



Be happier in '09: Turn your frown upside down



Are you happy? Have you ever stopped to ask yourself that? Don't pass over the question too lightly.

When I was a little boy and sometimes acted a bit grumpy, the grownups would often give me a warning to be happy by saying things like, "Turn that frown upside down!" When I became a teenager, I displayed happiness by drawing smiley faces next to my signature (come to think of it, I still do that!). When I went away to school I had a classmate who seemed to be angry if we didn't appear to be happy. She would come up to us and in an oddly commanding voice, say "Smile!"

Are any of these things true measures of happiness: frowns turned upside down, smiley faces, commands to "smile"? Or is happiness something else, something deeper, something a bit more complex? It is this "something else" that I invite you to think about with me for it is this "something else" that is at the heart of happiness.

At the beginning of 2009 — when we face exciting times of change as well as crisis around our world — it is particularly important to think about how to be happy.

It is possible to be happy even when storms are raging around and within us. Enduring the storms gives hope especially as we encounter the obstacles of daily life. That is important to remember.

Dr. Martin Seligman, a psychologist and professor at the University of Pennsylvania, has done much work on what it means to be happy. He has concluded that upside down frowns and smiley faces are only a part of what it means to be happy; and angry sounding commands to "smile!" aren't a part of the picture at all. Time magazine (Jan. 17, 2005) wrote that Seligman "finds three components of happiness: pleasure (the 'smiley face' piece), engagement (the depth of involvement with one's family, work, romance, and hobbies), and meaning (using personal strengths to serve some larger end)." The British Broadcasting News online (June 2, 2006) developed a "formula for happiness" from Seligman's work:

Pleasure + Engagement + Meaning = Happiness

What gives you pleasure? What is there in your life and community that gives you a sense of fulfillment and peace — that makes you smile when you think about it or share in it? It could be big things like the birth of a new grandchild or a milestone birthday or anniversary. Maybe it's the small, easily missed things like the first crocus blooming in the back yard or the squirrel that comes to play across the street or having lunch with a friend.

What gives your life engagement? Perhaps you and your spouse have a long and deeply meaningful relationship. Perhaps your children and grandchildren are especially close parts of your life. Perhaps you work at a place that is enjoyable and where you are engaged with your co-workers. Perhaps you have a hobby that is rewarding. Perhaps you are a part of a community group — a church, a synagogue, a club — where the relationships and the work provide deeply meaningful connections.

What, beyond yourself, gives your life meaning? What is there that allows you to forget about yourself and to devote your strengths and loves to helping someone else? Perhaps you volunteer to deliver Meals on Wheels. Perhaps you are a caring visitor to a neighbor who is lonely. Perhaps, even though you may not be able to get out of the house yourself, you pick up the telephone to let someone know that you are thinking of them and that you care about them. What lifts your eyes beyond yourself and causes you to find rich meaning in helping someone else?

David Lazar, a Community Health Ambassador for the Center for Healthy Aging, shared a poem that he wrote with me, "Steps of Happiness". At the beginning of this new and challenging year, I would like to share David's thoughts with you:

Learning happiness from all people

Being a master of happiness

Joining a happiness club

Breathing in happiness

Making a happiness decision constantly

Being a master of gratitude

Sleeping with songs of gratitude

Using links to happiness

Walking steps of happiness, joy, and love

Teaching others paths of acceptance, peace, and love

Creating a world of peace and happiness moment by moment

*Seeing life with eyes that glow
Being a messenger of love and peace And joy, and kindness, and courage
Being a walking soul that constantly leads the way to goodness and joy and hope.*

Are you happy? Can you fill in the details of that “formula for happiness”:

Pleasure + Meaning + Engagement = Happiness?

I imagine that you can. Doing so can lead to many happier and healthier tomorrows.

This column was written by David J. Fetterman, Center for Healthy Aging Director of Education and Community Outreach Coordinator.

CHA is a part of the Department of Epidemiology in the Graduate School of Public Health at the University of Pittsburgh. It is one of 33 Prevention Research Centers in the United States funded by the Center for Disease Control. For questions and more information contact David J. Fetterman, Community Outreach Coordinator & Director of Education at the Center for Healthy Aging at 412-383-3121 or visit www.healthyaging.pitt.edu

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