

## Joy

Wouldn't it be great if we could just push a button and feel joy? Well, ready for this? We can! Not a literal button, of course, but an emotional one we install within ourselves. All we need to do is understand what joy really is, what causes it, and what makes it different from happiness. And yes, there is a difference.

Rick Warren, author of [A Purpose-Driven Life](#), speaks on that difference. "Happiness depends on happenings. It comes from the word *hap*, which means 'luck' or 'circumstance.' Joy is different. It goes deeper. Joy is an attitude, a choice. Joy is an inside job and is not dependent upon circumstances. You can choose, regardless of the circumstances, to be joyful."

Isn't it great to know that we don't have to wait for joy to come to us? That we can create it ourselves at will? Yes, joy is something we can pretty much have all the time. It's all a matter of how we view things. Once we learn to develop thinking patterns that promote joy, it can become a way of life, regardless of our circumstances. Let's look at some ways we can think our way to a joyful life.

We'll start by clearing our minds of a few misconceptions about joy. Over and over we hear of "successful" people who claim their riches do not bring joy to their lives. The same is apparently true of fame, beauty, perfect jobs and amazing houses. And more often than not, the stress that accompanies these things destroys whatever joy there was. Yes, as hard as it is to believe sometimes, the evidence that these things are not true sources of joy is overwhelming. So we need to accept it as fact. In doing so, we can let go of our own unfulfilled desires for such things, and replace them with thoughts that promote real joy.

Similarly a joy-filled life isn't based on single big events. It develops incrementally. Experience by experience. Choice by choice. Your wedding, for example, is a happy day, but it's the marriage itself that will sustain the joy for the long term. So, we want to develop the ability to put life experiences into perspective, and assign personal meaning to them as we go.

Remove the phrase "...and *then* I'll be happy" from your vocabulary. Learn to live in the moment rather than waiting until you get out of debt, get through school, have more spare time, or reach the perfect weight. The more you enjoy the journey itself, the easier it is to absorb the bumps.

Realize too that having joy doesn't mean being free of challenges and hardships. However, we can learn to view challenges as valuable lessons for personal

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growth. Find the beauty and good in situations and people (well, *most* of them, anyway) and choose to focus on that goodness. This doesn't mean you don't recognize the bad in the world; it just means you choose to root out whatever good you can find and focus on that.

Stay aware of the "Big Picture." Knowing where you're going and why helps you relax and enjoy the journey more. List long-term goals--for up to 30 years in the future. Then list short-term goals--things you will need to do by the next day, week or year to succeed long term. Accept that you may need to do some mundane things now for a future payoff. Picture yourself in your final years, looking back on your life. Which memories will make you smile? Which memories will you cherish? What will really matter in a month, a year, or 10 years from now? Mental exercises like these are what train your mind to be joyful on command.

Pursuing physically and mentally healthy activity is essential for maintaining your joyful disposition. Go for a walk, plant a garden, call a friend, window shop, or read a book. Try something new to stretch out of your comfort zone a little. Activities like these keep the focus on the positive. They break up the routine so you can return to your challenges with a fresh outlook.

Remember too that life becomes infinitely more joyful when you help others. There are endless opportunities out there to do this. Try mentoring a younger colleague, mowing an elderly neighbor's lawn, serving the homeless at a soup kitchen, saying a few kind words to a waitress... you get the point.

Invite your family to share in your joy. Explore hobbies and activities with your children. Take your mom out to lunch. Call your friend on the phone. Leave a love note for your spouse to find. Text "I luv u" to your teenager.

When a situation causes a negative thought, remember it's your thinking, not the situation, which controls your mood. It's often a simple matter of displacement – pushing the negative thought out with a positive one. What's great is that the two thoughts don't even have to be connected. That means you can replace, "My boss is acting like such a jerk," with, "I love to play with my new son." And just like that your joy is back. Also, when you're in a good mood, negative situations are easier to handle. Don't we often wait until someone is in a good mood to talk about something difficult or to give bad news?

Here's a fun exercise for the next time you become aware of a negative thought: try to neutralize it by playing with it. Say it out loud. Say it while laughing. Say it in funny voices. Picture the thought written out. Change the size and color of the

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words. You'll find once you start controlling your thoughts, they stop controlling you.

Spend a few minutes each day reflecting on all that you're thankful for. Make a list and post it in a spot that will catch your eye throughout the day. You'll be amazed how much it can recharge all your joyful feelings.

Of course all this changing of attitudes, learning to control thoughts, shifting focus, and breaking away from mental ruts takes effort and practice. But when we consider the payoff is the one thing that everyone— rich, poor, big, small, old, young — is looking for in their lives, we're left with only one question: What are we waiting for?

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