sisters were asleep just to play with me and have a little fun after a stressful day. Cousins and friends told me in confidence that I was the "nicest" of the sisters.

I was initially proud of this status, but in time I became suspicious of the label. The designation seemed to carry a certain pejorative aura. I began to feel dismissed as someone who was tolerant and therefore no trouble. My opinions, when I did offer them, were often disregarded. When I was told I was *nice* or *happy*, I began to hear *dull* and *uninteresting* instead. Inevitably, I compared my tag with those of my sisters: My oldest sister was the "smart" one—she won spelling bees and essay contests. The next oldest was "talented and ambitious"—she was Clara in *The Nutcracker Suite* at our ballet school. And my little sister was "enterprising and demanding"—at a very young age, she was selling baked goods, handknit scarves and Avon. Smart, ambitious, talented, demanding—these characteristics got you somewhere in life. But no one, ultimately, was too impressed with happy.

Despite the fact that everyone wants to be happy, the emotion as an everyday practice is at best overlooked and at worst disdained. Scientists of the mind from Aristotle on down have determined that what humans want foremost, other than survival, is happiness. After life and liberty, it appears third on our list of important American quests. And yet happiness is often equated with a lack of intelligence ("she's dumb

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but happy") or with meaninglessness ("the movie was enjoyable but slight"). We find infinitely fascinating the darker things in life, like cynicism, sarcasm, irony, depression and evil, but we yawn at niceness, joy, generosity and goodwill.

Our society sees happiness as an easy trait or one for the wishy-washy and naive. Yet being truly content requires rigor and dedication. After a long and intimate relationship with happiness—one that by no means has always been happy—I've discovered that this is not a state at which you arrive but something toward which you must constantly strive. Being happy, like having a toned body, a sharp mind or a good relationship, requires discipline and hard work.

At a certain point, being the happy one actually created serious problems for me: Whenever I became depressed or even suffered a bad mood, not only was I sad, I ceased to exist. My whole identity evaporated. Also, people tended to assume I was less likely to be offended or have my feelings hurt. (Waking up a happy person to play seems reasonable because it is presumed she will take such a disruption in stride.) What no one, myself included, took into account is how much energy and effort it took to see the world through rose-colored glasses, to always hope for the best, to put on a good face no matter how I was feeling. Eventually, I found being happy exhausting. (Continued)



Happy people can feel intense pressure to be happy all the time.

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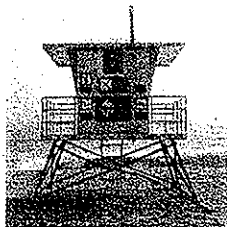
As a result, I spent my 20s trying to rid myself of the legacy of my sunny disposition. I became relentlessly cynical. I developed uncompromising opinions. I smoked heavily. I modeled myself on Addison DeWitt, the searing theater critic in the film *All About Eve*. I explored my darker side. I moved to Paris. Needless to say, I did not enjoy myself.

It was Gertrude Stein (whose writing, oddly enough, I first came across six years later, *after* I had returned from Europe) who eventually sent me back down the path toward my essential good nature. "[N]o artist needs criticism," she wrote. "He only needs appreciation. If he needs criticism he is no artist." Thinking about her words, I began to question our culture's assumption that being critical (dark, brooding, bleak) is more complicated and interesting than being optimistic. In order to flourish, a person needs encouragement, needs positive feedback, needs *happiness*. Being positive—liking who you are and what you do, assuming the best in others, giving and receiving praise—is actually a difficult thing to pull off. In my downtrodden Paris incarnation, I had become better at analyzing what was wrong in my life and others' lives than what was right. I wallowed in what I had not accomplished instead of trying to focus on what I had. I spent more time and energy struggling to figure out why someone didn't like me or hire me than I did nurturing relationships that were supportive and could help me.

Having returned from Paris certifiably unhappy, I went to a therapist who suggested a psychopharmacological remedy.

I have a deep resistance to all mind-altering medicines, so I decided to try to embrace my early natural tendency toward happiness and manufacture a kind of internal Prozac. At the same time, I also began to accept that being happy all the time was impossible, though always striving toward it was not. My game plan was intuitive: When confronted with negative experiences, I tried to implement a philosophy of "this, too, shall pass." I avoided situations I knew would make me nervous and uncomfortable—such as publishing parties ("So, how's the novel coming?") or certain family gatherings ("So, how's the novel coming?"). I made a concerted effort to notice when I was happy, to mark it in my memory and to re-create as often as possible the situations in which I felt joy. For me, this meant things like watching any movie from the 1940s, getting a pedicure with my sister, eating oysters with an old friend in an East Village restaurant. I also forced myself to listen to the people who encouraged my work, even during the years my writing was rejected, instead of hearing only the critics. I found that apparently simple things, like relaxing on vacation, required silencing the negative voices of guilt and regret.

Much to my pleasure, I recently discovered that the science of happiness is a new and growing field (with its own quarterly called the *Journal of Happiness Studies*) and that it backs up a good deal of what I came to by instinct. In researching the subject, I also came across the work of Robert Sapolsky, Ph.D., a neuroscientist at Stanford University in California,



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who points out that just as you can raise your heart rate by exercising or thinking a terrifying thought, you can change the mood-related chemistry of your brain merely by doing something that makes you feel good. The study I found most breathtaking, however, was a neurobiological experiment done at Emory University in Atlanta. While monitored by magnetic resonance imaging, participants played the game Prisoner's Dilemma, in which they had to choose between looking out for themselves or collaborating. The results, Natalie Angier of *The New York Times* recently reported, show how "the small, brave act of cooperating with another person, of choosing trust over cynicism, generosity over selfishness, makes the brain light up with quiet joy." I was consoled to find that, in a world often assumed to be dog-eat-dog, we have evolved to find altruism—bringing happiness to others—beneficial and pleasurable.

I must confess, despite my happiness training, I still experience bad moods.

Part of the process is reminding myself that I have choices at every turn and, whenever possible, I aim to make the positive one. So when my 2-year-old squeezes an entire tube of Vaseline in his hair two minutes before we are supposed to get in a taxi that will take us to a transatlantic flight, I decide to remind myself what a funny story it will be for the in-laws when we finally get to Italy. Or when I get a negative review, instead of letting it make me feel bad for months, years, the rest of my life, I tell myself the reviewer probably had a lousy day and I shouldn't take it too personally. And when my editor, playing Alice B. Toklas to my Gertrude Stein, tells me she thinks I'm a genius, I do my best to believe her. As I said, happiness is hard work. ■

Jenny McPhee is the author of The Center of Things (Doubleday) and coauthor, with sisters Laura and Martha McPhee, of Girls: Ordinary Girls and Their Extraordinary Pursuits (Random House). She has two sons and lives in New York City.

The author, living in Paris, tried *not* to be the Sunshine Girl.



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