

## How to Support Your Own Happiness

When you were little and the teacher asked what you wanted to be when you grew up, you surely didn't answer "miserable!"

At every stage in life, unhappiness is not a state to which we aspire. But with the economy rolling downhill, the vision of our own prosperity can seem like a tiny, inflatable raft in an ocean of fear. In such unstable times, the pursuit of happiness can feel like a taunt rather than an inalienable right.

Still, it's worth the effort. Emerging research shows that while trauma has a profound impact on the brain, the brain is not as hard-wired as previously thought. *We can learn to be happier.* In fact, the most popular class at Harvard University is one in which students learn to train their brains to cultivate what instructor Tal Ben-Shahar calls the ultimate currency: happiness.

### Why Happiness Matters

Medical evidence suggests being unhappy affects our memory and our capacity to learn, while increasing the risk of illness.

On the flip side, happier people are more likely to:

- be more creative, confident and productive.
- have a stronger network of allies and friends.
- be sick less often and get well faster.

### How to Support Your Own Happiness

If you would like to train your brain for happiness, consider some of these ideas:

**Decide that you want to be happier.** When you make that decision, you start to notice choices for happiness that you may have missed before. Those choices may be small, such as lying

down for 10 minutes when you're tired rather than powering through a task, but you start to create a habit of seeking happiness that grows.

**Acknowledge your feelings.** When you feel distressed, don't make it worse by beating yourself up for being upset. Do your best to accept your feelings. When you give your feelings respect and attention, they usually begin to shift on their own, and you start to feel better.

**Work with your thoughts.** If you're having thoughts that are hurtful to you, try reaching for a better thought or scenario that you can actually believe. For instance, if you're worried about losing your job, recall something stable in your life, whether it's your partner's income or your healthy savings account. When your mind returns to the worry, bring it back to the better-feeling thought.

**Celebrate success.** Whether it's the achievement of a major goal or a week when your children got along, take in the accomplishment, and give yourself and your children a pat on the back.

**Seek meaning.** Happiness comes from doing something that gives us pleasure and meaning. If your job doesn't provide that, find something that does. It could be a hobby, volunteering, taking a course, or allowing time to read a book or cook something tasty.

**Express gratitude.** Be grateful for everything that makes your day better, from a colleague's smile to your morning latte.

As you practice happiness and make it a habit, you'll find yourself in a lovely upward spiral that will support you through challenging times. \*



### Things to Say to Yourself

*Often, the things we say to ourselves we wouldn't think of saying to another person. We blame, shame, call names of the meanest sort, nag, belittle and bully ourselves through self-talk. What if, instead, we were gentler with ourselves, asked ourselves questions and listened to the responses? What if we treated ourselves as we treat a best friend, someone we love dearly? Here's a Top 10 list of loving things to say to yourself.*

- 1. What do you feel?** Listening for the response is like taking our emotional temperature.
- 2. What do you need?** Pay attention to your needs, they're about caring for yourself.
- 3. Good job.** Congratulate yourself on a job well done, whether it's mowing the lawn, writing a poem or cleaning the bathroom.
- 4. I apologize.** Saying "sorry" for the wrongs we've done ourselves can be the first step in healing.
- 5. Let's play.** Lighten up and have some fun. Listen to what comes up when you suggest play.
- 6. Breathe.** Breathing helps relieve tension, gives us that moment we sometimes need to center and ground ourselves.
- 7. I forgive you.** To have closure and to move on, we often need to forgive ourselves.
- 8. Let go.** Release worries, resentments, anger and fears to make room for growth.
- 9. Be present.** Staying aware of the moment keeps us feeling truly alive.
- 10. I love you.** We say it to others, why not say it to ourselves? Say it again. \*

# A Letter From

Michaela O'Toole, PhD



## Accept Yourself by Letting Go of Criticism

Many of us carry around an inner voice, a critic who is judgmental not only of ourselves, but of others. Very often, though, our judgment of others is usually a reflection of how we feel about ourselves. We've all been guilty of judging others too harshly at one time or another. Unfortunately, criticism can become a nasty habit that leads to a cycle of negative thinking. It's also a defense masking the unhappiness and secret anxieties that we may possess. In the process of being judgmental, we lose our ability to empathize, to be compassionate and tolerant, and we cut ourselves off from belonging. It is during times when we are feeling bad about ourselves that we are at risk to look for targets to project our tensions, negative feelings, and anxieties onto.

Do you often find yourself criticizing others relationships or successes? It may be that you haven't been as successful as you would like or that you haven't been in a relationship for a while. How does this "critical self" impact our well-being?

It is clear from the research that holding negative automatic thoughts promotes depressed states in people. Releasing these is a primary aspect of treatment for depression. CBT or Cognitive Behavioral Therapy can help people restructure their thinking. Therapy aims to liberate the "critical self", leading us on a path to compassion, kindness, and allowing peace and happiness.

# Are You Taking Good Care of Yourself

With our busy lives, taking care of ourselves is more important than ever—yet it's often the last thing on our minds. We have to meet that deadline, use break time to run errands, accomplish all the items on our list. We all know the negative impact on our health that stress can have—so, let's find some balance. Take this self-quiz to see how well you are taking care of yourself.



### True False

- 1. When I'm upset and/or feeling hopeless, I talk about the situation with a friend, family member or therapist. And if I need help, I ask for it.
- 2. I let go of the way things used to be. I accept the way things are.
- 3. Every day I do something physical even if it's just a walk around the block or a 15-minute workout.
- 4. I eat healthfully and take the time to enjoy my meals. I set aside work, driving and other activities while I eat.
- 5. I think positively. I view problems as opportunities and obstacles as challenges.
- 6. I can say no when I need or want to.
- 7. I remember to breathe.
- 8. If I'm experiencing physical symptoms, I go to the appropriate health care professional. I don't panic about the symptoms, and I don't deny them either.
- 9. I can settle for "good enough." I don't demand perfection in everything that I do.
- 10. I recognize the value of working in different gears. Some tasks require less effort. That saves energy for those times when I need to push myself.
- 11. I get enough sleep most nights.
- 12. I value my personal relationships and give them the time and energy they need and deserve.
- 13. I choose healthy ways to relieve stress. I don't rely on crutches such as smoking, drinking and overeating.
- 14. I recognize the importance of breaks during the day, as well as vacations.
- 15. I listen to and respect my feelings.

If you answered false to several of these, you may want to take an honest look at the impact your choices may be having. Please do not hesitate to call if you would like support in taking better care of yourself. \*

# Breath In, Breath Out

Everyone could use a 5-minute stress buster a few times a day, whether at home, work, school, or on your lunch break. When was the last time you intentionally allowed your mind and body to relax at the same time? Most of us run on automatic pilot and it is difficult in today's world to slow down and take a few moments for ourselves. Being purposefully aware of our breathing can help us tune into our body, calming mind, body, and soul. Using a technique called **DIAPHRAGMATIC BREATHING**, we can cultivate an adaptive response to stress or anxiety. Babies come into the world breathing this way, but somehow we adults have forgotten how to breathe deeply, and when faced with stress can feel uncentered. Diaphragmatic breathing is abdominal or belly breathing. The point is to relax your belly as much as possible so that the full cycle of breathing will be slower and deeper. Some people may hyperventilate when they become extremely anxious and will notice their breathing may become faster and shallower.



When this happens, they are not breathing in enough oxygen and are breathing out too much carbon dioxide. This is very common with people who suffer from **PANIC DISORDER**. Often, people with high anxiety

or panic may believe they are going to have a heart attack, pass out, or even believe they may die.

Sometimes, initially focusing on one's breathing may increase anxiety, but practicing creates the confidence that we can re-focus ourselves. **DIAPHRAGMATIC BREATHING** is an effective tool to reestablish inner harmony and balance. At any time during the day, one can surreptitiously do a quiet "breathe in, breath out" exercise without anyone around you knowing what you're doing. Perhaps you're in a meeting and a boss or co-worker gets on your nerves.

What do you do? That's right, breath in, breath out. This is a great way to emotionally collect yourself when you're angry, upset, vulnerable, or out of sorts. Tuning into yourself this way allows you to stay in the present and to orient yourself to what emotions you are feeling. \*

## TRY THESE BREATHING TECHNIQUES...

### Technique 1

1. Diaphragmatic or abdominal breathing can be practiced lying on your back or sitting in a comfortable chair. Try to **relax** your shoulders or any part of your body that holds tension and relax as fully as possible.
2. **Close your eyes**, or, if for some reason this is not comfortable, keep them open.
3. Put your hand on your abdomen and on the in breath feel your stomach expand as if it were a balloon, but comfortably. Feel it recede on the out breath. I find it helpful to breath in through the nose and exhale out through the mouth; however, inhaling and exhaling through the mouth is fine.
4. Allow yourself to just **focus on the breath**. Let all other noises or distractions fade away.
5. If you notice thoughts coming into your mind, simply return your attention to your "belly breathing" and stay with the breath, not judging any thoughts that occur.

### Technique 2

1. Become mindful of stress responses in daily life. Practice noticing when you become reactive; when someone pushes your button. Bring awareness to feelings of hurt, anger, or frustration, and notice what your body is doing.
2. Practice the above exercise several times during the day. Become more open and aware of your thoughts and feelings.
3. Notice if you can stop or lessen the stress responses as they are happening. This takes lots of practice, but it's worth it!

### Remember this tip:

**BREATH IN, BELLY OUT**

**BREATH OUT, BELLY IN**



# When Depression is Mild

At some time, nearly every person experiences feelings of depression—sadness, discouragement, the blues. These are common, normal feelings that come and go—mild depressions that can be seasonal or event-related.

Depression becomes an illness when symptoms intensify and persist over an extended period of time.

Depression can be treated; however, nearly two-thirds of depressed people don't get appropriate treatment. Even with all we know, some still believe depression is a personal fault or weakness, and that the person who is suffering could just "snap out of it" if he or she wanted to.

Like with other illnesses, denial that anything is wrong may be one reason help is not sought. Other times people don't seek help because they don't recognize the symptoms.

Following are some common characteristics of depression and some dos and don'ts if you or someone you care about is experiencing mild depression.

## Some Symptoms of Depression

- **Persistent sad or "empty" feelings**, feeling discouraged, blue or down.
- **Negative feelings**—feeling guilty,

unworthy. Self-criticism, self-blame.

- **Loss of interest in ordinary activities.**
- **Decreased energy**, feeling fatigued, restless, irritable or lethargic.
- **Increase of sleep or insomnia.**
- **Loss of interest in sex.**
- **Changes in appetite**—eating more or less, gaining or losing weight.
- **Difficulty concentrating**, remembering, making decisions.

If symptoms persist and the following additional symptoms appear, then professional help is needed.

- Excessive weeping or crying.
- Thoughts of suicide or death.
- Persistent physical symptoms such as headaches, chronic pain, digestive disorders.

## When Depression Is Mild, What Should a Person Do?

Try to be with supportive, understanding people. Do those recreational activities that you have always liked. Participate in social activities or community gatherings. Exercise is helpful—go for walks, work in the yard, plant some flowers.

Also, break large tasks into smaller ones; set priorities. Only do what

you can and check your expectations of yourself. Talk about how you're feeling with friends, family and your therapist.

## What Should a Person with Depression Not Do?

- Don't isolate or hide out.
- Don't set difficult goals or take on too much responsibility.
- Don't expect too much of yourself.
- Don't set yourself up for disappointment or failure.
- Don't make major life decisions—changing jobs, getting married or divorced—without first consulting with others who know you well and have a more objective view of your situation.
- Don't expect to suddenly get over the depression. Most likely, feeling better will happen gradually.
- Don't accept negative thinking and feelings as reflecting your true situation.

If you're experiencing mild depression, keep hope. With time and treatment, if necessary, the symptoms will dissipate. You will come back to yourself. \*



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