

Choosing to be Happy

In doing research for a talk I was developing, I surveyed more than 300 women from across the country. Here is some of the information they shared:

89% of the women said they experienced happiness most every day

57% said that they were satisfied with the amount of happiness they had in their lives

What would your response be?

In the order of most responses received, the following are what the women said when asked to complete the sentence:

I would be happier if...

- I had more time.
- I had more money.
- I had more self-confidence.
- I had a partner.
- People around me were more positive.
- My kids were doing well.
- I had less stress.
- My weight was where I wanted it.
- My family life was better.
- I didn't have health issues.
- My job was better.
- My relationship with my spouse was better.
- I wasn't in pain.
- I could travel more.

How would you complete the sentence?

When asked if they felt they had control over how much happiness they experienced, 93% of those surveyed said yes!

I felt like that was a wonderfully positive response. I believe if you feel you have control over your happiness then you can increase your happiness if you wish. In order to increase their happiness and make their lives work, these women can choose to work on the things they think will make them happier. You can too.

Although some of the things they said would make them happier are not within their control or cannot be changed, I think even when there are things in our life that make us unhappy, we can still experience some happiness.

The Unlimited Potential for Temporary Happiness (Maybe Even Ecstasy!)

I believe that we all have a choice to feel happy, if even for a minute, each day. The challenge is choosing to be happy and then doing something about it.

I asked some women friends and acquaintances to tell me how they experience pleasure, happiness, and delight on a daily or almost daily basis. The following is what they told me. I've listed their responses by age so you can scan the ones that apply to you or read all of them if you like. Remember these people lead lives like you and me, sometimes challenging, sometimes not so. Yet from their responses you can see that they do find happiness when they choose to do something about it.

Female, 20s

- I commute 35 miles each way to work and rather than dread it and get bored with no one to talk to, I have turned it into my singing time. From the time I get in my car to the time I park it at my office, I listen to whatever music I want and sing as loud as I feel like singing and I always arrive at work with a smile on my face and a lot of energy.
- Finishing the crossword puzzle every day. I always make time to do it, even when I have a lot of studying to do, and it gives me a break to look forward to and a sense of accomplishment when I finish.
- Having a conversation with my best friend always makes me happy. We laugh so hard every time we talk, and I talk to her almost every day.
- Sometimes, if I get sad or get homesick, I make myself Lipton's chicken noodle soup, or tomato soup and grilled cheese cause it makes me feel closer to home. Those are totally my comfort foods from childhood and it makes me feel better.

Female, 30s

- I feel overjoyed after a morning workout either running or doing yoga. Maybe it's the endorphins.
- I also feel happy when I'm spending quiet, uninterrupted time with the man I love. Content, even.
- I get tremendous pleasure from taking my dog, Nutmeg, on a walk. I get such a kick out of watching her "attack" her walk and the woods with such joy. She jumps, she whirls, she sniffs and she salivates. I notice the little things – like how beautiful her red coat is against the green grasses, or the ridiculous heights to which she jumps to clear a tall stand of grass or a fallen log.

Female, 30s

- Hug my puppy every morning and even let him smooch me with his big tongue if he wants to
- Watch the sunrise
- Go for a quiet walk all by myself
- Call a special friend

- Grab a cozy blanket, something warm and soothing to drink, a good book, and lie in the "comfiest" couch we have for a little reading session
- Stretch... I mean REALLY stretch--my neck, my shoulders, and my back, all the way down to my toes!

Female, 30s

I start my day by reading a "spiritual" meditation reading. I have it sitting on my office desk and I pick it up before I start my day. I've even got two other co-workers listening with me. We do a conference call at 9am every morning and I read from the book. We then talk about what we are going to do for the day that relates to the subject of the reading. It does seem to start my day out on the right foot.

Female, 40s

- I like to take walks through our local park in the morning. This is meditative time for me but at the same time connects me with the world. On one side of the park, the city street is filled with traffic heading to work. On another side of the park, I see children with their mothers playing on the playground equipment. On another side of the park, is a senior housing development. Many of my fellow walkers are seniors. On the fourth side of the park, I only see woods and garden. These four sides balance me and help me keep my life in perspective. Youth through old age, I walk my path. It grounds me, it centers me, it brings me peace.
- Another thing I really enjoy is watching the "Remembering the Spirit" segments of Oprah. Everyday the last five minutes of her show are devoted to a viewer's description of how they honor their Spirit. This also brings me a sense of connectedness. There are many others out there also trying to keep Spirit alive in their lives.
- I start each day writing my Morning Pages (from Julia Cameron The Artist's Way) at least three pages of journaling every morning first thing in the morning. I started this to tap into more creativity on the job; it ended up changing my life.
- I end each day with my Gratitude Journal (ala Sarah Ban Breathnach's, Simple Abundance). I write 5 things I am grateful for. Simple but a great way to ensure pleasant dreams and positive energy while I sleep.

Female, 40s

One of the things that brings me joy is slowing down enough to hear my own breathing. Sometimes it is just here in my office, but my favorite time is in the pool with the snorkel mask on. I look like an underwater nerd, but it's amazingly rejuvenating to be soothed by your own breathing.

Female, 40s

My joy is to leave an establishment with people laughing—the dry cleaners, the grocery store – a joke, a political observation, etc. It makes me feel wonderful to lighten others up because it comes back to me and my attitude!

Female, 40s

Stop working and pat the kitty cat. It's amazing how refreshed I feel having spent a mere 2-3 minutes on the floor with my 14 year old furry friend!

Female, 40s

- Walking across a college campus on a perfect fall day—blue sky, brisk air, trees, stately buildings and scampering squirrels.
- Getting away—whether for an afternoon shopping in some out-of-the-way place with my friends, a weekend trip or something more exciting.
- A good movie or a good restaurant shared with friends—or a good book all by myself.
- Attending high school or college sporting events with friends and family.
- Sharing family traditions—baking, decorating, etc.

Female, 40s

- I take in the woody bike trails that aren't too far from my house. It's really peaceful and quiet there and I almost always see some sort of wildlife—blue herons, beavers, etc. In the winter I sometimes run into a fox. I am always in a better frame of mind when I get home.
- The walks are even better this time of year (fall), as well as in the spring, when I get to practically watch the seasons change before my eyes.
- I also find happiness playing with my dog Nemo and watching him play with the kitten always brings a smile to my face.

Female, 40s

- Every morning while I am getting ready in the bathroom, I have a lit candle with a wonderful aroma. I alternate favorite aromas, I light it just before I get in the shower so by the time I get out of the shower the bathroom smells wonderful and gives me a relaxing, happy start to my day.
- I set my alarm to allow for one snooze time. I use the snooze time to slowly wake up while saying and praying my thanks for another new day, and for anything specific I might want to pray about for that day. It is a very calming, grounding way to start the day.
- I often forget, but looking at the sky, whether day or night, makes me feel happy and at peace. The grandness of the sky helps keep things in perspective
- Cuddly "spoons" with my husband
- Petting sweet Maggie, our dog, always brings a smile

Female, 40s

- Getting up 1/2 an hour earlier in the mornings than the household for quiet meditation.
- I have a home office and live in the country. Three days a week, a friend and I try to walk and visit during the lunch hour. Gets us out of our homes and the fresh country air and

conversation is rejuvenating (works best spring, fall, winter—mid-summer, too hot, we walk in the early morning).

- Daily writing in my journal.
- Having tickle fests with my children.
- Sunday afternoon naps!
- Catalogue shopping with my VISA! (yes, I have limits and boundaries!)
- Attending church together as a family
- Alone time with my husband, sans kids.
- Girls' night at the movies!!
- Girlfriend lunches!!
- Keeping a healthy balance of family, work, and community. Saying NO to additional activities when I feel I'm becoming overloaded.

Female, 40s

During the week, I like to (when possible) go out in my garden for at least a few minutes and sit quietly. I need to soak in the sights and sounds of morning. I find the smell very refreshing and restorative. The birds are very active around me, as I have multiple feeders nearby. I find this a very calming experience, and it helps to keep me centered throughout the day. Sometimes I wander around and check my garden areas, depending on how much time I have available.

In the evening, I return outside after it is dark and the house has quieted down from dinner, homework, and tucking my youngest child into bed. I love to sit outside under the night sky and enjoy the night sounds. It is a very peaceful way to unwind.

Another favorite way to relax is to go into my studio with a book and a cup of tea, light many candles, and stretch out on my sofa to read. I can see my garden outside, and have several bird feeders positioned so that I can enjoy the birds coming and going. I read for a while, then just relax and enjoy the sights and smells. I can add another dimension by playing some music while doing this. I also spend a great deal of time in my studio either painting or working on a quilt, two activities which bring me endless satisfaction. I try to create a very pleasing environment while doing these things by keeping the phone at a distance, and just letting my creative juices flow.

Female, 50s

- Sitting and watching a large body of water i.e., the ocean, large lake or river—that enchanting sound. I love the water.
- Baking or cooking a favorite dish, dessert, etc. for someone.
- Decorate my house. Moving furniture around or adding a new decorative item, picture, etc. I love just being and trying different ideas around my home.
- Sitting in my most comfy chair, lighting candles, and having my favorite music on. Then really listen to the music.

Female, 50s

Most consistently I experience happiness when I wake up after a good night's sleep (about 7-8 hours mostly uninterrupted) and realize that I have a whole day ahead to do what I want to do.

It's usually cooking or fooling around in the garden but the key ingredient is that I can shape my own 10-12 hours and am not responsible to anyone else.

Another time, which surprised me and I have thought about it a lot since it happened, was an afternoon that we spent recently in the Hungarian countryside. What made this experience so very unique and made me happy was that there was a torrential down-pour and the whole earth smelled fresh and new, a smell that I had forgotten from childhood. I think that the cement and asphalt of my life have changed the way things smell. It smelled so good that day and was so reminiscent of the past that I was happy.

Female, 50s

- When someone's name flits across my mind, I pick up the phone. "Hi, Karen, I was just thinking about you." – Or "Something I read (or heard) reminded me of you."
- The 21st century version of love notes in the lunch box is e-mail. My husband and I write messages like, "Look forward to having dinner with you tonight." "That was a nice talk last night." "You looked nice this morning." I've got mail. I've got male!
- I like to say to a friend, business associate or complete stranger, "That color really looks great on you." What smiles are flashed my way. No one can ever get too many compliments. As a writer and editor, I try to always compliment my client's initial effort before discussing how to improve it. When I say for example, "You're really a good writer," they just beam. Sometimes it's as simple as "You're really organized and will save me time."

Female, 50s

- Each morning, enjoying the beautiful view from my bedroom brings me happiness and gives me an opportunity to feel grateful.
- Happiness flows when my 22-month-old granddaughter raises her arms and wiggles her fingers to say, "Pick me up," as she runs across the floor.
- Physical activity makes me happy.
- Completing a list of 'must dos.'
- Arranging fresh cut flowers, especially from my garden.
- Connecting with people, especially in person.
- Reaching out to touch someone, may be listening, looking into the eyes of a loved one, laughing, or sharing a moment of commonality.
- Hearing a gaggle of geese as they fly over.
- The changing seasons: Kicking crisp, colorful fall leaves, watching first snow fall, spotting the first flowering spring bulb, swimming on a balmy summer evening.

Female, 60s

I don't know if this is what you're looking for but, for instance, yesterday was a busy day including being in the recording studio for three hours doing two of my new songs (which made me very happy. I love working with the engineer and my musical director.) So today, since I have a home-based business, I chose to stay in my pajamas all day, not take my vitamins or do my morning exercise, and stay on the computer answering emails and then returning phone

calls to good friends. It's now 3 p.m. and I'm about to get dressed, take my vitamins and go for a long walk. It's been a wonderful day and I'm happy!

Female, 70s

At this time of my life a beautiful day spent with my husband, a visit with a friend, a quiet time with a cup of coffee among many, many other happenings makes me what I am, a happy woman who is able to most of all, appreciate these moments. But if I were to think deeply as to what gives me the "most joy" I would have to say that after being with or speaking to my grown children. Seeing how they have developed and what good lives they have created for themselves and their families. I guess the pride I feel at those times I carry with me. The pleasure I feel is incredible. (The years of worry and fear for them, are behind me) These are the joys of "growing old" or I should say, "older".

Do you notice any common themes in what these women are saying? What I hear from their words is that it doesn't take much to carve out just a few minutes of happiness everyday. Take some time to reflect on how you experience happiness in your life. If you're not doing something to make you feel happy at least once a day, you might want to focus on adding things to your life that will bring you this pleasure. You may get some ideas of what you could add by reading what others do. Start with one a day and then continue to add until you can say that you are satisfied with the amount of happiness you choose to make happen!