

Beginning to Thrive through Love and Social Connections

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The Joy Compass: Eight Ways to Find Lasting Happiness, Gratitude and Optimism in the Present Moment, Donald Altman]

Would you knowingly partake in a behavior that was proven to shorten your life as much as smoking fifteen cigarettes a day does? How about starting a behavior whose negative effect on your life span was equivalent to that of being an alcoholic? How ready would you be to engage in an activity that was twice as harmful to your health as obesity? Believe it or not, a single behavior has been shown to shorten life expectancy as significantly as smoking, alcoholism, and obesity. This culprit not only dampens joy, but also considerably diminishes the amount of time you may have to experience it. The activity that is responsible is this: isolation from others.

The Benefits of Connecting with Others

A team of researchers at Brigham Young University found that people who had a strong social network enjoyed a 50 percent greater chance of living longer than those who were isolated and didn't have good support. The study (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010) was a meta-analysis that examined more than 148 studies that included over 300,000 participants. The results of having social support were dramatic, and according to the study, social connections had a greater positive impact on preventive health care than taking drugs to control high blood pressure or even getting a vaccine to prevent pneumonia.



Interestingly, the researchers also found that Americans had become increasingly more isolated over the previous two decades. Almost forty-percent of Americans now live alone, and researchers found that the number of people reporting a lack of loving relationship and a supportive confidant had tripled. What's more, adults are not the only ones experiencing this loss. We need to support a generation of children who are increasingly isolated due to technology overuse. Interpersonal neurobiology helps us understand that while web-based social networking sites may provide some sense of connection, they are not equivalent to the face-to-face interactions that are the key to unlocking deeper sustenance and locating joy. The act of social engagement unlocks the brain's innate potential for building healthy and loving relationships based on trust, openness, and empathy.

One factor in the harmful effect of isolation may be higher levels of cortisol. This is a stress hormone that doesn't exactly locate joy. One study (Adam, Hawkley, Kudielka, & Cacioppo, 2006) found a link between loneliness and cortisol. In fact, it found that individuals who went to bed after a day of feeling angry and lonely woke up in the morning with elevated levels of cortisol. It was as if their bodies were preparing these people for yet another stressful day. Fortunately, it doesn't have to be that way.

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It's important to recognize that a social network can come in many different shapes and sizes. When Bob came to me for help, he shared a life story filled with difficulties ranging from substance abuse to membership in a gang. His family was severely dysfunctional, and support was practically nonexistent. But despite having spent much of his adult life in and out of prison, Bob was determined to turn his life around one step at a time. The reason for Bob's visit was clear: having returned to school at the age of thirty-eight, it looked as if a community college training program was going to do him in. He was failing his classes and was highly distracted by personal issues. Bob needed to identify and access resources to help him navigate this new life path.

After I asked Bob some questions, it became clear that he had no idea how to manage his study time. I suggested that he find a resource person at the college who could help him craft a daily study schedule. When Bob returned the following week, he proudly showed me a study spreadsheet that detailed his study time for each week of the term. "I started asking around," he said, "and someone told me about this posting on a bulletin board. So I called, and they worked out a complete schedule. Now I know what I have to do each day." My work with Bob also included helping him manage his stress and find other supportive resources.

Another client, fifty-five-year-old Beverly, had cared for her aging parents for several years. While this had been extremely important to her, she had become so immersed during her parents' final years that she had lost all touch with her own social network. By the time Beverly came to see me, four years after the death of her parents, she was still grieving and isolating herself from others. Part of her grief, I believe, was due to the fact that her social network had consisted solely of her parents and their caregivers. Instead of building a new network - such as with coworkers in the office where she worked - she kept to herself and dwelled on the past.

To get Beverly connecting again with others, I encouraged her to seek out connections in her workplace, as well as make a list of all the activities that could help her transition from a grieving place into the social realm. Eventually, the benefits of seeking out direct interpersonal relationships paid off. Before long, Beverly was tapping into the myriad of joyful social activities she had always found sustaining, such as dancing, yoga, going to church, and meeting with others over a meal. These connections changed her life and helped her again feel closeness and trust from others - key hallmarks of positive resonance happening through our interpersonal neurobiologies.

As these examples point out, your joy compass can get activated from many sources other than family or friends. You can also find immense joy in having pets. Activities and professional support are other important avenues for finding joy. The following practices will illustrate the different areas from which you can gain and sustain social connections.

Practice: Daily Time Spent with Others

How isolated or connected are you? How much time do you spend face to face with significant others in your life? This practice will help you track how isolated or connected you are.

For the next week, do your best to track the amount of uninterrupted time you spend with others, as well as the time you spend alone. It can also be useful to track the amount of time you spend with electronic technology, not interacting face to face with others. To get the average amount of time, track the following categories on a daily basis:

- Uninterrupted time spent in person with significant others (at home)
- Time spent alone with technology (at home)
- Uninterrupted time spent in person with others (at work)
- Time spent alone with technology (at work)
- Uninterrupted time spent in person with others (outside home)

Reflections on Daily Time Spent with Others

Were you surprised by the results of your exploration? Are you spending less time than you would like with significant others in your life? What would it be like if you could increase quality time with others? What adjustments would you like to make about how you interact with others or with technology? What would be the challenges you would face? What is one small change that you could make right now?

Remember, the purpose of this practice is not to avoid technology, but to find a meaningful and joyful balance between the dynamics of technology and social activity.

Practice: Identifying Resources

On a sheet of paper, write down the following six categories and make a corresponding list for each:

- *Family*: Make a list of family members who are supportive of you, regardless of their proximity to you. Don't forget to include extended family who may have special work expertise or other talents that you can draw on.

- *Friends/Associates*: A supportive friend or associate doesn't have to be your "BFF," best friend forever! For example, even having a neighbor whom you can have a brief, pleasant exchange with is an important joy connection.

- *School/Workplace*: Locate people at your school or workplace who make you laugh. Take the time to learn about the full range of supportive resources that are available to you—from EAP counselors to human-resources professionals.

- *Activities*: Don't be shy or modest when creating a list of activities or classes you might want to try, such as yoga, meditation, dancing, music, sports, swimming, art, tai chi, book clubs, volunteering, and others. You don't have to be Picasso to take an art class; you don't have to be a sports star to join a softball league. Also, if you have taken part in an activity in the past, write it down anyway. You may find that reconnecting with an old hobby is like trying on a comfortable, favorite pair of shoes.

- *Caregivers/Professionals/Self-Help*: There are a host of people available to support your emotional and physical well-being, including doctors, dentists, mental health professionals, acupuncturists,

chiropractors, dietitians, naturopaths, life coaches, exercise trainers, 12-step programs, women's groups, men's groups, telephone hotline operators, and online support groups.

- *Church/Religious/Spiritual*: There are philosophy clubs and groups that explore meaning for almost every persuasion, from religious and humanist to pantheist and atheist. Conversations about living a life that matters can help you locate like-minded individuals whose values match your own.

Reflections on Identifying Resources

What did you discover by creating a list of support systems? Did you find more than you had imagined? What are the ones that you can start using right away? Which ones will take time to cultivate? Which ones get your joy compass working quickly?

Most important, what is one small, realistic, and achievable step you can take, either today or this week, to make a satisfying connection with another person? How would this action enhance your life, your mood, and your ability to experience joy?

Enhance Your Relationships

While a number of relationship studies investigate stressed-out or at-risk couples, one study (Carson, Carson, Gil, Baucom, 2004) took the unique approach of using mindfulness training with couples who were already well adjusted and fairly happy. The purpose was to see whether such practices as meditation, yoga, mindfulness, awareness of emotions, and a welcoming openness toward your partner could enrich an already solid relationship. Couples were trained in eight weekly sessions lasting two and a half hours and received one day long training. Couples filled out a daily diary that tracked such items as relationship happiness, relationship stress, and how well they were coping. The results showed that couples who had trained in mindfulness were better able to cope with relationship stress and felt increased optimism, closeness, and acceptance.

One of the qualities of mindfulness is that it invites a sense of curiosity to each interaction. To take a mindfulness approach with another person, even someone you have known for years, is to experience that person as if the two of you had just met. It means suspending and letting go of any attitude of judgment, dread, or boredom that arises. Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy (2009) wrote a short parable, "Three Questions," which sheds light on this more expansive way of relating to others in the moment. The story is about the search for the answer to three apparently simple questions: What is the most important time? Who are the most important people? What is the most important thing to do?

The wise man in the story explains that the most important time is now, the most important person is whoever happens to be at your side in this moment, and the most important thing to do is show compassion and caring. Not only is this Tolstoy's joy compass in three questions—but it is also a method for extending happiness to others.

Practice: Being Open and Present with Another Person

How present are you when you are with another person? In this practice you will focus on being present, open, and accepting. The next time you meet or greet someone—a new acquaintance or an old friend—try these four straightforward strategies.

- *Release your assumptions*. What assumptions, beliefs, or opinions do you hold about this person? How are these preconceptions getting in the way? Allow yourself to let go of your assumptions for one minute at a time so that you can experience the unique person before you in a fresh and accepting way.

• *Listen with respect.* Know that deep down, each person wants to be respected and appreciated. Listen without interrupting, show interest, and maintain calm and nonthreatening body language.

• *Be curious.* Take the approach that this person has experiences to share with you. With a curious mind-set, ask questions and get clarification. Seek out new meaning, new ideas, and new information.

• *Make yourself available.* Think of what you have to offer this person and how that compassion will enhance the relationship. This might mean going out of your comfort zone, and it could include asking how you could be of assistance.

Reflections on Being Open and Present with Another Person

Before you even get the chance to use the four guidelines just introduced, what do you think this will be like? Have opinions and judgment made it difficult for you to connect with others? Have you seen how judging others can harm your relationships? Can you let go of assumptions when another person is opinionated? What do you think it will be like to make yourself more available than you perhaps have been in the past? Even bringing these questions into your awareness can help you move in the direction of becoming more available.

After you have had the opportunity to actually put these four guidelines into action, contemplate the following questions: *How did dropping my own assumptions allow me to be more present? How did showing respect and acknowledging another's need to be heard change the interaction? What did I learn about the other person that surprised me? How did it feel to make myself available in some way?* Be patient with yourself as you practice these four guidelines for being open, present, and accepting. Continue to use these guidelines to unlock the vast potential of joy that is waiting in your next encounter.

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To get the full
value of joy you
must have someone
to divide it with.

-Mark Twain

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