

## HOW TO BE HAPPY IN CHALLENGING TIMES – COVID 19 (PART 9)



Welcome to the penultimate article in our series, COVID 19 – A Mental Health Response. These articles were produced to highlight that mental health is every bit as important as physical health and from the feedback we've received, we believe we've made a positive contribution to that discussion. This article focuses on how we can develop and maintain happiness, even in times of challenge.

We hope you find something of value in this piece, for yourself, a colleague, friend or member of your family.

Happiness is difficult to define and even harder to measure. We experience it as a combination of elements, in the same way that one wheel or spring inside a watch doesn't keep time – time keeping is the result of the synchronicity of the whole mechanism. Likewise, happiness is made up of many factors, which collectively bring us joy.

There is a plethora of research that has helped us to understand what those factors are and although the data is drawn from many disparate sources, there is general agreement on the primary components of happiness.

Most of us are striving for something we deem to be 'better', however, the evidence tells us that it's not the acquisition of material objects, status, influence and wealth that is most important to our well-being. Some measure of these things can be life-enhancing, but they can equally bring additional demands and stresses.

What's clear is that a life of meaning and purpose is central to happiness. It gives us a sense of value, a reason to get up in the morning. The more we feel passion about something the more our energy propels us in the direction of our hopes and dreams. Equally important, are relationships of substance and depth. We need to be part of a community, we need to have a

feeling of belonging, to be part of something that can support and sustain us through life's ebbs and flows.

Another critical ingredient in the happiness formula, is the relationship we have with expectation. Expectation presents us with a dilemma, because on the one hand we need to be positive and hopeful about our future. This is the whole point of positive affirmations, creative visualisation and other introspective activities. Yet, on the other hand, whilst positively anticipating what we want, we need to avoid expecting that to be fulfilled by others or circumstances. Expectation is most useful when 'we' are using it to cultivate the outcome of 'our' choice. If we are relying on some external phenomena to do this for us, then we can easily get caught in its trap.

The more we are wedded to expectation in the wrong way, the more our happiness belongs to something else or someone else. When that person or situation meets our expectations, we are overjoyed and life tastes sweet. However, when those expectations are not met, we begin to collect disappointments, which can lead to feelings of hurt, anger and betrayal – even when the other party meant no ill intent.

Therefore, it is imperative, if we are to be happy, to have little or no expectation of others. This approach dramatically limits the impact of external forces – giving us real power over our own happiness. Happiness that is cultivated from within yourself is true happiness. It cannot easily be wrestled from your grip. How do we build sustainable happiness, such that we can survive the demands and challenges of life?

Here are some of the essential practices that will assist you in building resilience and fortifying your mind.

## **1. Negative thinking, negative consequences**

Negative thinking slows down brain coordination, making it difficult to process thoughts and find solutions. Fear has the same effect – as we focus on negative events and outcomes, this decreases activity in the cerebellum, reducing the brain's ability to process new information. This makes it more difficult to engage in creative problem solving. In addition, the fear factor impacts the left temporal lobe, which affects mood, memory and impulse control.

The frontal lobe, particularly the prefrontal cortex, decides what is important based on the amount of attention we give to something and how we feel about it. Therefore, the more we focus on negativity, the more synapses and neurons in our brains 'fire and wire' together (synaptogenesis), supporting those negative thought processes – and a vicious cycle ensues.

The hippocampus, which is part of the limbic system, overseeing our emotions, provides context for stored memories, which means it influences the emotional description and tone our minds attach to our experiences. Understanding the role of the hippocampus gives us access to a lot of power, should we choose to use it. This is because we can either be defined by the original interpretation attached to the experience, or we can rewrite the emotional script by overlaying new meaning onto the experience, thereby diminishing its hold over us. So how can we do this?

A shift in perspective can dramatically change our perception and our interpretation of our experiences. We are often bound to negative experiences, not realising we possess the power to remould them. They can forever determine how we feel, or we can reshape and redesign them in ways that are best suited to our mental health. We can't change the past, but we can change the way the past affects us. The activities that help us to do this have been well documented throughout this series.

However, a couple we would particularly draw your attention to are, practising creative visualisation (conscious daydreaming) and acting 'as if'. The more we 'see' with our mind's eye the outcomes we most desire, the more likely they are to turn up in our lives. This is why creative visualisation can be so powerful.

Acting 'as if' places the emphasis on developing the emotions attached to the improvement or success that you want. It is another way to change your perspective and write a script of your choosing. The more you can 'feel' yourself living the life you most wish for, the more your life will seek out the positive energies and opportunities that will facilitate that outcome.

If you want to dismantle the blocks to your progress and rewire your brain, thereby taking back control of your life, then your perspective needs to change.

## **2. Changing perspective**

All the introspective activities we've discussed throughout the series are perspective changers. They give us access to the incredible capacity of our minds. They also enable us to become pharmacists, producing wonderful remedies and potions from the extensive pharmacology of the brain, which lead to a greater sense of well-being. All we need to do is practise these activities regularly.

When we engage in perspective-changing activities, the brain, from its vast array of neurochemicals, releases a protein called BDNF (Brain-Derived Neurotrophic Factor). This neurotrophin has many functions – arguably its protective propensity and the ability to repair memory neurons are amongst its most important; as both these activities enable further growth. BDNF is active where cell to cell communication occurs and is involved in what is called synaptic and cognitive plasticity – which put simply is our ability to change as a result of our experiences and develop new ways of being.

Equally protective of the brain and organelles is the family of endorphins (a group of hormones that carry out numerous physiological functions). Endorphins are chemicals that can also cross the gaps between neurons passing messages from one to the next.

One of the main functions of endorphins is to minimise discomfort and block the feeling of pain by stimulating pleasure centres. These endorphins can lead to feelings of euphoria.

It's interesting to note that the brain-body system, at times of stress, seeks to protect itself with BDNF, endorphins and other neurochemicals. This, however, is a survival response, as the brain and body try to manage threats – but we can consciously produce these substances by choosing to focus on positive things. Under these conditions these neurochemicals help us to grow and flourish.

By the way, BDNF and endorphins are amongst the reasons exercise makes us feel so good.

### **3. The method matters most**

Those who have mental health issues or simply want to embark on a self-improvement programme often are frustrated by their inability to generate positive change. In fact, this inability to create positive outcomes leads to feelings of doubt, lack of confidence and low self-esteem. And so, they conclude that something must be wrong with them. This belief makes personal transformation difficult.

Even more importantly, this does not reflect the truth. The main reason we find ourselves stuck, unable to generate the outcomes we seek, is our method is wrong.

Does the builder start by building the chimney and the roof? We know this makes no sense because the walls are needed to hold the roof in place. And without building a solid foundation first the whole building would be compromised. To construct a building fit for purpose it needs to be done in the correct order, meeting the needs and requirements of each stage.

Can the oak tree appear in the forest before the seed is sown? That magnificent specimen cannot arrive until the seed lands on the ground and drinks from the nutrients that lie waiting in the soil. Eventually its walls are broken down and a beautiful network of roots established, leading to the unfolding from seed to blossom – respecting every transition and phase along the way.

Equally, one cannot become a great concert pianist, playing at the Royal Albert Hall, without many years of study and practice – learning all the keys, chords and idiosyncrasies of each piece. Such mastery requires a formula and the discipline to diligently apply it.

Whatever we're doing in life, there is always an order and if we do not honour that sequence, that process, we lose something along the way; the end-product can never be its sparkling best.

Unfortunately, modern life, far too often, invites us to disregard the method in favour of the end-product, but what we don't realise is that compromise often means some quality is lost in the bargain.

As you navigate the journey that each of our articles has invited you to undertake, please concern yourself with getting the method right. Choose quality over quantity. Doing more things doesn't mean a better outcome. It's how well we perform each task that offers the greatest dividend.

### **4. Oppositional thinking**

It's easy to maintain focus on negative events and experiences, allowing them to define your moods and attitudes, but even these unwanted memories can offer the gifts of learning,

resilience and patience – introducing you to other dimensions of yourself, dimensions you didn't know existed.

Focusing on positive memories clearly has benefits and there is much we can learn from them, which we can use to replicate positive experiences in the future. But if we can find the courage to look at those memories that might be described as misfortune, then we are often able to find the fortune (the learning or insight) that those experiences have to offer. This is an important way to use negative events as catalysts for positive change.

This is why we encourage you to practise oppositional thinking. Put simply, every time you have a negative thought have a positive affirmation at hand, such as: 'I deeply and completely love and accept myself' or 'every day, in every way, I am getting stronger and stronger' or 'I am a self-healing organism and I am wonderfully well'. What you say isn't the most important thing, it's having a positive thought that resonates with you in some way, to replace the negative thought seeking to derail you.

At first you may not feel deeply connected to the phrase, which is fine and is often the case. But the more you practise this activity, the more the feelings of sincerity grow – and that's where the real power lies.

You can also use oppositional thinking when you feel criticised, put down or not respected. In other words, using someone's negative statement to ignite a positive thought and feeling within yourself. As soon as they make their negative comment, immediately replace it with your positive one. If after the moment has passed, you still find yourself ruminating over their criticism and disregard of you – reach for your positive affirmation or mantra and subdue the feelings you are having by repeatedly reciting it.

This is a wonderfully liberating practice and you will increasingly find that you won't mind being around negative people because they become agents for positive change. Try this approach and watch what happens. It eventually becomes a very entertaining and enjoyable pastime.

## **5. Optimism is a skill**

Practitioners from the positive psychology movement often invite clients/patients to imagine what they really want their lives to look like – encouraging them to create a mental state, which leaves them feeling their goals are achievable. We now know that if you visualise your aim and objective, the brain treats that image in precisely the same way as if it were happening. We can use this facility to our advantage and retrain the brain. In other words, we don't need to remain trapped in the past, or by feelings of trauma.

Optimism is a skill we can learn and there are a variety of ways to acquire it, says psychologist Dr Mary Ann Troiani, co-author of Spontaneous Optimism. Through her research, Dr Troiani has come up with three things that we can do to enhance our sense of optimism.

Firstly, she encourages us to pay attention to our posture, keeping the body straight, shoulders back and head up. Also, when walking she recommends taking long strides and

moving at a reasonably fast pace. This is because Troiani says “People who are pessimistic walk slowly with small steps and their heads down.” We can therefore use our posture to send positive messages back to the brain, improving our moods, attitudes and self-image in the process.

Secondly, changing our tone of voice, so that it is cheerful and full of energy. Our voices have a significant impact on how we feel about ourselves and life generally. Think of those times when you’re listening to someone whose mood is flat, there’s no rhythm and inflection in their voice, all the words sound as if they could have the same meaning. It doesn’t illicit joy... you can equally feel flattened by their monotony and lethargy.

Thirdly, change your vocabulary and where you might use negative labels to describe your experiences, choose more hopeful, upbeat words, such as challenge instead of problem, opportunities rather than losses. Think of your mistakes as your tutors rather than your tormentors.

Dr. Troiani recommends these three simple practices because they all have a positive impact on the brain’s biochemistry. She says, “These activities boost your serotonin levels, which in turn makes you happier”. Troiani also emphasises, like a growing number of neuropsychologists, that it takes approximately 4 to 6 weeks to create a habit. If you want that new habit to become truly embedded, you need to sustain that practice for a further 4 to 6 weeks.

Give these three simple things a try and see if your optimism increasingly comes to the fore.

## **6. Try new things**

The brain is malleable and is a wonderful receptacle for information, learning and growth. It loves repetition, because that’s how we primarily learn – and this propensity allows us to take on countless tasks that eventually require no conscious thought. Equally the brain loves to try new things, to go on new adventures and explore uncharted areas, using its immense capacity, energy and potential.

For good mental health we need to satisfy both aspects – the need for certainty, structure and order, as well as being open to experiencing the unexpected and the unknown. This may be a challenge at first but if we embark on this path with courage, willing to embrace the endless possibilities that life presents us with, then we discover the best of ourselves.

Psychologist Rich Walker of Winston-Salem State University, examined 30,000 event memories and over 500 diaries, ranging from durations of 3 months to 4 years. He concluded that people who engage in a variety of experiences are more likely to have and retain positive emotions and minimise negative ones, than people who have fewer experiences.

The work of Psychologist Barbara Fredrickson, at the University of North Carolina, supports this premise. She explored, over several years, how we respond to negative and positive events and concluded that those with good mental health have at least a 3:1 ratio in favour of positive events. Those who have a higher ratio, around 11:1, enjoy optimum mental health.

Those whose ratio hits 1:1 are much more likely to find that they have anxiety, depression and other mental health disorders. So, try new things, as this increases the possibility of more positive experiences, especially if our expectations are realistic.

So, whatever activities you engage in, be SMART (small, manageable and realistic targets) – by adopting this approach you are more likely to achieve success.

When embarking on new things it's worth remembering that for some activities, preparation is needed... there's no point going to run a marathon if you've not done the training.

## **7. Growing your brain**

We've established that happy thoughts and positive thinking support brain growth, through the generation and reinforcement of new synapses, especially in your prefrontal cortex (PFC) – which is the executive centre for all body-brain-mind functions.

The PFC allows us to control our emotional responses through connections to our limbic brain (the primary centre of emotions). It has the ability, whilst focusing on something, to simultaneously develop understanding and insight about that thing. In other words, it has a self-evaluating capacity.

The PFC is the only part of your brain that can control your emotions and behaviours and help you focus on whatever goals you elect to pursue. It helps you grow as a human being, change what you wish to change, and live life the way you decide.

We all recognise the crinkly landscape of the brain – it's a classic image in most biology text books. Gyrification refers to the folds/wrinkles on its surface. The crevices are known as sulci and the ridges between the crevices are known as gyri. The more wrinkling, the greater our cognitive potential and abilities. This is because billions of neurons are packed into these folds and wrinkles and so if we engage in activities that increase the folding, the actual surface area of the brain increases. This means we can literally grow our brains.

What the cognitive neuroscience research has shown, is that individuals who practise introspective activities and work on developing a positive mental attitude, increase their gyrification. In other words, their neural conversations are refined and improved, leading to better brain-wide communication, which in turn enhances moods, attitudes and perception.

## **8. Do the small things well**

Many of us are obsessed with getting the big things right; that presentation, that meal for a large gathering, improving the aesthetics of our homes, organising the reshuffle at work.

It is of course right to try and get whatever we're doing done to the best of our ability, but what happens is that we focus so much on getting the big things done that the small things

often get neglected. These tend to be the things we say we'll come back to and often don't return to – until we see the consequences of our neglect.

The small things can mistakenly be considered unimportant, such as – tidying up your desk, clearing the kitchen, making that phone call, chasing up an enquiry, fulfilling a promise to someone... the list is endless.

What we miss when we overlook these 'small things' is the consequences of our omissions. Not fulfilling that small promise to someone we love may have a big impact on that relationship. Not clearing the desk might mean something important that you need can't be found at the critical moment. That enquiry that you haven't addressed could be the resolution to your problem.

What we have observed from working for more than forty years at the coal face, is that those individuals who focus on getting the small things right find the big things come together more readily at the time of need.

The next time you go to put off something small, think about the far-reaching ramifications and you will be inspired to act now.

### **Final thought**

Much has been offered throughout the Mental Health Response series, but it's important to remember this is a buffet for the mind, body and soul; a table filled with many delights, something for every palate. One could be tempted to try and consume everything in sight, but that's likely to cause indigestion.

A more sensible approach is to be discerning in your choices and go for what will meet your needs right now. You can always come back for more.