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Money & Happiness

by Laura Rowley

A Scientifically Proven Way to Be Happy

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I teach a course on contemporary moral values at Seton Hall University in New Jersey. We recently studied Aristotle's notion that all things have a "telos," a noble end or goal to which they must give expression. The seed's highest telos is to develop into a tree; the lyre player's is to become an accomplished harpist.

With this in mind, I asked my students to write a paper on their talents and how they plan to share them with others after they graduate.

These papers always inspire me to reflect on whether I'm using my own gifts to serve others -- or if I'm just milking them for the bucks. Saddled with a mortgage, a '95 minivan beginning its death spiral, and the prospect of a \$900 heating bill in January, even the most ardent idealist can get distracted.

And there are other diversions, including the perennial suburban pastime of "keeping up with the Joneses." A recent tour of my neighbor's finished basement sparked a deep yearning for sheetrock, wall-to-wall Berber carpet, and louvered bi-fold doors. I had not anticipated such desires when I entered the working world, eager to give expression to my telos.

So I was delighted to receive a nugget of wisdom from one of my students. He wrote that his greatest gift was the ability to be grateful for what he has been given. He reminded me what many researchers have confirmed: If you want to increase your happiness -- including your financial well-being -- find concrete ways to express your gratitude.

Give Thanks to Get Happy

"Gratitude seems to be incompatible with some negative emotions. It's hard to feel envious or greedy or bitter when you're grateful," says Sonja Lyubomirsky, a psychology professor at the University of California, Riverside. She conducted an experiment in which students were instructed to write down five things for which they were grateful. One group wrote once a week, another three times a week, and a control group did not write at all. Those who counted their blessings once a week showed a measurable rise in happiness.

Interestingly, students who wrote more frequently apparently got bored with the routine and showed no change in well-being. Researchers suggest that if you practice gratitude, choose a timetable that keeps it meaningful, and change the domain in which you contemplate your good fortune every week -- from, say, health to career to relationships to simple pleasures. That may help sustain the rise in happiness created by the exercise.

Can't think of anything to be grateful about? Try this technique from Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh.

"When I have a toothache, I discover that not having a toothache is a wonderful thing," he writes in "[The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching](#)." "I had to have a toothache in order to be enlightened, to know that not having one is wonderful. My nontoothache is peace, is joy. But when I do not have a toothache, I do not seem to be happy. Therefore, I look deeply in the present moment and see that I have a nontoothache, that can make me very happy already."

Consider applying this technique to your finances. Celebrate your steady paycheck, lack of credit card debt, paid-off car loan, balanced checkbook, employer's 401(k) match, or low-cost health insurance. After all, these things are far from universal.

With Charity Toward All

If making lists of the things you appreciate isn't your bag, consider another method of boosting happiness: Intentional acts of kindness and generosity.

Lyubomirsky and two other researchers had students perform five acts of altruism a week over six weeks. The acts had to benefit others or make them happy, at some cost to the participant -- donating blood, helping a friend with a paper, visiting an elderly relative, etc. Those who practiced five systematic acts of kindness in a single day each week showed a significant rise in well-being.

If you want to banish envy, never measure your financial achievements against anything except your own goals. Contemplate the deeper values you aspire to in your own life -- your telos, if you will -- and organize your financial house to help you realize your highest priorities.

As Aristotle wrote, "The life of money-making is one undertaken under compulsion, and wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking; for it is merely useful and for the sake of something else."

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