

Get your ***happiness mojo*** working!

Feeling a bit blue? Not sure what to do?
What boosts and bolsters peoples' spirits during hard times?
Create your own personal recipe for happiness.
Here's how...

Hurricane *Sandy* turned lives upside down in her devastating coastal wake from Canada to Cuba. Deadly attacks last month in occupied Gaza strip. Natural disasters, poverty, violence, greed, environmental degradation. The hurt that has no end. So it seems. Pile on top of that daily stressors that feed the frenzy of our national anxiety, creating a collective panic attack. *How do humans cope? When do we break?* And here's the million dollar question--*excuse the economic expression*--what truly feeds the human soul and creates pure happiness?

I've been on a renewed quest. Searching for the holy grail of human happiness. Good medicines for the soul. I've been having late night discussions with good friends about *the empty spot*, to see if they feel a spiritual void or experience genuine happiness. My circle seems to be a happy, spiritually centered lot, but at least 2/3's of them are dealing with some type of impending disaster--from foreclosure to divorce. In spite of all their stressors I continue to probe: *what truly makes people happy especially during difficult times?* Some interesting results have turned up. Love for humanity and our environment may have more to do with true happiness than economic growth, development and material wealth.
Makes sense to me.

First, I thought I'd begin with those amazing centenarians--the ones you see celebrating their birthdays on *Good Morning America* who have survived wars and famine--pulling through one hundred years later grinning at the camera saying, *you bet I'm happy*. Elders carry vast wisdom. Let's learn from them. They must be the keepers of secret tips to happiness--*in the face of adversity*.

Interviews with these merry matriarchs and patriarchs reveal everything from possessing a spunky, sassy attitude to practicing eclectic Hunza health secrets like drinking a dose of cider vinegar and eating ten raw almonds a day. Maybe all of those quirky things work.

Take note. Here's another commonality: most centenarians proudly state *faith and family* as central to their long happy lives. Whatever that faith might be. The other happiness ingredient is surrounding yourself with people you love and *loving them well*.

Still, some scientists say that good genes may win in the last round. On the other hand, human growth and development experts know our environment can make or break us. The *Nature v Nurture* battle will be duking it out for many future episodes, *Survival of the Fittest*.

Feeling like life is a battle might be part of the burden, too. I've been dumped upside down on my head several times--hit with devastating set-backs and losses. *Messy, ugly, painful stuff.* Lost everything to my name nearly five years ago in a painful relationship ending. Yet, my personal struggle was nothing compared to the lives of people suffering in places like Dafur or Afghanistan.

Trauma sends people reeling. Hardship wreaks havoc with the physical body. It creates *monkey-mind*. Wild, uncontrollable, negative thoughts that interfere with work, relationships, productivity and creativity. Wakeful 4 am fits steal sleep. Night terrors are terrible. The emotional pain body consumes energy and impairs cognitive capacities when it continues to dominate. *Fight and flight* become the ever-ready EMT responders--always on-call, never knowing when to punch out.

So, why is it that some people survive and thrive after severe trauma, achieving states of spiritual nirvana while others do not? What makes people resilient during hard times? Some people sustain as peaceful as Buddha while others carry gloom and doom with them wherever they go. Deciphering this happiness quotient has strong implications for all of us, especially trauma victims impacted by domestic abuse, homelessness, extreme poverty, violent crimes--and definitely veterans and civilians who have endured the atrocities of war.

Those Centenarians...

Back to those centenarians.

I think they have a pretty good idea about how to live *The Good Life*. Early sustainability pioneers, Helen and Scott Nearing come to mind, with their homesteading and happiness lifestyle teachings published back in 1954--definitely going against the grain of their times. For a time, I embraced and experimented with their guiding principles that centered around avoiding over dependence on money. The Nearings divided their day into two main four-hour periods--one for "bread labor" and the other for meaningful professional and personal endeavors. Here's what most long-living elders similar to the Nearings have to say about creating a happy, healthful long life...

Get fit, stay active.

This doesn't mean running marathons in midlife. What it does mean is regular moderate exercise for 30 minutes daily, 2-3 times weekly to get your heart rate and numerous other muscles, organs and hormones functioning properly. Studies now show simply moving once every 20 minutes to stay busy with normative physical tasks will keep you limber for a lifetime. The happiest people do not push their bodies with grueling workout routines or marathons. Instead, moderation seems to be the rule. Studies actually show excessive exercise can bring on increased stress for many people.

Embrace a positive mental attitude.

There's a bit of a tangent I'll take here--people are happier and live longer when

they worry moderately. It appears that a bit of an edge makes them more conscientious people--with an above average concern about their health, relationships, money. This motivates people to do something about nagging worries, whereas those who simply sit around and mope, doing nothing or are careless about their lives are more prone to depression, obesity or worse.

Overall, what else created happiness for the centenarians?

They have strong social circles--plenty of people they love and who love them in return, from a spouse to friends and neighbors. They practice healthful eating, exercise moderately, engage in work or volunteering post-retirement, definitely activities they enjoy. Happy people *do not work themselves to death--but work themselves to live*, says Howard Friedman author of *The Longevity Project*.

These are the lessons of the elders.

Live and learn.

Happy Planet Index

Would it surprise you to learn that there's something called the *Happy Planet Index-HPI*? Ever take one of those online pop quizzes to learn which city or marital partner is best for you? I have. Especially when I get the itch to move or travel. I love taking them. There are more sophisticated tests and tools, such as the *Happy Planet Index*, that Nic Marks and others designed to mathematically measure sustainable happiness and well-being in humans globally.

I like the *HPI* because it focuses on progress in a holistic manner, taking into account factors such as environmental sustainability and social justice--not solely economic growth measurements. For too long there's been a statistical fixation on what a country produces materially rather than overall health and happiness experienced by a society.

It is about time we measure what makes us well, what makes life truly worth living. Perhaps this will help us shed the fear factor and dreary negativity--*stop feeding the nightmare*. Perpetuated panic spreads like a global virus these days.

It is better for our health to dream, envision and create sustainable solutions. Here's what Happy Planet people and other researchers have discovered: people on this earth want *happiness, love and health*.

Yes, security and money are important--but the three aforementioned rank globally as top human desires.

Happier spaces, places on the planet

Are your extended family, neighbors or city council cranky? What are the solutions? *Revolution, reconciliation, relocation*? Let's look at the option of moving. Essentially, we're a nomadic tribe. Twice I tried to be an ex-pat in

Mexico. Those were amazing and affordable times, but I succumbed to my heartfelt desires. I craved the closeness of family and dear friends back in my homeland. Still, I consider emigrating every several years.

The question of residency prompted me to deepen my quest, explore *spaces and places*, discover which U.S. cities and countries are hosts to the happiest residents. How does it stack up for good ole *Estados Unidos*? Here are a few of the cities that shine as happiest places to live: *Boulder Colorado, Madison Wisconsin, Austin Texas and Honolulu Hawaii*, to name a few. I'm happy to report that I've either lived or worked in two of those wonder spots. They have much to offer their residents with quality life factors.

Here's another intriguing happy hometown story. In his National Geographic book, *Thrive: Finding Happiness in the Blue Zones Way*, Minneapolis author Daniel Buettner describes the cheerful California city of San Luis Obispo. Evidently people are moving there in droves due to its happiness super-status. Recently, Denmark has been ousted from the *Top Ten List of Happiest Countries*, while Costa Rica shot to the apex of all happiness charts. Why Costa Rica and San Luis Obispo?

Sustainability is the key. Human happiness should not happen at the expense of the earth. Simply living in a wealthy country does not guarantee life satisfaction. Sustainable values are correlates with true happiness. *Pura vida* is a popular expression in Costa Rica--roughly translated as 'the pure life'--an understanding and appreciation of life's true essence. Where there's *pura vida* present in a neighborhood, community or country people seem much happier. This far outweighs prestigious economic status and possession of material goods. Several other fascinating factors about Costa Rica: they generate all that bliss on only a quarter of the resources that similar happy nations utilize. And, they abolished their army in 1949.

Interesting.

Safe, Sound and Secure

Greed, materialism, disproportionate wealth and the military industrial complex prevail in the Big Nations--while billions of others suffer without necessary resources essential to human survival. *Maslow was right*; when basic needs are met, humans survive and thrive. When they're not met, people are pretty much miserable. Clean water, food, shelter, health care, living wages *are basic human rights*.

Happy people are comfortable, secure. They may not be rich, but they have *enough*. A recent benchmark study from Princeton reported that when U.S. families have an annual income of approximately \$75,000 they *feel ok*. Less than that amount, they're stressed out and struggling. Further studies indicate stress shooting up again when income exceeds \$200,000--due to the constant pressure of earning more money, or the grinding fear of losing it. Some studies illustrate that income is relative, though. For example, one recent study of world values revealed that Mexican families living on \$320 per month were ranking

happier than U.S. families living on \$5000 month. Just this morning, my friend who is a teacher emailed to say how much easier her life is in Ethiopia this year in contrast to the daily financial strains of life back in Midwest Minneapolis.

However, there is the *fear factor*. Happy people do not live in fear. Humans function best when their tribe ensures safety--when their nation embraces economic and social policies and programs that provide equitable education, health care and other progressive, sustainable means to help their citizens advance.

Security also comes in the form of loving relationships: marriage, family, friends, neighbors, co-workers and social networks--such as churches, schools or clubs. Happier people genuinely like and care about one another. They look out for each other. Strong trust exists. Solidly woven connections, not tattered disconnection. Optimists opt out of conflict, bicker little over petty matters, and are less likely to use courts to sue one another. They're a peaceful lot who prefer working things out--embracing compassionate and empathic values. This ensures survival of the tribe.

Being happy and secure means living violence-free in a safe home, in a safe neighborhood. Environments where there is little child abuse, domestic violence, rape, street violence, institutional violence--or ugly wars. It means a commitment to deeply honoring human life.

Happiness studies underscore this: *violence equals misery*.

Enough love in your life?

People want to be loved.

Loneliness and unhappiness go hand-in-hand. Want to experience a mega dose of *happy hormones*? Fall in love. Being in love actually alters brain and body chemistry producing more serotonin, oxytocin, vasopressin and endogenous opioids--increasing relaxation, pleasure, satiety and bonding. A loving marriage does more to promote life satisfaction and happiness than money, sex or even having children, as decades of psychology studies reveal. Happily married people tend to save more money, feel secure and engage in daily healthful habits such as good nutrition, volunteer work and moderate exercise.

Happy couples--gay or straight--enjoy trust, laughter, forgiveness, friendship, compatibility and good sex. So, if you're seeking a buffer to unhappiness--having a loving relationship may keep you immune.

Warning: an unhappy marriage works conversely.

When it's good, it's very good--and when it's bad, it's horrid.

There's more to it than this, but overall, loving couples and families are happier people than those who experience loneliness and isolation.

What about work...

People passionate about what they do for a living are among the happiest. Here's one work happiness equation I discovered: $G+P+V=C$
This is how it breaks down. Combine individual *gifts* (G), plenty of *passion* (P), plus important personal *values*(V); it can all add up to knowing your true professional *calling*. Apply it. See if it works.

Other factors contributing to vocational happiness are: having positive relationships with your boss and co-workers, solid trust, good communication, regular feedback, periodic recognition and rewards, excellence and pride in work accomplished, plus being paid what you're worth.

People working from home or having a short commute to work rank higher in sustainable happiness than others. Self-employed people and educators are among the happiest professionals.

Here's my pitch for shorter work weeks. The happiest of all people work only 30-40 hours per week. No more. For every full-time daily shift worked, it has been proven there must be 6 hours of free-time or social time for balance. Those who work even longer hours must find more free-time (9 hours of free-time for every shift worked). Where they will find that time, I do not know. Studies show six weeks of vacation per year creates happier, creative workers, too.
Ok worker bees...how well are you faring?

What feeds your soul?

What other nourishing factors keep humans happy?
Here's one I love: *spend time in nature*. Humans feel more connected when communing with Mama Nature. Children and adults need regular doses of green. Their anxiety, depression and aggression rates all decrease when they spend more time outdoors. Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods*, says 'nature intelligence' increases--and general IQ will, too.

Hobbies, passions and fulfilling activities outside of work are important themes in happy peoples' lives. This runs the gamut from white water kayaking to weaving birch bark baskets at a Scandinavian Folk School.

Content people enjoy regular quiet time, live in homes and places they love, and embrace some form of spirituality--alternative or conventional. They support the arts, walk a lot and take in more natural sunlight than others. Interestingly, they enjoy a glass of wine with friends or partake in moderation during Happy Hours at local pubs. They support community projects and volunteer more than unhappy people do. Hopeful humans have savings accounts that serve as safety nets. They watch less television, grow more gardens, have a family pet, and are proud of their family. Here's another you might like: *they sleep a bit more than others*.

Boost and Bolster: Happiness resiliency factors

Have hope for the future. Happiness is an inside and outside job. Think positively. Be resilient. Know what to do and who to reach out to when the devil comes knocking at your door. Tap into internal and external strengths and resources. Whether you're cruising along in perfect non-eventful homeostasis or you're a survivor of something terribly traumatic, here is my finale on what to consider when designing happiness and well being for a lifetime:

- Love and be loved
- Get fit, stay active, use moderation
- Ignite your curiosity, feel passion
- Learn something new each year
- Immerse in nature often
- Be aware of what's happening around you
- Connect with others, care about your global tribe
- Stay hopeful about the future

When all else fails, here's one final dose of good medicine and tough love that helps me make it through those not-so-easy days: *Sometimes life knocks you on your ass...get up, get up, get up! Happiness is not the absence of problems, it's about your ability to deal with them.* (Steve Maraboli, *Life, the Truth, and Being Free*)

Cheers! Here's to creating happiness mojo this season!

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