<https://www.painpathways.org/maya-angelou-chooses-joy-2/>

“To Experience Joy, We Need to Learn to Trust.” (starting with ourselves)

**7 Ways to Experience More Joy**

**1. Imagine Happiness**

Any activity, when performed repetitively, changes the structure of the brain. But even repeatedly imagining an activity has an impact on neural structure. Researchers at Harvard Medical School demonstrated this with an experiment where they asked one group to play a five-finger exercise on the piano over the course of a week. A comparison group was asked to merely imagine moving their fingers to play the same exercise. Though actively playing the exercise had a greater impact on brain structure than imagining it, by the end of the week, the same region of the brain in both groups had been significantly affected.

Each day, deliberately imagine yourself happy. Picture yourself in a situation with people you really like, or engaged in an activity that gives you a lot of pleasure. By actively imagining feelings of happiness or recalling happy experiences, you can help to encourage changes in your brain that will predispose you to creating more real-life joy in your daily experiences.

**2. Memorize Happiness in Your Body**

Even though the brain is strongly inclined to notice and retain negative experiences over positive ones (that’s our protective survival instinct at work), you can help level the playing field by strengthening your neurological happiness circuits. Whenever you’re experiencing a moment of joy or contentment — walking, listening to music, being kind, feeling grateful — don’t miss it! Pause to notice the feelings in your body and the state of your mind. Do you feel warmth in your chest? Does your mind feel light and open?

Now consciously intensify that sensation. Some psychologists call this “memorizing” the feeling. Either way, you are causing the same neural circuits to fire repeatedly, thereby strengthening them. Psychologist Rick Hanson calls this “taking in the good.”

“As with any positive state of mind,” Hanson says, “if you can develop a strong ‘sense memory’ of the experience, you can reactivate it deliberately when you want to.”

**3. Reframe Your Fate Positively**

Countless studies have shown the effects of gratitude exercises on positive outlook. One study conducted by positive psychologist Martin Seligman asked participants who considered themselves severely depressed to write down three good things that happened to them each day for 15 days. Ninety-four percent of subjects reported a decrease in depression, while 92 percent said their happiness had increased.

Because experiencing and expressing appreciation has such a demonstrable effect, we highly recommend course participants keep a daily list of things they’re grateful for.

Here’s another exercise that can incline the mind to gratitude even during unpleasant moments: Choose a task or situation in your life that feels like an obligatory burden. Try changing your “I have to” story to an “I get to” story, and see if you arrive at a different perspective. “Now I get to take out the garbage” could create an opportunity to feel grateful for your working legs, or your trash pickup service — instead of just feeling annoyed.

**4. Strategically Diffuse Worry**

Worry and rumination are chronic joy-killers, but they’re easy habits of mind for many. This excerpt of a March 2000 conversation between the Dalai Lama and a group of neuroscientists and scholars suggests a useful technique for heading off anxious episodes. The speaker is Matthieu Ricard, PhD, a geneticist and Buddhist monk:

“The basic way to intervene [when a troubling thought arises is to use a technique] called ‘staring back.’ When a thought arises, [instead of reacting] we need to watch it and look back at its source. . . . As we stare at it, its apparent solidity begins to melt away, and that thought will vanish without giving birth to a chain of thoughts. The point is not to try and block the arising of thoughts — this is not possible anyway — but not to let them invade our mind. We need to do this again and again because we are not used to dealing with thoughts in this way. . . . Finally a time will come when thoughts come and go like a bird passing through the sky, without leaving a trace.”

**5. Experience the Bliss of Blamelessness**

When we’re stuck in resentment, self-condemnation or guilt, our capacity for joy is severely limited. Everyone makes mistakes, so it’s important that we learn how to let go of blame — for others and for ourselves.

Resentment consumes energy, even when we’re entitled to it. If you’re trying to let go of blame toward someone else, try becoming curious about a hurtful experience, instead of taking it personally. Taking a more impersonal view of disappointments can reveal their hidden gifts.

When you’re trying to break the habit of self-recriminating thought, focus instead on how you want to feel. Rather than dwelling on a mistake, recall the pleasant feeling you have when you choose wisely or accomplish something successfully, and let that feeling be your guide.

It can take several months for neural circuits to consolidate fully in support of new habits of mind, so be vigilant. You are wiring your brain to fully experience happiness instead of just relief at avoiding error.

**6. Let Go of Feeling Busy**

One of the primary obstacles to joy is the feeling of being too busy. Even if we can’t pare down our schedules, it doesn’t mean we can’t feel happiness, peace or even joy in the midst of our busyness.

During intensely scheduled periods, try giving yourself “mini-breaks.” Take a brief moment between tasks and obligations to pause, close your eyes, breathe deeply, and feel what it’s like to be “outside of time.”

Even if you’ve just dashed down the hall at work from one meeting to another, stop for a few seconds before you open that next door. Close your eyes, let your body relax, take a breath, and come back to yourself. You may find yourself feeling substantially less harried and more capable of dealing calmly and consciously with whatever unfolds next.

**7. Seek the Good in Others**

There are a lot of reasons to feel joy observing other people — if we’re looking for the best in them. Seeing the goodness in someone else brings something real, alive and uplifting out of him or her. It allows trust to develop between people who scarcely know each other. And it allows you to truly enjoy your interactions with others without getting hung up on what you don’t like.

Try this: For one week, take on the practice of looking for the good in everyone you come in contact with. See in each person the desire to be safe, accepted, happy and loved. Even if you know someone’s shortcomings, keep looking for the positive qualities — creativity, humor, a caring heart, intelligence — any and all positive qualities you might admire. Notice what effect this has on how you feel toward others and on your interactions with them. Notice the effect it has on your state of mind. And enjoy it.

*James Baraz and Shoshana Alexander wrote Awakening Joy: 10 Steps That Will Put You on the Road to Real Happiness. Copyright ©2010 by James Baraz and Shoshana Alexander. Used by permission of Bantam Books, a division of Random House, Inc.*