

Sometimes your joy is the source of your smile, but sometimes your smile can be the source of your joy. — *Thich Nhat Hanh*

AN ODE TO



SCIENTISTS HAVE DISCOVERED THAT THE HUMAN BODY IS HARD-WIRED FOR HAPPINESS, AND THAT FINDING TRUE, LASTING JOY IS WITHIN OUR GRASP. HERE'S HOW:

BY DIANA TONNESSEN

WHAT WOULD THE holidays be without joy?

During the frenetic holiday season, we line the lamp-posts of our city streets with j-o-y spelled out in twinkling lights. We send good tidings of joy to friends and family via greeting cards. We lug gifts around the mall in overstuffed shopping bags emblazoned with the word. Carolers and revelers sing out in joy

and exaltation during the holiday season.

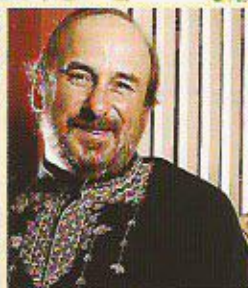
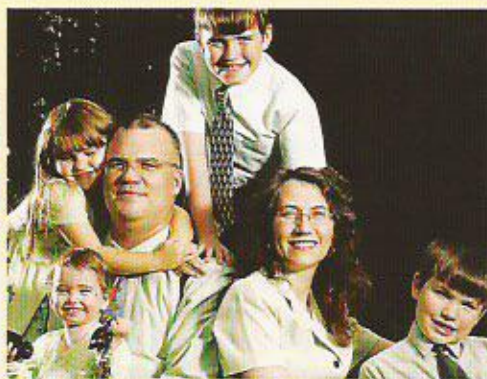
But our yearning for happiness doesn't stop when the holiday season ends. In fact, researchers and scientists now are proving beyond a shadow of doubt what prophets and poets, sages and seers have been proclaiming for ages: Happiness is a basic human need.

Barbara Welsch, a psychologist in the Student Health Center at the University of Florida and a faculty member in UF's Center for Spirituality and Health, says "We need joy in our lives because it gives us a reason for living."

Now, research in the fledgling fields of neuroscience and positive psychology is giving us even more compelling reasons to find ways to bring lasting joy into our lives: Happiness, the research suggests, is a cornerstone of good health and a long life.

"There's no question that joy has a very measurable and tangible effect on health," says Allen Neims, professor in the Department of Pharmacology and Therapeutics in the University of Florida's College of Medicine who is also affiliated with the Center for Spirituality

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — *Declaration of Independence*



THESE HEART-WARMING STORIES ILLUSTRATE LIFE CHOICES THAT INSPIRE JOY, PAGE 53

and Health.

Surprisingly, happiness is not the fleeting, here-today-gone-tomorrow feeling that comes to us on a whim, as we've often been led to believe. New research suggests that we are fully capable of training the brain — and changing our minds — to foster a greater sense of satisfaction with ourselves and our lives. We have within us the power to cultivate a calm mind and an open heart, which many believe are the foundations for real, lasting joy.

NO WORRIES?

But isn't the pursuit of happiness a rather self-centered and self-indulgent activity?

On the contrary, says Welsch, unhappy people are likely to be self-absorbed, socially isolated and angry.

"As a psychologist, I certainly know that unhappy people don't do the world any good. They don't do their families any good. They don't do themselves any good," she says. "When you feel isolated and angry, it affects all of us."

Happy people, on the other hand, tend to be more sociable, flexible and creative. They're also more loving, generous and forgiving than unhappy people. And their happiness is often contagious.

Still not convinced? Think of the wholesale pre- and post-Christmas transformation of Scrooge in Charles Dickens' classic story, "A Christmas Carol." Which of the two would you rather spend time with?

Welsch, Neims and other researchers say that true happiness comes not just with an occasional indulgence in something that gives us pleasure — bingeing on a box of chocolates, for instance — or even a headlong plunge into hedonistic activity. Instead, real joy stems from a deep sense of inner satisfaction with ourselves and our lives that radiates outward.

Living a joy-filled life doesn't mean a life that's completely devoid of pain and suffering, either, adds Welsch. Rather, it means being able to work through negative feelings, bad moods, stress and adversity without letting them get the best of you.

THE HAPPINESS/HEALTH CONNECTION

Numerous studies have found that happy people tend to be healthier than their unhappy counterparts, and to live longer, too. Laughter — the outward display of inner joy — stimulates the heart and blood circulation and relaxes muscles for up to 45 minutes after the last laugh, making it a natural antidote to stress. Some research suggests that laughter increases brain levels of mood-enhancing beta-endorphins — the same "feel-good" hormones responsible for the runner's high. Still other studies show that laughter boosts the body's disease-fighting immune system and may even reduce pain.

But the health benefits of a hearty laugh are just the beginning of a complex interplay between brain and body, thoughts and emotions,

THOUGHTS ON HAPPINESS

Joy is the best makeup.
— Anne Lamott

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But what is happiness except the simple harmony between a man and the life he leads? — Albert Camus

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Success is not the key to happiness. Happiness is the key to success. If you love what you are doing, you will be successful.

— Albert Schweitzer

»»»»»

The best remedy for those who are afraid, lonely or unhappy is to go outside, somewhere where they can be quiet, alone with the heavens, nature and God. Because only then does one feel that all is as it should be and that God wishes to see people happy, amidst the simple beauty of nature.

— Anne Frank

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Happiness comes when your work and words are of benefit to yourself and others. — Buddha

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If only we'd stop trying to be happy we'd have a pretty good time. — Edith Wharton

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Whoever is happy will make others happy, too.
— Mark Twain

MORE THOUGHTS ON HAPPINESS

Happiness cannot come from without. It must come from within. It is not what we see and touch or that which others do for us which makes us happy; it is that which we think and feel and do, first for the other fellow and then for ourselves.

— Helen Keller

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The mind is its own place, and in itself, can make heaven of Hell, and a hell of Heaven. — John Milton

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Happiness is when what you think, what you say, and what you do are in harmony.

— Mohandas K. Gandhi

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Growth itself contains the germ of happiness.

— Pearl S. Buck

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If you observe a really happy man you will find him building a boat, writing a symphony, educating his son, growing double dahlias in his garden. He will not be searching for happiness as if it were a collar button that has rolled under the radiator.

— W. Beran Wolfe

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I believe that the very purpose of our life is to seek happiness.

— The Dalai Lama

heart and mind that is just now coming to light. Armed with magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), ECG machines and PET scanners, researchers and scientists have been busy mapping the inner workings of the brain and heart, recording the biochemical and electromagnetic interactions that drive many of our thoughts, moods, emotions and behaviors.

We've known for some time now that our mood and energy levels are partly governed by levels of the brain neurotransmitters *serotonin*, which has a soothing effect, and *dopamine* and *norepinephrine*, which act as stimulants. Imbalances in these brain chemicals can lead to addiction, anxiety, depression and a host of other emotional disorders that often manifest as physical problems, including digestive disorders, heart rhythm abnormalities, fatigue and/or insomnia.

How do these chemical imbalances come about? They can happen in any number of ways, points out psychiatrist Henry Emmons, author of "The Chemistry of Joy," which describes an integrated approach to the treatment of depression. These include genetic makeup, poor diet, lack of exercise, exposure to industrial, agricultural and environmental toxins, lack of sleep and a high-octane lifestyle coupled with little time for rest.

Two big risk factors for depression are chronic, unmanaged stress and emotional hurts that don't heal, along with the seemingly endless mind-chatter that comes with them.

"If our minds are allowed free rein," Emmons writes, "fretting endlessly over worries about the future, seething constantly with resentment against real or imagined grievances, or shutting down entirely in response to stress, we will sooner or later pay the price in depression."

Emmons and other researchers contend that most of us don't understand the role of the mind in shaping our emotions, our perceptions and even our physical health.

"Our lack of awareness means that we can't find good strategies for dealing with our fearful, angry or confused minds. Instead, we confuse our mind's perceptions with reality, and we allow our unwise mental strategies — worry, anxiety, blame, retaliation, denial, confusion — to determine the course of our lives," Emmons writes. "It's a depressing way to live — and we are, accordingly, depressed."

THE HEART WITH A MIND OF ITS OWN

It's not just our minds that shape our feelings, perceptions and outlook on life. The heart plays a major role, as well. Long recognized as the seat of our emotions, researchers have only recently

MAKING THE CASE FOR A GOOD LAUGH

- Stimulates the heart and blood circulation
- Relaxes muscles, making it a natural antidote to stress
- Boosts the body's disease-fighting immune system
- May even reduce pain

discovered that the heart appears to have a mind of its own — and the memory of an elephant.

According to scientists at the Institute for Heartmath (www.heartmath.com), who study the physiological ways in which the heart communicates with the brain, "The heart is, in fact, a highly complex, self-organized information processing center with its own 'brain' that communicates with and influences the cranial brain via the nervous system, hormonal system and other pathways." The researchers point to numerous studies demonstrating that the messages the heart sends to the brain have a profound effect on our perceptions, mental processes, emotional states and our ability to function in our daily lives.

MAKING SPIRITS BRIGHT

Unfortunately, both the brain and the heart have a natural tendency to hold onto negative experiences in their collective memory banks. It's a survival strategy that's meant to protect us from danger, but one that can also put a Scrooge-like damper on our openness to new experiences and our enjoyment of life.

But it doesn't have to be that way. The new research also shows that just as the heart and mind are conditioned to hold onto old hurts, so, too, can they be trained to be less reactive in the face of perceived threats and more receptive to the good vibes of positive experiences. How?

Sometimes, finding — or feeling — joy can be as simple as turning that frown upside down.

"When you smile, it changes your brain hormones," says Welsch, who adds that changing your frame of reference from negative thinking to more positive thoughts can make a dramatic difference in your brain biochemistry, as well. "Do you see the cup half full or half empty? Whatever you focus on, it's your choice."

Welsch encourages her students at UF to cultivate an attitude of gratitude and generosity because, she says, "What you put out is what you get back." Each semester, she assigns a class project that involves having students go around

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Happiness is not in the mere possession of money; it lies in the joy of achievement, in the thrill of creative effort.

— Franklin D. Roosevelt

— JOY—

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doing good deeds with joy in their hearts. It doesn't matter what form of service the students choose. What's important is the attitude the students adopt while performing the service.

"It's picking up trash or letting someone in front of you in traffic, and all the while emanating from your heart love, appreciation and gratitude," Welsch explains. At first, she says, the students think she's crazy. But as they record their experiences during the course of the project, they soon come to see that, at the very least, having a positive attitude invariably improves the way they feel about themselves. And their good mood often spreads to others whose lives they touch.

Over the years, Allen Neims has observed that very often, happy people are either engaged in serving others — especially during the holidays — or taking on a creative endeavor, be it cooking, writing a book, painting, admiring nature or playing a musical instrument.

"Joy seems to be intertwined with serving and creating," he says.

OTHER WAYS TO BRING JOY INTO YOUR LIFE:

Learn something new, which both serves to distract the mind and to change our frame of reference — usually for the better.

Practice "mindfulness." Mindfulness, Emmons contends in "The Chemistry of Joy," is simply being aware of ourselves and our surroundings without passing judgment. "And being without judgment requires us to expand our capacity for acceptance — both self-acceptance and acceptance of others."

Meditate. One way to increase your awareness and calm the incessant chatter of the mind is through the ancient spiritual practice of meditation. The deep breathing and focused attention associated with meditation slows your breathing and heart rate, increases oxygen levels throughout your body, including your brain, and helps calm and soothe the mind, providing a natural buffer against stress.

Seek out social support. Humans are social beings. Consider one of the most severe forms of punishment meted out in American prisons: solitary confinement. One way to break free of the sense of isolation and disconnection we tend to feel in our fast-paced cyber-oriented society is to reach out to others.

Don't overlook pets as comforting companions, says Welsch. "Pets can be an incredible source of joy in peoples' lives," she says.

Whatever you do, says Welsch, be sure that the things you do to bring more joy into your life don't turn into additional sources of anxiety.

HOLIDAY HAPPINESS: HOPE OR HYPE?

Ironically, the holidays, which come gift-wrapped in the expectation that they'll be filled with happiness and hope, can easily turn into a source of despair.

"We expect so much," explains Welsch. "We paint these visions of what it should be like, and it almost never is." Or we tend to dwell on the memories of holidays past or fret over how soon the season will be over.

"But if you spend your time thinking about how great it's going to be or how soon it's going to be over," Welsch says, "then you may miss the beauty and the joy that's right there in front of you." 🍀