

VISTA PSYCHOLOGICAL & COUNSELING CENTRE

F O C U S

Don't Worry, Be Happy

“Happiness” is a loaded word: It’s loaded with expectations, hope, yearning, confusion... You get the idea. What makes happiness feel so elusive usually has more to do with how you relate to the concept than with how you really feel. Here are a few simple adjustments that can help you unleash the happiness within yourself. **Be present.** Awareness is the springboard from which we can appreciate the world around us. Set reminders in your phone throughout the day to pause and check in with yourself. By stepping into a space of curiosity you will discover an increased ability to notice happiness in everyday life. **Harness difficulty.** As long as you’re alive, challenges will find you. Sometimes you probably even create challenges for yourself—we all do. Instead of getting down on yourself, try thinking of difficult

moments as opportunities to ask yourself: How can I be kinder to myself right now? **Get connected.** Connection is more than an experience—it’s also a skill that we can strengthen with small gestures. Try smiling at a stranger, tell a friend you appreciate them, or tell a loved one how much they mean to you. Create connection in the small moments of life. **Turn meaning into action.** What in life really matters to you? Is it family, compassion, good friends, the environment? Take these values and turn them into verbs. If you value family, make a plan to put phones aside during dinner. If it’s the environment, consider volunteering with an organization. **Find a purpose.** Getting involved in something outside ourselves has the power to infuse our daily lives with meaning amid the drudgery. Every day, ask yourself these three questions: 1. What do I care about beyond myself? 2. What action can I take today that aligns with this? 3. In the long run, how will my actions affect the world? Practice and repeat this over time and watch your sense of purpose grow. **Be generous.** There is no experience more uplifting than giving. Practice being more generous: tip the server a bit more than usual, give more to charity this month, or offer more of

your time to friends, family, and strangers. **Forgive and let go.** Lily Tomlin once said, “Forgiveness means letting go of the hope for a better past.” Letting go is hard. It’s also easy—we let go every single night when we go to bed. When we hold onto our mistakes or the mistakes of others, it only serves to stress us out, which has negative impacts on our minds, bodies, and relationships. Ask yourself, “Am I ready to let go of this burden?” If so, try breathing in and acknowledging the pain you feel, breathing out and releasing the burden. **Overhaul your habits.** We’ve all got habits we’d like to kick and if we could we’d feel a lot happier. The key here is to focus on the reward you seek from any given habit. For instance, many of us snack on junk food to soothe stress. In that case, ask yourself: What else can you do in times of stress that is soothing? Getting a hug can feel soothing. So can placing your hand on your heart. Practice understanding the rewards you seek from your habits, so over time you can develop healthier ones. **Nurture positivity.** Most of us have a hard time receiving compliments and entertaining positive beliefs, especially when we’re stressed or unhappy. Choose a positive belief such as “I am skilled” and ask yourself:

1. Is it true? If your answer is “No,” then ask yourself: 2. Would someone else say it is true? Chances are, yes. Now, follow with: 3. If you were to accept this possibility, how would you feel? If you then start experiencing any positive feelings, allow yourself to savor them for a few moments. **Make your body happy.** If you look at a map of the nervous system, you’ll see it goes from the brain throughout the entire body—there is no separation. A healthier body means a healthier brain. Listen to your body and notice how it needs to be treated, moved, and fed. Bringing more mindfulness to your body is a recipe for overall well-being. **Keep track of your joys.** At the end of the day we are usually aware of the long list of bad things that happened. What if, instead, you focused on the joys? Make a list or write a journal entry about the things that bring you joy each day. It could be a smile a kind stranger gave you, the sweet smell of a flower you passed on the street, or the presence of a trusted friend or pet. The more you take note of what brings you joy, the more joy you’ll find in your everyday life.

Source: Mindful, August 2016. Stephanie and Elisha Goldstein, clinical psychologists at the Center for Mindful Living, Los Angeles, CA. Elisha is the author of *Uncovering Happiness*.

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How NOT to Raise a Little Jerk: Do This With Your Kids

How do we avoid raising a generation of jerks? That's a question Dr. Deborah Gilboa, TODAY Parents child development expert and pediatrician, addressed in her Tedx talk, "The Expectation Gap," at Carnegie Mellon University in March. "What do household chores tell us about where society is headed? Chores are the canary in the coal mine of kid's character," Gilboa stated as she opened her talk, revealing that she discovered while talking to a group of affluent Silicon Valley parents who believed that most of them had chores—laundry, cooking, cleaning—in their youth, only four of those 1500 parents in her audience gave their children chores. Parents, she said, feel their children have too many burdens between school, sports, and clubs, and jobs. In essence, their kids don't take out the garbage; instead, they are expected to excel academically and extra-curricularly. But by focusing on achievement instead of character-building activities and expectations like chores, Gilboa believes we might be letting our kids

fall through the cracks when it comes to morals and manners. "As our expectations are rising on their achievements, our expectations are simultaneously dropping on the character of the child in front of us. Adults are willing to tolerate, excuse, even promote behaviors that damage these people that we love," she said in the talk. "I am a family doctor, and a few parents of kids in my practice say that they not only understand, they pay for their kids' alcohol and drug use to help them manage the stress of their enormous workload." Gilboa relayed at TedX a story about one of her four sons who had never put a lot of effort into the science fair at school. Finally, at the age of 12, he did. He worked hard, did his research, and took third place in the school science fair. He even advanced to the regional competition. Gilboa and her husband were very proud of their son for stepping up his effort and winning...until they realized he also participated in a mean joke that made fun of another student in the class with a less successful project. According to

Gilboa, her son was baffled when his parents showed disappointment in him that day. He had won at the science fair. Wasn't that what they wanted? He didn't understand why they cared more about his kindness toward his fellow student. "When we stressed to our son the importance of doing a great job on his science fair project, he took that to be our highest priority," Gilboa told TODAY Parents. "Through no fault of his—or ours, really—he subconsciously decided that his success was what, and all, we valued." Gilboa and her husband realized they had to take the emphasis off the achievement and put it instead on his conduct. "Being a jerk to some other kid doesn't diminish his science fair award, it diminishes him as a person," said Gilboa, "And it's him as a person that we need to raise right." In her talk, Gilboa concluded that a generation that doesn't take out the garbage because they are "too busy" with schedules loaded with sports, extra-curriculars, and honors classes might not understand that who they are is more

important than what they achieve, and that morals are necessary to help solve the problems this next generation will face and carry the burden of solving. "The solutions to (our) issues don't depend on great SAT scores. They depend on problem solvers of good character—people who see something wrong and ask, "What can I do about that?" Noting that parents spend a lot of time worrying about their children's happiness, Gilboa contends that our children's happiness is not actually our responsibility; their character is. But the two, she says, go together. "When we focus on our kids' character, they will accomplish meaningful things and are very likely to find and make their own happiness. But the opposite is not true. Because when we focus on our kids' achievements and immediate happiness, it's easy for them to turn out to be jerks, never knowing that this was not the goal," she said.

Source: Allison Slater Tate, TODAY Contributor, www.todayparents.com June 2, 2016.

Remembering to Take Your Medications

For many of us, keeping track of all the medications we take can be a confusing ordeal. At the same time, taking medication correctly is extremely important. Here are some creative tips to help. **Make taking medication as comfortable as possible.** Is swallowing pills difficult for you? Or does the taste avert you? There are other options for delivering your medications, such as cutting pills, taking smaller pills, or adding a flavor to liquids or tablets. Speak to your psychiatrist, physician, or pharmacist about these alternatives. **Use a pillbox.** Also called dosettes, they are the simplest and most

effective way to keep track of medication. They make it visible in determining if you have taken your medication or not, and they help in avoiding the mistake of double dosing. Pillboxes/dosettes come in multiple variants to accommodate the most complicated of medication regimens. Some advanced models integrate sensors that can track opens and send reminders to users via smartphone. **Use technology.** Utilize digital reminders such as alarms, calendars, or text alerts available on cell phones, tablets, and computers. **Go analog.** Use pen and paper reminders such as sticky-

notes on the bathroom mirror or near the coffee pot. Use neon pens in your calendar. Or set your watch or alarm clock with a repeating alert. **Link to a daily event.** Plan to take your medicine around a daily event, such as brushing your teeth, getting the newspaper, or making coffee. **Be mindful.** Influence more awareness and certainty about taking your medicine by practicing mindfulness. Before taking our pill, pause. Look at it in your hand, feel it there, and tell yourself, "I am now taking my pill." After swallowing the pill, take a deep breathe in and out. **Keep it visible.** New prescriptions

are easier to forget about—it takes time to instill the habit of taking medication. Leave them in an obvious place, and put them in a bright, attention-getting container. **Get a little help from a friend or family.** Rely upon those with whom you communicate often to help you remember. **Tie it to a fun activity.** Take pills with a treat, such as a piece of candy or schedule around a favorite TV or radio show.

Source: Adapted from Help clients remember to take their medicine. myStrength.com

How a Messy Kitchen Might Ruin Your Diet

Unwashed pots and pans tower precariously in the sink. Last week's mail is strewn across the countertop, and a TV blares from the next room over. According to a study published in February in *Environment and Behavior*, this kind of chaotic environment can be enough to make someone overeat, given a certain mindset. "We knew environmental factors influence behavior, and we knew the influence of stress on over-eating in general," points out Lenny Vartanian, a psy-

chologist at the University of New South Wales in Australia and the study's lead author. "But nobody had connected those to say: here's an experience that lots of people actually encounter. What impact does (a disordered kitchen) have?" To answer this question, the researchers set up two kitchens: one was cluttered and noisy, the other tidy and quiet. They then instructed 98 female undergraduates to complete a writing assignment while in one of the kitchens. Some of

the volunteers wrote about a time when they felt particularly out of control; others wrote about a time they felt in control. They were then provided with cookies, crackers and carrots and told they could eat as much as they wanted. Among the participants who wrote about a time they felt out of control, those in the chaotic kitchen consumed twice as many calories from cookies as did those in the organized kitchen. Subjects in the messy kitchen who had thought about being in con-

rol, however, ate less than people in the other groups. "The in-control mindset buffered against the negative impact of the environment," Vartanian says. He and his team hope to eventually find ways to induce that powerful feeling in people in the real world, where kids, busy schedules and the messy business of life can make it tough to keep the kitchen tidy.

Source: Jordana Cepelewicz, *Scientific American Mind*, July/August 2016.

Tips for Handling Sibling Rivalry

If there is more than one child in your family, then it's almost a guarantee that there are disagreements, arguments and competition. Yes, your children may love one another, but siblings will still disagree and fight and drive most parents crazy. It's called "sibling rivalry," a competition to be number one in a parents' eyes. This probably can be traced back to prehistoric ancestors when being number one could be a matter of survival. Today, it's more about simply having parents approval. Young children will naturally feel threatened when a sibling is born. They see parental love as limited

and finite, but suddenly there's someone new to love, meaning less love for the older child. It's not an irrational fear. A new baby is usually the center of attention and, out of necessity, takes up more of the parents' time. The older child probably feels he or she is suddenly less important and starts to misbehave to win back more attention. The cure for that problem is to demonstrate to your children that you love them all. Simply saying it has no real affect, but when you set aside "special time" for the older child, offer your focused attention, and give plenty of hugs and reassur-

ances, you're demonstrating your love and overcoming his or her sense of feeling threatened. For an older child, it's not jealousy over parental love, but about winning parental attention. Siblings may compete to have better grades, be better in sports, or demonstrate better musical or artistic skills. This can be good, if kept under control, leading to higher levels of accomplishment. But praising a higher-achieving child shouldn't be at the expense of the other children. If one child is always "winning," you may want to tip the scales slightly and give the other children extra attention

and time. But competition can get out of hand, threatening family peace and harmony, and possibly doing physical or emotional harm to one or the other children. That's when help is needed. School counselors are often excellent sources of advice on excessive levels of sibling rivalry. A professional counselor specializing in family issues could also help. While a little friendly sibling competition can sometimes be a good motivator, don't let it destroy family peace and happiness. If you work to be fair with your love and attention, you may find sibling rivalry will lessen and disappear.

Source: "Counselor Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association, www.counseling.org

Can We Prevent Addictions Using Vaccines?

The goal of anti-addiction vaccines is to prevent addictive molecules from reaching the brain, where they produce their effects and can create chemical dependencies. Vaccines can accomplish this task, in theory, by generating antibodies—proteins produced by the immune system—that bind to addictive particles and essentially stop them in their tracks. But challenges remain. Among them, addictive molecules are often too small to be spotted by the

human immune system. Thus, they can circulate in the body undetected. Researchers have developed two basic strategies for overcoming this problem. One invokes so-called active immunity by tethering an addictive molecule to a larger molecule, such as the proteins that encase a common cold virus. This viral shell does not make people sick but does prompt the immune system to produce high levels of antibodies against it and whatever is

attached to it. This method has been tested in laboratories and has successfully blocked chemical forms of cocaine or nicotine from reaching the brain. Another approach researchers are testing generates what is known as passive immunity against addictive molecules in the body. They have cultured monoclonal antibodies that can bind selectively to addictive molecules. The hurdle with this particular method is that monoclonal antibodies are expensive to

produce and need to be administered frequently to be effective. Attempts to circumvent these issues have been tried by genetically modifying the liver of mice to produce and secrete sufficient quantities of anti-addictive monoclonal antibodies, but that work is still in its early stages. If successful, though, addiction vaccines would be a valuable aid to help addicts quit.

Source: Lynne Bennetch via e-mail to Ronald Crystal, chair of the department of genetic medicine at Weill Cornell Medical College, *Scientific American Mind*, May/June 2016.

VISTA PSYCHOLOGICAL & COUNSELING CENTRE



1201 South Main Street
Suite 100
North Canton, Ohio 44720

Phone: 330.244.8782
Fax: 330.244.8795
Email: info@vistapcc.com

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3-Minute Breathing Space

The three-minute breathing space is one of the core practices taught and repeated throughout Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy. It's intended to help bring formal mindfulness practice into moments of everyday life. It's considered the most important practice in the program. **Preparation:** Begin by deliberately adopting an erect and dignified posture, whether you are sitting or standing. If possible, close your eyes. Then take about a minute to guide yourself through each of the following three steps: **1. Becoming aware.** Bringing your awareness to your inner experience, ask: What is my experience right now? What *thoughts* are going through mind? As best you can, acknowledge thoughts as mental events, perhaps putting them into words. What *feelings* are here? Turn toward any sense of emotional discomfort or unpleasant feelings, acknowledging their presence. What

body sensations are here right now? Perhaps quickly scan your body to pick up any sensations of tightness or bracing. **2. Gathering.** Now, redirect your attention to focus on the physical sensations of the breath. Move in close to the sense of the breath in the abdomen...feeling the sensations of the abdominal wall expanding as the breath comes in...and falling back as the breath goes out. Follow the breath all the way in and all the way out, using the breathing to anchor yourself in the present. If the mind wanders away at any time, gently escort it back to the breath. **3. Expanding.** Now, expand the field of your awareness around your breathing so it includes a sense of the body as a whole, your posture, and facial expression. If you become aware of any sensations of discomfort, tension, or resistance, take your awareness there by

breathing into them on the in-breath. Then breathe out from those sensations, softening and opening with the out-breath. As best you can, bring this expanded awareness to the next moments of your day.

Source: Mindful, "Practice", August 2016.

