



10 How will you know when you're happy?

This last chapter is simply the full stop at the end of our long discussion on happiness. Although I definitely want you to keep reading these last few pages, I'll tell you right now that there are no new or additional happiness strategies here. There are, however, a few important points to keep in mind and, notably, a few tricks that I've used to remember what I need to do to keep happy.

I'll also take this opportunity to answer one of the questions I'm constantly asked. Many of my clients who have applied these strategies and have realised significant benefits from them still have a degree of uncertainty as to whether or not they've achieved what they set out to achieve. As such, they often ask:

'How will I know when I'm happy?'

And my standard response is:

'Ask yourself! And keep asking yourself often.'

One of the reasons many ask this question is because they have not properly defined what they mean by happiness and therefore they find it hard to know if they've achieved it because they're not even sure what they're trying to achieve. And some who think (unrealistically) that they should be happy 'all the time' find it difficult to believe they're really happy if they experience any degree of distress. This is clearly not helpful.

What's more helpful is to think carefully about what happiness means to you and to note that happiness almost certainly means different things for different people. It's important to remember that happiness is not simply one thing. Instead, it is a collection of emotions including contentment, satisfaction and fulfilment, as well as joy, excitement and pleasure. Further, although through the application of the principles outlined in this book it's possible for the experience of happiness to be authentic and more enduring than most people typically experience, the results, nevertheless, are emotions that will continue to change and fluctuate depending on a range of diverse (internal and external, controllable and uncontrollable) variables.

As mentioned earlier, the realistic and achievable desire to be happier more often should not be confused with the unrealistic and unattainable goal of 100 percent pure happiness 100 percent of the time. So to answer the question posed above, you really need to clarify what you mean by being happier.

Let me share with you another metaphor that might help you understand what you can do to keep track of your happiness levels.

Many people, myself included, meet with their accountant or financial adviser once each year to complete their tax return. One of the questions that might be asked of the accountant is something along the lines of 'How are my finances this year?'

Well the answer to that question obviously depends on how you define a 'strong' or 'weak' financial position. And this definition can, and almost certainly does, change. Think about how you would have defined 'wealth' when you were twelve years old? One hundred dollars probably would have seemed like a fortune back then. But would you consider yourself wealthy now if you had one hundred dollars in the bank? Probably not, and the reason is that your definition has changed.

So think now, how would you define happiness? And further, how would you monitor your happiness to see if you were achieving, or getting closer to reaching, your defined goal?

Well, in this context, your accountant may not be able to help you, but you can. Like an accountant, set up your own system to 'audit' your happiness and to monitor your progress. Just like you check your bank balance at the end of each financial year, you can check your happiness or wellbeing balance at the end of each year and, even more specifically, you can check it within each of the domains of your life you deem important (such as family, health, spirituality, optimism).

This leads to our final exercise, but this is not a daily one. It's a good idea to complete a 'happiness audit' at least once, if not twice, each year. And the good news is it's quite simple.

Take a sheet of paper and list the areas of your life you believe to be most important for your health and happiness. Then ask yourself how you would rate your current position in each of these domains over the last six or twelve months on a scale from one to ten (where one is not achieving anything at all in this area and ten is fully achieving everything you want to achieve in this area).

If your score is less than nine or ten, then consider drawing up a plan that will help you improve in this particular domain. But remember, very few of us will ever really achieve tens in the various aspects of our lives and, in addition, the scores may fluctuate over time due, as noted above, to various life forces.

This need not be a problem if recognised as being perfectly normal. Remember, happiness is a few simple disciplines practised every day. All of the components outlined in this book are skills that can be learnt. Just like any other skills, you'll get better at utilising them with practice and perseverance. Stick at it and happiness will be yours.

As noted in the preceding chapter: fall seven times, stand up eight.

A similar sentiment is expressed in the following great quote that's been used many times in discussions of success and achievement. There's no reason, however, that its message cannot be seen as being equally relevant to happiness.

Nothing in the world can replace perseverance. Talent cannot, there is nothing more common than misused talent. Genius cannot, geniuses are often unfulfilled. Education cannot, the world has many educated people with little achievement. Only perseverance and determination are omnipotent.

Michelangelo is quoted as saying ‘If people knew how hard I worked they wouldn’t find my achievements so remarkable.’ Whether we’re talking about achievement, success or happiness, the same principle applies. For many people reading this book happiness might not be something that comes easily. Just as you need to work hard to achieve success most of the time, you might also need to work hard to achieve happiness much of the time.

So when you notice that you’re not as happy as you would like to be, don’t just accept it (unless, of course, you’re experiencing ‘negative’ emotions that are appropriate to the situation, such as grief following the loss of a loved one or guilt following the enactment of a wrong). Do something about it.

You’ll be as happy as you choose to be.

In fact, I often think of happiness as a choice (as many others also have thought of happiness as a choice), and have developed the CHOOSE mnemonic (memory device) so I don’t forget what are some of the most important components of happiness.

As I explained in my introduction, I regularly use the CHOOSE model, where each of the letters in the word CHOOSE has a special significance. To recap, CHOOSE means:

- C** = clarity of purpose and direction
- H** = health (sleep, exercise and diet)
- O** = optimism (and hope)
- O** = others (my key relationships)
- S** = strengths
- E** = enjoy the moment

I've always found acronyms such as this one helpful and over the years I've used a variety to continually remind me of what I want to remember. I change them from time to time as my priorities change but also to avoid monotony and tolerance. In the past, I've used the following to help me remember what's important

I used to 'CHAT' to myself on a regular basis. In this context, 'chat' meant:

C = calm

H = happiness

A = attitude

T = tolerance

I also focused on GRASPing happiness:

G = goals

R = relationships

A = attitude

S = strengths

P = (the) present moment

With a bit of imagination and creativity, you can come up with your own acronyms or other types of mnemonic. Although you're more than welcome to use mine, you'll almost certainly find it more beneficial and more effective if you develop your own as this will have more meaning for you, be more relevant and, ultimately, prove more powerful.

So if you're interested in doing this, first of all list the strategies and issues or aspects of your life that you believe to be most crucial for your happiness and/or wellbeing. While you're doing this, it can be helpful to consider if there is more than one way to label a particular variable (such as attitude or optimism, relaxation or meditation, others or relationships). Remember, it doesn't even really matter that much what you call it as long as you know what you're referring to.

Then, play around with them for as long as it takes to come up with a word, phrase or even a sentence that will bring to mind whatever it is you want to have in the forefront of your mind. Finally, find a way to remind yourself of this acronym or mnemonic on a regular basis.

I know I've said this before but I'll say it again, happiness is simply a few disciplines practised every day. Whatever disciplines or strategies you believe will prove to be important for your happiness will only work if they're implemented on a regular basis. Even if you master the art of meditation, it won't help you if you don't use it often. Even if you can think optimistically at times, it won't really lead to authentic happiness unless you think helpful thoughts on a daily basis. Whatever your happiness plan turns out to be, a plan is only as effective and only as useful as its degree of application.