

Unlocking the Door to Happiness

By Jackie Kelm

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So, what is happiness anyhow? And once we figure out what “it” is, how do we get more of “it?” No, I’m afraid “it” cannot be purchased on eBay®. This past summer I intended to find out, and initiated a study on joy with thirty people from across the US. The results were astounding.

It’s one of those things where you look back on it all, and see how it makes perfect sense in hindsight. But at the time I designed the study, I was quite frankly, clueless about happiness. I was even more clueless about the innate human capacity for change. I was just looking to help people get a little happier, which they most certainly did; but who would have thought that some would experience major transformations.

It all began over the internet this past July when thirty people agreed to do a set of three brief exercises for four weeks, and report their levels of happiness. The exercises were not rocket science and took less than three minutes a day. They basically consisted of writing a gratitude list, answering a simple question on how to increase joy, and doing a weekly visioning session on the ideal life (exercise details are provided later in the article.)

At the end of the four weeks, the participants were significantly happier on average. And it was the people who were most unhappy at the start who showed the greatest improvement. Almost everyone who began as “unhappy” at the beginning had moved into the “happy” part of the scale by the end of the four weeks. And they stayed there for two months after the study ended.

This surprised me. I knew the exercises were good, but I didn’t think they were *that* good. There was one person in the study who came to understand that he did not have to be depressed any more. He realized he had a choice and could take control of his life. Wow—what is that insight worth?

What is Happiness?

This brings us back to the first question that started all this. What is happiness? Positive psychologist Martin Seligman has been studying this topic for many years, and claims there are two types of happiness.¹ First is what he calls, “The Pleasures.” These are the things we experience with our senses, such as a delicious meal, a good movie, or a wonderful massage. They have a definite “good” feeling about them, and are what we typically think of as happiness in Western culture.

The second type of happiness is what Seligman calls “The Gratifications,” and we experience this type of happiness when we are totally absorbed in what we are doing. It might be getting immersed in a good book, experiencing a breath-taking sunset, or doing a challenging rock climb. It’s almost like we lose ourselves in the moment, and there is not necessarily an emotion associated with the experience. In fact, many people describe a sense of being out-of-touch with time, and some describe it as a spiritual experience. The various religions and spiritual traditions have a variety of definitions of this second type of happiness.

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After consulting the experts, I decided to look at the results from the study. As I read through quotes from participants on what brought them joy, I began to feel something move deep inside. It was my heart. Most of the participants had been out-of-touch with what really made them happy, and I realized that the joy exercises had initiated a journey of discovery in many cases as people began to connect to a deeper inner-knowing. The quotes seemed to speak to a universal journey, and yet the way it showed up in people's lives was as varied as they were. Joy was found in many places, but often it was found in learning to appreciate the small things throughout the day. Here are a few quotes from the data:

"I learned that joy doesn't have to be big. Joy can be found in small, daily things....I found joy in floating in a lake with tiny dragonflies landing on my arms. I found joy in having something super yummy planned for dinner, or cuddling with my 3 year old...How blessed I am!..."

"Because I really had to explore what 'joy' meant to me, I learned a whole lot about the things that help me to joy, like an intimate connection with someone, my cats especially! Being outside, music, being kind and loving toward myself."

"I wanted to escape from it all... maybe go work at a retreat center, or live on a tropical island. I thought it would be magical. I went to a spiritual place for a bit, and when I returned I realized that the magic is here – inside. Are you going to stay in your space of centeredness and joy or be knocked off? I wanted to escape from it all, but there is no place to go; it's all right here."

"I realized that at first you have to 'clean out your house' to get to really creating joy. At first I thought that doing things like cleaning the dishes wasn't 'spiritual enough' to increase my joy. Then I learned that the Buddhist say that the ideal state is the absence of suffering, and that decreasing suffering increases bliss. So, it really does help you feel better to clean the kitchen or take care of that one thing that is bugging you."

"When I started writing down the one thing I could do to increase my joy I found I was still very much attempting to control, not only my life, but the lives of those around me... When I chose to laugh for no reason or look for the beauty/joy in every day experiences, I felt my spirit rise. I felt released from an anchor, allowing the day to bring the joy rather than chasing after joy. It is like chasing butterflies. When you run after them they are elusive. When you sit still amid flowers they alight up you."

"I learned that when I'm feeling tremendously overwhelmed I start to avoid positive things as well as trying to avoid negatives. Being aware of that now, I am realizing that I need to work more on being ever more determined about having a positive attitude and following through on things that will bring me joy. I have also learned (again) that I need to do better at making time for me and doing more self-care things."

"I forgot that I really enjoy tucking my daughter into bed at night. It was a chore I did so I could get on to the next one as quickly as possible. She won't be a little girl forever and I'm glad I now remember how precious these moments are to me."

The Key of Choice

One key learning for many people in the study was that we are responsible for creating our happiness. Happiness is something we can choose deliberately, and it is not dependent on other people or external situations. It is a state of mind or attitude that we can control and we get better with practice. Here are a few quotes from the data:

“A key learning for me was that joy is a choice.... I can choose my perspective.”

“The one thing I came away with, was that my husband doesn’t make me happy, and he can’t make me unhappy. They just do what they’re going to do. Intellectually I get that, but I haven’t gotten that on an emotional level. Now I get that. It’s all about me. He’s going to do what he’s going to do and I’m responsible for how I respond to other people. If I let them impact me it’s still not their fault.”

“One of the key learnings I had is to be responsible for myself. I used to feel responsible for the happiness of my husband, my mother, the kids – I was trying to make everyone happy. They have to find their own thing. I am not responsible for anyone else besides myself. It makes me very happy. It makes me so free.”

“I choose it. I choose happiness. I claim it.”

“I’m very conscious about the distinction between what happens and how I respond. I can influence what happens, but there are things in life that do get thrown at you, and often times they sting initially. I step back and try to navigate how I’m going to respond. I ask, ‘What do I really have control over here?’ The answer is in how I respond to it.”

“I learned that I cannot hang my hope of joy on others reactions to my actions and conversely my reaction to their actions. Joy is an inside job. You find it when you look for it.”

“Lines from the Eagles song ‘Already Gone’ express succinctly what would probably take me two dozen paragraphs to say: ‘So often times it happens, that we live our lives in chains, and we never even know we have the key.’”

Try This....

One of the most exciting insights that came out of the study is that we all possess the power and wisdom within to create happiness in our lives. Each of us will find it in different places and in different ways, and our knowing evolves in the journey. We each have to find our unique path to happiness, which as it turns out, is not so elusive. Simply try the following exercises for four weeks and see what you discover:

Each day, list three things you are grateful for. Then take 2-3 minutes to reflect on your answer to the following question, and write it down: *“What one thing could I do today, no matter how small, that would increase my joy?”*

Once a week, do a 15-minute visioning exercise. Begin by getting yourself comfortable and feeling as good as you can. You might want to put on inspiring music, look at pictures that make you feel happy, or play with your pets etc. Get out a piece of paper or journal, and write your response to the following: Pretend that a miracle occurred, and your perfect, ideal, joy-filled life manifested right now before your eyes. Write down every glorious piece you can imagine about what this ideal life looks like at the highest level. You only have 15 minutes, so you have to keep the vision big. How is your health? Your career? Your relationships? Your home? List the ideas as they stream through your mind. Let your deepest hopes and desires come forth and dream big about your perfect, happy life. Pretend it is really happening now, and feel the joy inside as you write.

The Key Is Found Within

Marcel Proust said that, “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.” My hope is that you will give these exercises a try, and unlock the key to happiness that lies within. All it takes is a few minutes a day. Believe me, you won’t find anything this good on eBay®....

© J. Kelm, 2006. Jackie Kelm is a speaker and author of the book **Appreciative Living**. She lives in Raleigh NC with her husband and two children. For more information on her speaking engagements, workshops and research, or to purchase her book at a discount, visit www.AppreciativeLiving.com or email Admin@AppreciativeLiving.com.

¹ Seligman, Martin E. P. *Authentic Happiness*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002. pp. 102-121.