

# The Path to Growing Happier

*Path  
to  
Happiness*



Molly L. Stranahan, Psy.D  
[www.pathtohappiness.com](http://www.pathtohappiness.com)



The Path to Happiness was founded by Molly L. Stranahan, Psy.D. to share what you can do to be happier and more fulfilled.

This booklet is a short summary of the *Path to Growing Happier*, or “boosters” to help you become happier. To explore more deeply, visit [www.patthohappiness.com](http://www.patthohappiness.com).

Molly can be reached at [Molly@patthohappiness.com](mailto:Molly@patthohappiness.com), and is available for consultations to help you navigate YOUR Path to Happiness.

Content © Molly L. Stranahan 2014  
Design, layout and editing by Eloise Gorski Branden  
Every Little Detail Concierge, LLC

## THE PATH TO GROWING HAPPIER

### Table of Contents

Growing Happier .....	3
Caring for Your Body .....	4
Caring for Your Mind .....	9
Caring for Your Relationships .....	15
Caring for Your Soul .....	22



# GROWING HAPPIER

Just as we need to water and fertilize our gardens, each of us needs to care for body, mind, relationships and soul, all of which have a big impact upon happiness levels. These practices help us 'grow' our happiness.

While this flower pot diagram adheres to the Cartesian illusion that body, mind and soul are distinct parts, a human being is really an integrated whole, and what we do in one 'sphere' powerfully impacts us across the artificial distinctions between 'parts.' Systems theory postulates that our relationships (and our environment) are also a part of our whole being, but drawing distinctions makes it easier to sort through all of the practices. Please keep in mind that while a particular practice is illustrated as a petal under one artificial 'part' or aspect of the diagram, that practice impacts us universally.





# CARING FOR YOUR BODY



Our body is the vehicle in which we *drive* through this life. Its functioning affects our experience of life, because we rely on our senses to perceive the world around us, and because it provides the *soil* for the other aspects of us to exist.

You may have noticed that your mood is impacted when you are hungry, dehydrated or tired. Many people get crabby; their thinking is less clear, and they are less pleasant to be around. When you are in physical pain, you are more likely to be depressed (and vice versa). Physical relaxation techniques, such as progressive relaxation which involve tightening and then relaxing the different muscle groups of the body, are important skills to cultivate.

Caring for your body is an important step on the path to happiness.

## Breathe

Deep, slow breathing tells your body that it is safe. Taking deep breaths, filling your lungs and feeling your belly rise, has been shown to reduce the body's reaction to stress and improves the functioning of your immune system. Whenever you feel anxiety, fear, worry or pain, take some slow, deep breaths into your belly, and breathe out fully. This tells your body to relax. One technique is to count – try breathing in for four counts, holding the breath for eight counts, breathing out (all the way out) for eight counts, and then waiting another four counts to breath in. Dr. Jim Nicolai of Miraval teaches breath walking, which is a four-count in-breath followed by a four-count out-breath. Some practices have you breathe through your nose



both in and out. Others tend to breathe in through the nose and out through a slightly open, but relaxed mouth. Experiment to discover what works best for you.

## Sleep

Getting enough sleep has a profound impact on your health, your mood and how you feel. It affects your mental acuity, your responsiveness to your environment, your immune system and even your metabolism. The invention of the electric light, to say nothing of all of today's electronic gadgets, contributes to most of us being sleep deprived. Research indicates eight hours of sleep per 24 hours period is a really good idea for most people. Making your room quiet and dark is important to the quality of sleep. Naps are beneficial, if you can train yourself to nap well. Many successful business people incorporate naps into their schedules. To learn more, see [How to Nap](#).

## Use Quality Fuel (Food, Etc.)

What you put into your mouth influences both your body and your mood. When you are dehydrated, your physical and mental functioning is reduced. Make an effort to be mindful of how your body reacts to the various things you eat and drink – sugar, artificial sweeteners, alcohol, processed foods, fresh foods, caffeine, etc. To keep your body running well, improve your mood and to build your resilience in the face of stress, try to use high-grade fuel (including proteins, fresh vegetables and fruits). Don't let yourself get to 'empty.' Your body and your emotions will thank you for it!

## Exercise

Physical exercise has a profound impact on mood, as well as on the functioning of our immune system. Exercise is one of the most helpful treatments to reduce or eliminate depression. It also reduces agitation and can improve your sleep. Of course we know exercise has a powerful impact on physical health. Regular exercise (3-5 hours of walking per week is a standard



in much of the research) has been found to significantly reduce both the occurrence of breast cancer and its recurrence after surgical therapy.

Many people get blocked by coming up with a grand exercise plan and when they fall short of their goals, they give up entirely. Take baby steps. Park further from the store, take the stairs rather than an elevator, start with 5 minutes of exercise, or dance while you watch TV. Engage in the forms of exercise that are most enjoyable to you. Remind yourself that moving your body will improve your life in multiple dimensions.

## Meditate

Brain imaging research shows that when practiced meditators meditate, there is increased activity in the parts of the brain activated when one experiences pleasure and serenity. Studies of Buddhist monks who have deep meditation practices have shown significant long-term changes to their brains, not just when they meditate. They also test as being happy with their lives. Studies that teach people to meditate for 20 minutes a day for four days show reductions in anxiety, and improvements to the immune system (tested by antibodies to the flu virus).

Finding ways to focus inward – whether on your breath, a mantra, or just observing what you are sensing without attachment – and bringing your mind back when it wanders – is a powerful practice. For an introduction to meditating, check out Martin Boroson’s video “How to Meditate in a Moment.” Many yoga traditions incorporate meditation. Progressive relaxation can be another form of meditation. Try various techniques to see what works best for you.



## My Healthy Stress Relievers (Music, Reading, Hobbies. Etc.)

Identify the things you enjoy that reduce your stress levels and make a point of doing them on a regular basis (every day would be good!). Music is a powerful way to shift your mood. Find the songs that make you happy and listen to them regularly. What you read will impact your mood – do you like biographies, or happy endings? Do you like learning or being entertained? Try those hobby activities that have always interested you. Learn to paint, or do woodworking, knit, or go bird-watching. Try a warm bath, with candlelight and some favorite music. Maybe talking with a friend, or playing with a pet, a walk in the woods or some other form of exercise works best for you. Sometimes a silly television show, or a break reading a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon book is what you need. Make a list of the things that work for you. Create a list of strategies to use in stressful situations, as well as practices to engage in on a regular basis to reduce your overall stress level.

## Connect with Nature

Being in and focusing on the beauty and wonder of nature helps us gain perspective on our lives. It can also help us feel a part of something larger than ourselves. Bring your curiosity – pretend to be a child or an explorer discovering your environment for the first time in order to get the full benefit. Inspect the bugs you come across, lie down in the grass or hug a tree. Take a walk in the rain or in a snowstorm, feel the ground beneath your feet. Focus on the miracles that surround us and let yourself be awed. If you can't get outside, look at some great nature videos on YouTube or on-line slideshows or a book.

## Tune In to Life

This form of meditation involves narrowing your focus to pay attention to the messages that come through your body and



mind. It entails tuning in to what draws your attention in the moment. It usually starts with noticing a physical sensation and holding your attention on it until it shifts or something else in the moment takes its place. You can learn to tune in to the flow of energy in different parts of your body. This practice can be experienced in a group. In that case, each person shares what they are experiencing as they feel drawn to speak. Sometimes interesting visual images emerge and are woven together. Learn more from Tesa Silvestre, who studies and teaches body and energy literacy, the internal requirements that support making a difference in the outside world.

### Touch (Hugs, Massage, Pets, Etc.)

Good touch stimulates the release of oxytocin – the hormone and neuropeptide that relaxes the body (reducing blood pressure and other physiological symptoms of stress). Some refer to oxytocin as the love hormone because sex, giving birth and nursing all trigger its release, as do other forms of touching. Touch creates a willingness to be open that encourages us to connect with others, and connection correlates strongly with happiness. With frequent enough positive touch, the oxytocin levels stay somewhat elevated, increasing the sensation of pleasure and leading to more openness, thereby increasing our levels of connection.

Apparently, face-to-face hugs are one of the best touch triggers – hence the advice to get/give five to seven hugs a day! Have you ever watched the Free Hugs video on YouTube? Did you notice the smiles on the faces of people who just had the courage to hug a stranger? There has been some research indicating that a longer hug (20 – 30 seconds) has particularly beneficial effects.

Massage relaxes muscle tensions and provides a neutral form of touch. Of course, loving touch is the most blissful, but find ways to add enjoyable touch (respecting other people's preferences about being touched) to your life.



While human touch seems to have the most powerful impact, petting an animal friend also has a powerful positive impact on well-being.

## CARING FOR YOUR MIND



There are many practices from the field of Positive Psychology as well as from the Path to Happiness technique that improve our happiness levels through our thoughts, attitudes and actions.

What we focus on, the stories we tell ourselves, the beliefs and attitudes we reinforce, and the things we do all affect our happiness and satisfaction with life.

Learn more about the practice in each petal below.

### Accept Reality

Accepting 'what is' rather than wishing life were different increases your serenity level. When you resist what is happening around you, or to you, you are making yourself unhappy. This isn't to say that you should accept painful situations that you can control or avoid. It does mean that accepting the weather as it is in this moment, or the body type you have, or that your plane is late, will give you greater peace of mind. Accept that a large part of the world is not in your control.

### Accept Your Feelings

Having feelings is human. As Tal Ben-Shahar says, "the only people who don't have feelings are psychopaths or dead." This doesn't mean you have to act out your feelings, just don't ignore or try to suppress them. Your feelings are a result of the



stories you tell yourself about what is happening to and around you. They have important messages for you, which may include an invitation to change your story or to make other changes in your life.

## Focus on the Positive

What you focus on influences how you feel. If you focus on what you wish were different, you are more likely to be unhappy than if you focus on what is beautiful and good in your life. If you focus on what you want (but don't have), you will experience desire and scarcity, but if you focus on what you have, you will experience abundance. If you focus on what your child did well in her schoolwork, or his chores, you will be happier, and your relationship will improve.

Appreciative Inquiry asks 'what worked' in order to figure out how to make things better, rather than focusing on problems and strategies to correct them. This practice results in much more successful interventions and builds happier teams. Educational research suggests that to create more successful achievers, schools allow students to focus more of their time on things they do well, rather than trying to boost their scores in areas that are weaknesses. Focus on what you do well, and what is working in your life.

Even when bad things happen, you can ask yourself what is positive about the experience. When you find something good in your life, focus on it. As Tal Ben-Shahar says, "When you appreciate the good, the good appreciates." Plus, you will be happier in the meantime.

## Let Go of Expectations

"Expectations are planned disappointments and premeditated resentments." ~ Twelve Step wisdom

Getting attached to your expectations is a prescription for unhappiness. A better attitude is to accept that we can't predict



the future, and no matter what we do to prepare, things are likely to work out differently than we planned. If you let go of attachment to an outcome, rather than being sad that things didn't work out the way you wanted them to, you are free to discover the gifts that are presented in the way things actually happen.

One of my favorite maxims is, "If you ask for what you want, and accept what you receive, you will get what you need."

One of the big expectations many of us have is thinking that we (and those we love) will live as long as the average life expectancy. We then feel cheated and angry if we face death at an earlier age. You will be happier if you accept that any day could be your last (which is true). This thought also helps you savor this particular day and what it has to offer, and encourages you to make good use of today. A helpful practice is to ask what you would do if you knew you had just one year left to live, and then do those things as much as is responsibly possible.

Another expectation that makes us unhappy is the expectation that life is fair. Besides the fact that life isn't fair, it is rare that everyone agrees on what would be fair. Again, if you focus on all the good in your life, rather than on the negative, and trust that 'it all works out in the end' you will be happier.

## Let Go of Fear

Many people live in a state of chronic worry, which is a form of fear. This is especially prevalent in those who tend to take on responsibility for others, and even more so if you tell yourself that if you foresee every possible risk, you can prevent them from occurring. When we worry about something that hasn't happened, our brains respond as if the event we are imagining is actually happening. It doesn't know the difference between the imagined and the real. The same neurochemicals are



released. Worry borrows trouble from tomorrow, which ruins our enjoyment of today.

Fear is useful if it leads us to take action to protect ourselves (or others), but once we have taken any actions that can reduce our anxiety, dwelling on our fears is destructive to our peace of mind and to our health (and often our relationships).

For those of us who regularly torment ourselves with upsetting stories that come from a vivid imagination (for instance assuming someone's lateness is a result of a fatal car accident), it helps to remind ourselves that our fears are probably exaggerated. Even if they were to be born out, pre-traumatizing ourselves does not help us deal with them. For the one time we might be able to say, "I knew that bad thing would happen," we will have imagined a thousand bad endings that never did.

Letting go of our fears also lets us focus on the positive in the situation, another happiness booster.

## Let Go of 'Shoulds'

If you find yourself saying "I should..." or "I have to..." you are likely to feel resentful about the experience and perhaps blame other people for the resentments. It is unlikely that you will enjoy the experience - it turns into a task, which then becomes much harder to complete. Question your beliefs – especially the "shoulds" and "have tos." Investigate the consequences of not doing the thing, and imagine what it would be like to live with those consequences. This can help you either turn the "I should" into "I want to..." or let go of it.

## Journal

Writing your thoughts and feelings has been shown to have a long-term impact on happiness. Studies show journaling on a regular basis for even two minutes a day can improve happiness. It is particularly helpful to write about things with



emotional content (things that make you happy, or things that upset you, and how you are coping with them). Expressing yourself in a nonjudgmental forum releases the emotional energy, and often gives you the opportunity to gain perspective and further process stressful or traumatic events. Writing about good things that happened to you (for example, keeping a gratitude journal) also increases happiness.

An interesting study on automotive workers who were laid off from their jobs showed that those who journaled about their feelings, including the painful ones, were happier, healthier, and even found new jobs more quickly!

## Affirmations

What we say to ourselves matters. You can shift your habitual thought patterns by giving yourself positive messages, especially if they are personally meaningful. This is particularly useful if you have identified new beliefs you want to reinforce. Write them on post-its and put them in places you see regularly (e.g., the bathroom mirror, the steering wheel of your car). Say them out loud to yourself. Include them in a meditation practice.

Check out some of the little books of affirmations that are usually carried in the addiction areas of bookstores. Use them to create a little meditation practice, and help you change your beliefs. Make your own affirmation booklet, or a card to carry with the affirmation you want to embrace.

## Optimism

Focusing on what is good, on what is working, and anticipating that things will work out for the best, all increase our happiness level. We can learn to be more optimistic (Martin Seligman, a major proponent of Positive Psychology, wrote a book called *Learned Optimism* after his earlier work on learned helplessness made him famous.) Optimism reduces the amount of distress we experience when faced with life's inevitable



disappointments. It also helps us cope more effectively leading to better outcomes as well as better feelings.

You can ask yourself, "In this situation, what would an optimist think?" Remember that 'acting as if' you believe the optimistic view actually impacts how you feel, and it strengthens the neuron connections for positive thinking in your brain.

## Appreciation

There has been a lot of research on the power of an 'attitude of gratitude,' and the long-lasting impact on happiness is impressive. A broader approach is to increase your appreciation – looking for the good in your life, and even seeing positive in the challenges. As positive psychologist Tal Ben-Shahar says, "Appreciate the good and the good appreciates." Check out Louis Schwartzberg's video on gratitude with Brother David Steindl-Rast.

Find some time each day to focus on things you appreciate. Some people create a daily family practice around these exercises. A lot of research has been done on the impact of writing a gratitude letter. This means writing a letter to someone about how she or he impacted your life positively. Ideally, you read the letter to him or her. It creates a big boost in the happiness of the letter-writer as well as the recipient. One reason is because it makes us feel good to make other people feel good – more about that in the relationships section. If you incorporate appreciation into everyday interactions by telling people what you appreciate about them, you will increase your ability to notice things to appreciate – making yourself happier!

## Savoring

This is about noticing the good in the moment, and then replaying it in your mind. It probably helps to explain why experiences tend to make us happier than material things do. To practice savoring, be mindful about your experiences,



noticing all the sensory inputs, and imprint them in your memory. Whether you are savoring a delicious bite of food, or the smell and softness of a baby's neck, or the moment of winning a challenging tennis match, it is about noticing all the pleasant sensations and then revisiting them. Just those words may have evoked a sensory memory that boosts your happiness level. Give yourself the gift of savoring by paying attention to the good things – whether the budding of a tree, or the praise of a mentor. In addition, give yourself permission to replay them – it is healthy for you!

## CARING FOR YOUR RELATIONSHIPS



Humans are social animals. It is extremely hard to survive without other people, so we apparently evolved to be happier when we have close relationships.

Having several relationships in which you can share your emotions (even the unpleasant ones) and be your authentic self

correlates strongly to happiness.

One of the most important things we can do to increase our happiness is to invest in our relationships. While the greatest payoff is in our closest relationships, using our relationship skills in all our relationships yields a high return.

### Communicate (Listen, Ask, Let Go of Outcomes)

Actively listen to others. Be curious about how they see the world. Let go of judging whether their views are right or wrong, accept that they are different. Ask people about their perspectives and their beliefs – you don't have to accept their views, just accept their right to have them. Pay attention to



their answers and repeat back to others what you just heard them say while trying to identify with whatever they are feeling.

As Mahatma Gandhi said, “If you don’t ask, you don’t get,” so ask for what you want. While it won’t guarantee you will get what you want, asking vastly improves your chances of getting it. Sharing what you hope to gain by receiving what you ask for helps others know and understand you better.

“If you ask for what you want, and accept what you receive, you will get what you need.” Realize that others may not choose to or be able to give you what you want. Accept what you get and let go of the outcome. Sometimes we think having our way is what we want, when all we really need is to be heard. And sometimes what we get is even better than what we thought we wanted.

## Let Go of Judgments

This is about accepting people as they are, not setting up expectations for them to be what we want them to be, and not setting ourselves up to be the judge of what is good or bad. You will find you like others better when you expect them to be imperfect, and you stop judging them. It has an important side-effect of encouraging you to stop judging yourself.

Stop yourself every time the word ‘should’ pops into your head. It implies judgment, and we often use it to turn what we want into commands for others. It helps to reframe it as “I wish that person would...” Let go of any judgments about what anyone else should do or should be. Let go of any judgments that you are not good enough if you don’t meet the expectations of others. As you stop judging others – and yourself – you’ll let go of your fear of how others may judge you. Believe that being yourself – and the kind of person you want to be – is good enough.



One technique to reduce your tendency to judge is to focus on neutral observation and training yourself to think, "Isn't that interesting!" rather than focusing on whether you like or dislike what is happening.

## Compassion for Others

Compassion is about opening your heart to others. It is a form of love and caring, and involves respecting the rights and dignity of others, including their right to be treated with respect, no matter the situation or their actions. It means accepting their imperfections, and seeing that even when their words or actions hurt us, they are just seeking to avoid their own suffering. A great exercise is to extend compassion to those different from us, and even those we are tempted to hate. We may never understand the experiences or motives or stories they tell themselves that lead to actions we don't understand or condone, but we can create greater peace in our own hearts by practicing compassion for all. One way to develop our compassion is to practice a Loving Kindness meditation. You can read a version at Metta Institute. I usually add "May my heart be filled with love," which transforms into "May your heart be filled with love" when I switch to focusing on others. My teacher, Robert Gass, has made MP3s of loving kindness meditations available through Dropbox. Start with the first level for expanding your compassion, and when you are ready, move on to the graduate level to extend your compassion toward someone who you don't like. The peace it brings you is profound.

The Dalai Lama says, "Only the development of compassion and understanding for others can bring us the tranquility and happiness we all seek," and "The more we care for the happiness of others, the greater is our own sense of well-being. Cultivating a close, warmhearted feeling for others automatically puts the mind at ease. It is the ultimate source of success in life."



## Take Responsibility for Your Own Feelings

Other people do not cause our emotions. We often think other people's actions were intended to cause the feelings we experience in response. Yet our feelings are really the result of what we tell ourselves about what we experienced, not what actually happened. The same event might stir vastly different feelings in different people, based on the beliefs they have about the world and themselves. Those beliefs are a result of how earlier experiences were interpreted. We can change the stories we tell ourselves, even about past experiences, and change how we feel today.

It's a mistaken belief to think that someone else can make us happy. A partner does not make our dreams come true. A partner can only encourage you to make your own dreams come true. When something is upsetting you, or causing you to feel distant from your partner, it's your responsibility to share your feelings. Not sharing your feelings with your partner shuts him or her out of your life.

If we expect other people to provide our sense of worth, we are asking too much of them. The only way to feel valuable is to value yourself. Self-esteem doesn't come from the outside. It comes from what you believe about yourself. It comes from believing in yourself.

## Forgiveness

Forgiveness is about letting go of your feelings (usually hurt and anger) about something that happened. It doesn't mean you weren't treated wrongly, and it doesn't mean you have to accept being treated poorly again, now or in the future. You can control whether or not you stay in a relationship with someone who treats you badly, and you can tell them when something hurts or angers you. But to hold on to the hurt and anger hurts you more than the offending party. Forgiveness is about accepting that, as humans, we are all imperfect. We make



mistakes, we fail to be our best selves, we hurt each other. Holding a grudge takes a lot of energy and prevents you from moving on in your life. It keeps you connected to (and sometimes haunted by) the person who caused you harm. Nelson Mandela said, "Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies." What would it take for you to free yourself from the bondage of holding on to past hurts? If you are concerned that forgiving others for their failings means condoning their behavior, or subjecting yourself to future abuse, let go of that belief. You can condemn the action that caused harm and assertively protect yourself from future abuse while forgiving the person for her or his shortcomings (which may include failure to take responsibility for the damages caused to you and others). Be inspired by Nelson Mandela, who came out of 27 years of prison to focus on forgiveness said, "Forgiveness liberates the soul."

Sometimes it is ourselves whom we need to forgive. Some of us carry around guilt about a wrong we committed long ago. If the person you harmed is still around, you can choose to confess your error, apologize and ask for forgiveness. But at the least, you may want to forgive yourself for being human and making a mistake.

Read more about forgiveness in this [Psychology Today](#) blog.

## Be Yourself

Be authentically yourself. It is nice to be the best self you can be in the moment, and under the circumstances. When you aren't your best self, it pays to apologize and ask for forgiveness. When you try to be perfect, or whatever it is you think the other person wants, you are being an actor, playing a role and you are no longer in an authentic relationship. Trust that the people who really care for you will accept you as you truly are. If you discover that your relationships are falling away, check to see if you are engaging in the other practices



that build relationships rather than decide you should be someone else to please and maintain your relationships.

South African Bruce Muzik challenges us to take the risk of sharing our deepest secrets, the things we are most afraid to reveal to others out of fear of being judged as a bad person (perhaps for hurting the other person). Have you heard the phrase, “You are as sick as your secrets?” Your secrets can make you sick, depressed and numb, and they certainly prevent authentic relationships. Having the courage to reveal the secrets you carry brings the gift of being fully authentic and alive.

## Show Appreciation

Letting people know what you appreciate about them and their behavior is one of the best ways to build relationships. Think about how good it feels to hear someone – whether a beloved or a stranger – tell you some positive thing they noticed about you or your behavior. You have the power to make someone else’s day by noticing something you appreciate about them, or something they have done. Besides making the other person feel good, you will find it makes YOU feel better too! It can become contagious as the person glowing from the compliment is more likely to notice something nice about another person and let them know. This is one little way to make the world around you a better place, which is a powerful component of happiness. Read more about this powerful strategy in this summary of Don Clifton’s Theory of the Dipper and the Bucket.

## Be Kind

The Dalai Lama has said, “Whenever possible, be kind. It is always possible.” Be kind whenever you have the opportunity. Kindness is contagious just as happiness is, and like love, it feels good to be kind and thoughtful of others, perhaps even more than to be the recipient. Kindspring is an inspiring website that shares kindness stories and gives out Smile cards with



which you can 'tag' people with a random act of kindness. Remember to be kind to yourself as well. Fire your inner critic and 'speak' as kindly to yourself as you would to a beloved child.

## Show Affection (Touch Is Important)

Think of the warm sensation you get when you see an elderly couple holding hands. Hugs, gentle pats, and whatever else may become your agreed on ways of expressing affection are important! Tal Ben-Shahar still gets goose-bumps when he remembers his grandfather gently brushing his hands down young Tal's arms or back and saying, "I'm spreading love on you." Remember that good touch releases oxytocin, which creates pleasurable sensations.

Telling people that you love (and like!) them is good, and affectionate pet names can be heart-warming. It is important to verify that the recipient interprets your affectionate actions in the way you intend, and don't use them to dismiss their feelings of anger or displeasure, because then your actions can become destructive.

Have a conversation with people who are important to you about what makes each of you feel cared for, and look for clues. Ask for the kinds of affection that make you feel good.

## Share

Share what you feel, share what you have. There is a Swedish proverb about how sharing our joys doubles them and sharing our troubles halves them. Sharing our feelings, thoughts, hopes and beliefs builds closer relationships. Sharing our problems not only reduces our feelings of isolation and aloneness, it helps us gain perspective and find solutions. "The only thing that hiding your problems accomplishes is making sure no one helps you with them." (Credit Counseling)



A sharing economy movement is building because sharing your resources not only means more people benefit from them, but it helps build community. A sense of community, which happens when people believe others care for them and are likely to help them when they need it, increases happiness and well-being. It can be sharing books, your lawnmower, or your home. It means working out agreements, which requires communications – another happiness enhancer – to prevent misunderstandings and resentments.

## CARING FOR YOUR SOUL



I think of my soul as that part of myself that carries my values, my best self and my essence as a being. It connects me to all people, to other beings and to nature. For me, this is about our spiritual nature.

Not only do these practices increase my happiness, they also help me be a better person (or at

least feel like one).

### Trust Something Greater than Yourself (You Are Not In Charge)

Twelve Step recovery programs talk about a higher power (something beyond you) that can be trusted to be 'in charge.' A belief in a benign force in the universe that is greater than us as humans can serve your happiness. Whether you label it God, goddess, Allah, fate, destiny or the unknown, letting go of the sense of responsibility for everything that happens to you creates relief and a sense of well-being. Since the definition of faith is a belief in something that can't be proven, why not choose to believe in something that brings you peace of mind



and contentment (as long as it doesn't lead you to be unkind to others with different beliefs)?

## Live Your Values

In *What Happy People Know*, Dan Baker says, "When people identify their values, it gives their lives focus, and gives them a sense of security during times of chaos and confusion. When people live up to their values, it gives them a sense of purpose, peace of mind, and fulfillment—all necessary ingredients for happiness."

Awareness of your deepest values, and using those values to guide your actions also makes decision-making easier! Some values relate to actions we know create greater happiness – like love, compassion, generosity, kindness, sharing, being responsible for the consequences of your actions, authenticity, and integrity. Sometimes our values require sacrificing a current pleasure (like being responsible for our impact on the environment, or putting someone else's needs first), but knowing we are being the person we desire to be provides a deeper satisfaction.

It can be interesting to ask yourself, "What would someone who watched my behaviors say is most important to me?" If it isn't in alignment with the kind of person you want to be, think about what you would do differently to live your values more completely.

## Make a Difference

We need to believe our life makes a difference in the world in some way that is important to us. It can be to please someone by making a tasty and healthy meal, or by listening and being a good friend, by raising a happy, self-sufficient child, rescuing an animal, or through acts of kindness. If you are fortunate, your work helps you meet this need. Many times, it takes asking yourself what opportunities you have at work to make a difference to someone. Read about becoming a Daymaker. In



general, we want to believe that we have a positive effect on other people, and that when we die we will be missed and there is a difference in the world because we existed. If you are feeling down or depressed, one of the best ways to improve your mood is to do something for someone else. Volunteering can be a great way to find a sense of purpose, feel appreciated, and avoid boredom.

## Let Go of Judgments

Letting go of judgments improves your connection to yourself, as well as your relationships. In general, when you judge people, it is because you are comparing yourself to others to find ways you are *better than* so that you feel *good enough*. You are setting yourself up as the judge of right versus wrong and *better than* versus *less than* based on your own perspective and beliefs. Not only are you ignoring the old adage about not judging another until you have *walked a mile in his shoes* (lived his experiences and beliefs), it becomes a trap because when you don't think you are *better than*, you typically think you are *less than*, and that feels awful. When we judge others, we also judge ourselves, and many of us are much harsher critics of our selves than we are of others, which is obviously a detriment to happiness. Making judgments also separates you from others because judging is the opposite of accepting. Try a belief that all people are of equal value, simply for being human, which means you are as valuable as anyone else (no less, no more). You can still try to be your best possible self, but it doesn't come from trying to prove yourself *good enough*.

## Compassion for Yourself

Compassion is about sympathy for someone suffering. Since life gives us many opportunities to experience pain, being as gentle with ourselves as we would be with a beloved child helps us deal with life's challenges more effectively. When we allow ourselves to be imperfect, and to grieve our losses, while not



getting caught up in stories about being a victim or fairness, we actually strengthen ourselves. We are often our own harshest critics, thinking that striving for perfection makes us worthy. Instead this strategy burns us out, makes us irritable, and sometimes we fail to take responsibility for our imperfections and the impacts our failures have on others. You don't have to be a superhero; you just have to be you. Don't beat yourself up when you fail to be your best self, let yourself be human, which means being imperfect. If you have trouble feeling compassion for yourself, start by downloading an MP3 of my teacher, Robert Gass, guiding his [Opening the Heart](#) meditation.

## Generosity

Michael Norton has done a lot of research on how giving to others increases our happiness. He gave a TedX talk titled How to Buy Happiness in which he says, "If you don't think money can buy you happiness, you aren't using it the right way" and the right way is by giving it away. Giving our time and our attention are other forms of generosity that increase our happiness. One probable explanation for why generosity enhances our happiness is that when we give some of what we have away, we get the sense that we have more than enough. Our human tendency to compare ourselves to others is getting the message that we have more than someone (or some cause), which helps us believe we are living in abundance. Besides making us happier, giving to others has been shown to have positive health benefits and to increase work-group productivity, and even improve a soccer team's performance! Get some ideas at Kindspring.

## Awe

Let yourself be inspired by the grandeur of nature, by the miracle of life, by the kindness of others, by all that is good in this world. This is a form of appreciation of things that are



greater than ourselves, and it leads to greater happiness. Check out KarmaTube (or YouTube) and search for the type of videos that most inspire you of amazing nature, beautiful music, or inspiring performances by people with incredible talents or those who have overcome handicaps to accomplish the unbelievable.

## Permission to Be Human (Imperfect)

Being human means you will have feelings, including ones that make you unhappy. You will feel pain at losses, fear when you detect danger, anger when you feel threatened with loss or fear of losing something that matters to you. However, you get to choose how you respond to your feelings. You can get caught up in the story you tell yourself about the cause of your feelings, which will extend them, or you can pay attention to the important messages your feelings have for you. If you let yourself experience your feelings, and pay attention to the messages they give you, and take actions where appropriate, they will pass through you.

Brain researcher and stroke survivor, Jill Bolte Taylor, talks about it taking about 90 seconds for an emotion to pass through you after being triggered, although it extends when you continue to focus on the cause of the emotion, which is often a story we create to explain the emotion to ourselves.

Humans are inherently imperfect and fallible. We will never be our best selves all of the time, so give yourself a break and don't set up the expectation that you (or anyone else) must be perfect. Embrace your imperfections. Accept that you will make mistakes. When they impact someone else, try owning up to them. No one really likes being with someone who is 'perfect' all the time (since in our hearts we know we aren't), so you may find people like you better as a result. It gives others permission to be their imperfect selves.



## Be Mindful

Mindfulness is about being present in the moment, and not getting attached to expectations or outcomes. It includes developing the ability to observe yourself with a bit of detachment or distance, being aware of the sensations, thoughts, and feelings you are experiencing without getting caught up in the stories or feelings related to experience. Building your ability to be mindful can help you become more aware of the stories that color our experiences, so that the story is no longer your primary experience. This can give you the ability to have more control over your experiences, your feelings and your life. Meditation is a popular strategy for developing your mindfulness although it is really just about focusing on the present moment with openness to whatever is happening. It helps to let go of judgments and comment to yourself, "How interesting!" You can even speak that phrase out loud as you observe your thoughts and feelings.

## Pay Attention to Your Intuition

Intuition is the synthesis of all our wisdom, and it is often felt in the body. Trust that your *gut feeling* provides important information. Our minds fool us with thoughts, while there are other parts of us that tune into inputs that we aren't aware of consciously. Research indicates that many successful business leaders pay attention to the messages that come from their intuition. Robert Gass, who teaches leadership skills, says that to build our intuition, we must pay attention to the messages we get from it. One way to develop our abilities is to quiet your mind and body and look inward, without attachment, to the path that draws your attention. Imagine venturing down that path, and observe the sensations that come into your body.

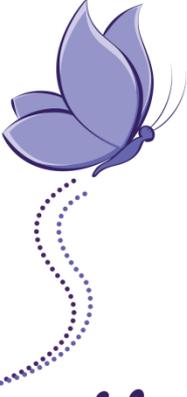
Keep in mind that your physical reactions can be a result of conditioning. For instance, feeling nervous around someone you define as a different race may be more a result of past



conditioning that triggers the *discomfort* you might label *intuition*. So particularly question your *fear* based sensations.

Feel into what your heart invites you to do, let your intuition provide the courage to step into living more of the life you desire.

Path  
to  
Happiness

A purple butterfly is positioned in the upper right quadrant of the image. A dotted line trail starts from the bottom of the butterfly and curves downwards and to the left, ending just above the letter 'H' in the word 'Happiness'.

[www.pathtohappiness.com](http://www.pathtohappiness.com)

[Molly@pathtohappiness.com](mailto:Molly@pathtohappiness.com)