

5 Ways to Amplify the Good Life

by Patty Onderko

It's all about savoring—to recognize and revel in—life's happy moments. Here's how to do it.

“Just because you're not down doesn't mean you're up,” says Fred Bryant, Ph.D., professor of psychology at Loyola University Chicago. You might be able to shake off stress and take disappointments in stride, but, Bryant asks, how do you deal with the good things that happen to you? He says your ability to cope with negative experiences isn't necessarily connected to the ability to make the most of positive ones. So while the rain might not bother you, the sun may not warm your mood either.

Learning to deal with difficulties and tone down doom-and-gloom thinking is important, but figuring out how to amplify the good stuff is equally integral to your satisfaction with life. How do you do that? Through savoring, the art of “generating, intensifying or prolonging positive feelings in response to positive events,” says Bryant, who coined the term as a form of emotional intelligence in the mid-1980s.

Savoring doesn't just mean getting orgasmic over a piece of dark chocolate or luxuriating in a fragrant bubble bath. It means recognizing happy moments big and small—catching a fly ball in a Little League game, maybe, or making the train in the nick of time—and allowing yourself to fully appreciate and enjoy them. Doing so will help you reach your maximum happiness potential, Bryant says.

Not everyone is naturally adept at savoring, though women tend to be better at it than men and extroverts better than introverts. Luckily it's a skill that can be learned by anyone. Practice these savoring strategies.

Be nostalgic. Nostalgia has taken on negative connotations in the past few decades, with the current cultural emphasis on living in the moment. But it's OK—and necessary, really—to look back fondly. In fact, savoring your past can help you better enjoy today, too, Bryant says. In one of his papers, published in the *Journal of Happiness Studies*, a group of test subjects was instructed to spend 10 minutes a day reminiscing about pleasant memories, while a control group was asked to think about current concerns for 10 minutes a day. After a week, the reminiscing folks reported significantly greater increases in the percentage of time they felt happy over the course of the week than the control group.

Daniel Kahneman, Ph.D., author of *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, challenges his readers with a thought experiment: If you could take an amazing first-class, four-star free vacation in a tropical paradise, with the catch being that you wouldn't remember a second of it once it was over, would you go? Maybe you would or maybe you wouldn't, but the fact that we pause at all in our consideration highlights the importance of memories to our enjoyment of an experience. The best parts of a

vacation, research has shown, are the planning of it and the looking back on it. So get out all those old photos and reminisce, whether it's a past vacation or your eighth-grade dance or the birth of your child.

Take photos. Plenty of critics these days will implore you to get out from behind your smartphone and experience life rather than just document it. But snapping photos can be integral to enjoying the moment. Taking a photograph means that you acknowledge a moment or place or person as beautiful, special and worth remembering, and that acknowledgement is a big part of savoring. Plus the photos can help you appreciate the moment again later.

Be thankful. Gratitude is a key part of savoring, says Bryant. Say someone gives you a scarf. You might think it was thoughtful and genuinely like the color and fabric. But take it further, he suggests. Imagine your friend going to the store and picking out the scarf, considering your taste and eye color as he did so. Think of the time it took for him to drive to the store, buy the present, wrap it up and deliver it to you. It's hard not to appreciate the gift even more after you've considered everything that went into it. That's savoring.

A gratitude journal can be great, says Elizabeth Lombardo, Ph.D., author of *Better than Perfect: 7 Strategies to Crush Your Inner Critic and Create a Life You Love*, as long it doesn't become just another item on your to-do list. Really think about and visualize what you're grateful for. If you write down "my spouse," for example, remember a great meal or activity you shared together recently. Imagine the scent of him or the way her hand feels in yours. List some of the things you appreciate and love about him or her.

Marvel. Cultivate awe and wonder at the world around you. You don't have to be standing in front of the Grand Canyon to appreciate your surroundings. The corner of the building you pass by every day may look striking against the sky. The approaching dark cloud is dazzlingly ominous. As you drive to the store or walk to your office, notice the beauty in both the mundane and the magnificent, Bryant suggests.

Share the good stuff. So if you appreciated the silhouette of that building façade against the clouds, you can extend the pleasure by telling others about it, whether passersby or your partner. One study, published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* by the American Psychological Association, found that communicating personal positive events—"I had a really great workout today" or "My colleague told me he thought my idea was brilliant"—with others was associated with increased daily well-being. Sharing genuine pleasure and happiness is not the same as showing off, Lombardo says, especially if you are equally receptive to hearing the good news of others.

Ruminating on the positive. Say you have a great conversation with a neighbor in which you opened up about your hopes and life goals. Later, in bed, will you think about how lucky you are to have such a friendly neighbor and how nice it is to be able to share your feelings with like-minded folk? Or will you worry that you divulged too much and become embarrassed? Humans' natural negativity bias suggests the latter, but according to Bryant (and the ethos of positive psychology), we can flip that bias. Stop the negative ruminating (which Lombardo likens to "pressing on a bruise") by

acknowledging your feelings of embarrassment or shame and moving on. Then allow yourself to really feel good about the exchange. You were charming and interesting. Your neighbor was gracious and funny. Together, you shared a moment of connection. That's worth savoring, no?