



Talk About Living!
Suzanne Zoglio, PhD

Happiness is an inside job

What makes me happy –art, flowers, dance, writing, helping others-may not be what pumps up your dopamine (feel-good hormone). And what makes you feel happy might do nothing for your spouse or children. True, research indicates that certain activities can be counted on to be mood-elevators for most people: showing gratitude, giving, forgiving, learning something new, for instance. However, research also confirms that happiness in many ways is an inside job...founded on individual character traits and the degree to which we find new ways to use them.

In a Positive Psychology study reported in the *American Psychologist*, two actions were shown to have long-lasting effects on happiness. The first –the Gratitude List- has been written about often. To feel less depressed and have a greater sense that life is worth living, each day for a week, write down three things that *you* think have gone right with your life that day and why. Doing just that, the study indicates, will not only make you feel happier, but will do so for six months. Perhaps, if you make a daily habit of the practice, you could be happier for life!

The second booster of long-lasting happiness was even more individualized. Based on strengths identified in the *VIA Survey of Character Strengths*, people were asked to find a new way of applying one of their core strengths (e.g. creativity, responsibility, compassion, learning, courage, justice, etc.) and do it for a week. Those who did so were happier after one week and after six months. To understand more about individual character strengths visit www.authentichappiness.com (there is no charge for taking the inventory online). But for the moment, imagine a mother applying her compassion to underprivileged women or a newspaper writer becoming a blogger or a trial lawyer teaching justice to college students. Perhaps you know someone who retired and started playing the saxophone, or painting, or heading up a nonprofit. These are just a few examples of finding new ways to apply personal strengths. For inside-out happiness, we must each find our own.

So many people today refer to finding, following, or nurturing their passion. Yet, I hear from so many others that they don't know *have* a passion. (This is usually said a bit remorsefully, as though they've missed the boat or something's wrong with them.)

What I find so positive about the character strengths and the research behind them, is that you discover your natural virtues and can boost your life satisfaction just by including more activities related to them. No mystery. No "wishing" you were a closet Monet, Beethoven, Forbes, or Mother Theresa. No envying all those passionate people...just pure ecstasy in expressing your own magnificent gifts.

What a relief! We don't have to be as successful as our colleagues to be happy. We don't have to be as creative as our siblings. We don't have to be as wealthy as our neighbors. We don't have to be as compassionate as our "good" friends. Happiness is an inside job.

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