



Naples Daily News

Life changing: 'I'll be happy when...'

Donna Daisy, Community contributor originally published Wednesday, September 23, 2009

How many times have you said to yourself, "I will be so happy when I retire in 10 years? That is when life will really be good," or "I will be happy when I get a different job," ... or "when my husband gets his act together ... or the kids grow up ... or I get that promotion at work."

It is so easy to postpone today's happiness on the belief that when our situation changes, our level of happiness will also change. This approach to life is sometimes called a "victim stance" — the belief that it is our circumstances (not us) that are in control of how happy we are. In reality, our circumstances do not define us. In the words of author and lecturer, Dr. Wayne Dyer, "They just represent our unique curriculum — our tests, challenges, and opportunities for personal growth."

My husband, Charles, and I made it a practice to use our challenging life experiences as a very effective curriculum in our own lives. Four years ago, Charles' left knee became infected with an extremely resistant strain of bacteria known as Acid-Fast Bacilli (AFB). Within a year, the right leg was also infected. The artificial knees in both legs had to be removed, and he was confined to a wheelchair. After many surgeries, and countless daily trips to the infusion center for IV antibiotics, we were still unable to eradicate the infection, resulting in the amputation of his right leg.

We realized that if we adopted the mindset of, "We will be happy when Charles can walk again," we would miss the opportunity for many happy moments, and the laughter we shared as we worked together to get through those challenging times.

The ability to remain happy, especially in times of adversity, requires the conscious use of some very specific mental skills, including the perspective with which we view things that happen to us. Each day, we all have a choice to "be happy when ..." or to be happy now. Here are a few strategies that helped us make each day the best one possible:

1. Don't get too high or too low about anything that happens.
2. Don't sweat the small stuff. (Thank you, Richard Carlson.) We have enough large stuff to keep us challenged.
3. Avoid letting your mind dwell on the things that upset you or "punch your buttons." Your feelings are directly connected to your thoughts.
4. Focus on the good stuff. Each morning before starting your day, take a moment to mentally make a list of five things you are grateful for that day. Try to list different things each day.
5. Treasure every moment you have, be happy, and enjoy the ride.



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“This article is written as a tribute to all the wonderful residents of Southwest Florida who are the embodiment and role models for aging with vitality.”

— Donna Daisy, Ph.D.

Make the Rest of Your Life the Best of Your Life

Donna Daisy, Ph.D.

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My worries about what old age might bring abruptly began when I received that long dreaded letter from AARP that said, “You are now eligible - - .” At that time, my head was filled with all the usual cultural stereotypes about aging such as, “Intelligence declines with age” and “Most older people have little interest in or capacity for sexual relations,” or “The majority of older people are isolated and lonely.” My fears about my own future as related to aging were so intense that I decided to audit a class on aging at Florida Gulf Course University to see if there was any “upside” to this business of growing older.

I was delighted when I ran across studies from the MacArthur Foundation Consortium on Successful Aging that said, “The way people age (whether in their 70’s and 80’s they end up sick, demented and sexless, or vigorous, sharp and libidinous) is mostly a matter of how they live rather than genetics.”

People who age well don’t have some kind of marvelous genetic immunity that allows them to wander through life untouched by illness, bereavement, job losses and other losses. What differentiates the people you see socializing, playing golf and tennis, exercising, playing bridge, and enjoying ballroom dancing is that quality called resilience. Resilience is the ability to bounce back from distressing events, and it is the primary factor separating those who enjoy a high quality of life as they grow older from those who experience sharper physical and cognitive declines.

So how do we become resilient? How do we cope with the inevitable stressors related to aging? What are the skills we need to master to build resilience? What I discovered was that people who are resilient take responsibility for their lives. They empower themselves rather than living their lives as helpless victims who never seem to have the resources to cope. They take control of their lives, even when all they can control is the attitude they bring to challenging situations.

The MacArthur studies identified several factors that contribute to resilience and the ability to develop positive and satisfying lifestyles: Regular physical activity, healthy diet, frequent social interactions, meaningful activities such as volunteering for local non-profit organizations, and active engagement with lifelong learning opportunities. These are the factors that can be changed by people as they age, putting their sense of well-being under their control.



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What excited me most was learning that there are specific characteristics and qualities that we, even in our 40's and 50's, can consciously choose to develop and strengthen in our lives that will empower us to be more in charge of our mental health, physical health, and sense of fulfillment and satisfaction with life as we get older. Here are some of my personal favorites. By putting these seven strategies to work in my own life over the past several years, I have been able to enjoy and maintain a high quality, happy, even joyous life despite the many challenges that my husband and I have faced:

1. Surround yourself with friends who are upbeat and energizing. Consider gradually detaching from those who drain your energy.
2. Take long walks each day. This provides a wonderful opportunity to quiet your mind (a good stress reducer) while also getting some terrific exercise.
3. Refuse to dwell on thoughts that create stress and anxiety. Take responsibility for the quality of your life by doing what you can about each problem that comes your way. Then, as they say in 12-step programs, let go and let God.
4. Maintain a healthy diet.
5. Get medical care on a regular basis.
6. Get a pet. Research has long documented the health benefits of sharing your life with a pet that loves you.
7. Stay closely connected to your spiritual nature. Know your deepest values and honor the things that make your heart sing.

Thank you Southwest Florida role models who live these strategies every day. You are the best proof we could have that when you take responsibility for your own life, you can, at any age, "make the rest of your life the best of your life," and for that, you will forever have my deepest gratitude and respect.

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