

CHOOSING *Happiness*

Ready to make a big resolution in the new year?

by Minx Boren



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Ever notice how year after year we seem to set resolutions that slip away as the days roll along? Maybe it's because we don't aim high enough. We don't set our sights on what really matters.

HAPPINESS MATTERS

Happiness is our most generative state. Research shows that when we are happy we're more creative, productive, effective, and resilient. We are also more energetic, enthusiastic, and open to new ideas. People who are happy and optimistic (which often go hand in hand) are more successful at work and make more money. We're also healthier, live longer and have more successful relationships both personally and professionally. As we become more vividly alive, we even become more sexually attractive. So, if it were possible, wouldn't you choose happiness?

THE MAGIC OF INTENTION & ATTENTION

Have you ever had the experience of making a wish or a decision and then noticed the way serendipitous things seem to happen? Perhaps you call these things luck or coincidence, yet you have an inkling that they are more than just mere happenstance... that something larger and more magical may be at play. In the book, *How We Choose To be Happy*, sociologists Rick Foster and Greg Hicks ask the question, "As you go through your day, to what extent do you actively intend to be happy?" Maybe what we focus on is what we attract and bring into being in our lives. Setting an intention and paying attention to the opportunities and possibilities for choosing happiness that come our way may make all the difference. Taking it a step further, learning to rebound when life seems most difficult and even cruel, can lead to a renewal of energy, connection, and meaningfulness that Dr. Paul Pearsall, author of *The Beethoven Factor*, refers to as "thriving." Like Beethoven, who composed his "Ode to Joy" after he was both deaf and blind, we too can actively create fulfilling lives, no matter the circumstances.

EXPERTS ARE CHEERING US ON

Dr. Martin Seligman, the founder of the Positive Psychology movement, which focuses on Learned Optimism, Authentic Happiness, and Signature Strengths (which also happen to be the titles of his 3 books), has spent a decade exploring how we might learn to thrive rather than just survive in a stressful world. In the process, he found ways to define and scientifically measure both optimism and happiness as well as develop tools and interventions that can increase our capacity

for a fulfilling life.

Positive psychology focuses on our strengths rather than our weaknesses and demonstrates that happiness can be cultivated by building on the best things in life while identifying and using many of the traits and virtues we already possess called "signature strengths." These strengths include: Creativity, curiosity, kindness, humor, optimism, and generosity. According to Seligman and his colleagues, these attributes form the foundation of the good life and are "natural buffers against misfortune" when the going gets tough.

WHAT IS HAPPINESS?

My favorite line of poetry, from Mary Oliver's *The Summer Day*, is, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" The answer my clients give usually has something to do with being happy and with living a meaningful life. Although "happiness" is rather vague and difficult to define and even more difficult to measure, Dr. Seligman has developed a concept of authentic happiness as measured by a "fulfilling" life that incorporates three categories: The Pleasant Life, the Engaged Life, and the Meaningful Life.

While hedonists may insist that all there is to happiness is feeling good and avoid feeling bad, Dr. Seligman explains that there is much more to the Pleasant Life. This pertains to being present to life moment by moment in a way that allows for the savoring of pleasures. It's about contentment, serenity, and hope. People who are serious and goal oriented sometimes denigrate or downplay the Pleasant Life because it feels trivial, less worthwhile. Yet it is an essential part of the truly fulfilling life.

The Engaged Life focuses on immersion and absorption in whatever it is that we choose to do. When we are engaged, time seems to flow and the edges

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around work and play may blur as we thoroughly enjoy the task at hand. The Engaged Life is about knowing your highest strengths, your talents, your virtues and crafting a good life by using them. While most of us are somewhat aware of these, you can log onto www.authentic happiness.org and take the VIA Signature Strengths Survey in order to more accurately determine your level of happiness. The Meaningful Life also focuses on knowing your signature strengths, using them to belong to and serve something larger than the "self." It's about community and contribution. As Albert Schweitzer said, "The only people who will be truly happy are those who have found a way to serve." Think about the ways you contribute to those around you and resolve to offer your gifts in even greater ways this coming year.

THE FULFILLING LIFE PERSONIFIED

Florence Ross is 85 years old. A longtime lover of learning and civic activist, she went back to school in her mid-70's for a Ph.D. in International Peace Studies, has spoken to and for the United Nations on the power of the elderly, and is currently an adjunct professor at Nova/Southeastern University. (Talk about an engaged and meaningful life!)

My favorite story is about what occurred after a board meeting for Spiritual Eldering Institute. Florence invited her colleagues to a Middle Eastern restaurant. Noticing that the female belly dancer was not making enough tips, Florence got up to dance in order to "get some action going." As people start throwing

SIMPLE AND PROVEN PRACTICES TO INCREASE YOUR HAPPINESS

1. SAVOR LIFE

Take time to savor a meal, a sunset, a book, time with a friend. Allow yourself to be fully present to whatever you are doing, letting distractions fall away.

2. TELL A STORY

Think about what your best gifts and strengths might be. Choose one and tell a story about yourself to a friend or colleague that illustrates this quality. Relating positive stories can impact our sense of self.

3. COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS

Every night write down 3 good things that happened that day along with an explanation as to how you contributed to their occurrence. The simple act of paying attention to what is good in our lives and understanding how we help generate these events can be empowering. (Even watching a sunset requires us to take the time to have an appreciation for that which is beautiful.)

4. FIND REASONS TO SMILE

When we contract our facial muscles, the flow of blood in nearby vessels decreases, cooling the blood. This lowers the temperature of our brain stem, which produces serotonin, a chemical which actually makes us feel good. And, of course, we spread joy because smiling and laughter are contagious.

money at Florence, she turned to the bewildered young performer and said, "Don't worry honey. I'm just working the room for you. You get to keep all the money." (Talk about the Pleasant Life.) Florence's signature strengths include playfulness, passion, humor, enthusiasm, curiosity, genuineness, and citizenship and she has built a remarkable and joyful life using them.

A WORTHWHILE COMMITMENT

Step by step, with intention and attention, we can learn about our own levels of happiness and life satisfaction, and how to enhance them. As we do so, we can bring this awareness into our homes, organizations, and businesses and begin to create an impact in those environments as well. This is not a frivolous task. Remembering all the benefits of authentic happiness, the implications could be far reaching indeed. ▼

About the author: Minx Boren PCC is a certified life and business coach, an author, a speaker, and a convener. With a background in nutrition and healthwise life choices, Minx has also trained and been certified in such cutting edge technologies as Appreciative Inquiry, Emotional Intelligence, and Authentic Happiness Coaching. As founder of Fourfold Path Inc. and co-founder of Authentic Woman Enterprises, Minx creates and facilitates "essential conversations" for both small groups and large audiences. She can be reached at Minx@CoachMinx.com.