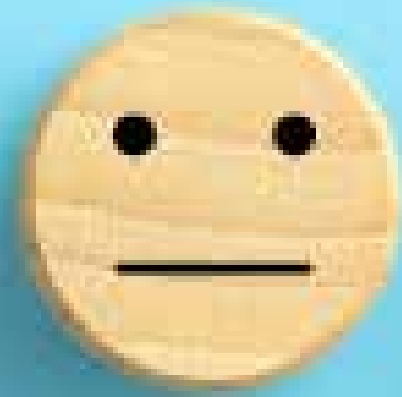


I WROTE DOWN FIVE THINGS THAT MAKE ME HAPPY

The real science to happiness isn't about being happy all the time. Here's what this writer learned.

BY AKANKSHA SINGH



WHEN THE COVID-19 pandemic hit last March, I was anxious, depressed, and sleeping until noon. My freelance clients started to pull out of contracts one by one, and since I'm a writer and journalist, the news—of mass unemployment combined with the havoc wreaked by COVID-19 and of what was yet to come—added to my anxiety. Because I've been clinically diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder for six years, I know when my slumps are coming and when they have a tendency to spiral. This was going to be one of those times.

As a means of proving to myself that there was still happiness and fun left in the world while I wrote about the pandemic and politics, I decided to maintain a "positivity practice." I'd tried and failed at

keeping a daily gratitude practice alive several times over the years, but after coming across one of those motivational social media posts about making habits, I said I'd keep at it for just one month consistently. After all, if it failed, I'd lose nothing.

Every night before bed, I would jot down in an old notebook a list of five things that had made me smile throughout the day. With my unreadable handwriting and made-on-the-spot abbreviations, these lists would never make sense to anyone else. Occasionally, however, I found myself going to bed chuckling as I wrote about that thing my cat did or what my mother said on Twitter.

After more than six months, I'm still going with these lists. Recording my five things has meant that

I wind down by reflecting on my day—something I never gave myself time for earlier: I go to bed less anxious, more grounded, and mostly happy.

The Bad Stuff Sticks

In today's hyper-plugged-in digital world, it's easier than ever to focus on the bad stuff. Between news notifications telling us that the world is ending and social media likes distracting us from our sense of self-worth, a 2019 study in the *American Journal of Health Behavior* suggests, it has been shown that we're often mentally and emotionally drained by the time we get to bed.

But once upon a time, focusing on the negative stuff was what kept us alive. "For sound evolutionary reasons, most of us are not nearly as good at dwelling on good events as we are at analyzing bad events," writes Martin Seligman, the founder of the field of positive psychology, in his book *Flourish*. Our brain has a negativity bias on account of our evolution, explains positive psychologist and motivational speaker Kezia Lockett. In other words, we focus largely on what could go wrong or what went wrong, which once worked in our favor. As cave people, we'd run from saber-toothed tigers and prevent ourselves from eating berries that made us sick the last time we picked them off a bush. While humans generally still tend to focus on what's going wrong in the world and in our personal lives, taking the time to center ourselves and jot down the good could be a small step toward combating those negative thoughts.

Negative Experiences Are a Means of Learning

Today, explains clinical psychologist Jeanette Raymond, PhD, although negative experiences get a bit of a bad rep, they're still key to understanding ourselves and the things that threaten us. When you think of name-calling in a schoolyard, gossiping in a clique, cyberbullying, or being fat-shamed on social media, Raymond says, "these are potential psychological threats that, in today's society, become enormous dangers to your social grouping and ability to do business."

But these things need to be focused on, explains

Raymond. Negative experiences are important to remember so that you can try to learn from mistakes and avoid repeating the same ones (unless you got a reward for it, like being let off the hook, in which case those mistakes reinforce the same behavior). "The more intense the experience, the greater the memory irrespective of its positive-negative balance. It all depends on the salience of the emotion at the time the memory is encoded," says Raymond.

Positive Psychology Is Not "Happiology"

When I started my five-things-that-made-me-happy practice, there were days when I was convinced it wasn't working because I wasn't happy in the moment I was writing things down. On some days, thinking up things that made me smile was hard work, and on others, it felt too forced to be authentic.

In *Flourish*, Seligman writes, "[To] overcome our brains' natural catastrophic bent, we need to work on and practice this skill of thinking about what went well." The goal of positive psychology, he stresses, is "flourishing." Seligman makes a key distinction about what positive psychology isn't, too: "If positive psychology is to be more than a 'happiology' of cheerful mood, we need to shift

our focus to well-being."

I might not have been in the best of spirits while writing down my list after a "bad" day, but I was, overall, in a better frame of mind. Interestingly, Seligman's research, published in a paper titled "Positive Psychology Progress: Empirical Validation of Interventions," suggests that practices like mine, in which participants wrote down three good things that happened to them each day, led to an increase in people's happiness and a decrease in their depressive symptoms over a six-month period.

Your Brain Is Trained to See Signs

"When we focus on the smallest thing," explains Lockett, "our focus grows." Thanks to a network of neurons in our brains called the reticular activating system, we see what we want to see. For instance, she explains, if your focus is on a red car you want to buy, all you see is red cars.

When I pushed through my second month of journaling these five things, I noticed that it had become a lot easier to do. It wasn't as if my anxiety had suddenly dissipated; rather, I was more at ease with it.

KEEPING A HAPPINESS LOG IS ABOUT SAVORING THE SMALL THINGS THAT MAKE YOU SMILE.



Personally, when I pushed through my second month of journaling these five things, after coaxing myself into it by buying a new notebook exclusively for this practice, I noticed that it had become a lot easier to do. It wasn't as if my anxiety had suddenly dissipated; rather, I was more at ease with it. What's more, I'd started adding an odd bonus item to my list and sharing some details of the things that made me happy—seeing my cat reach the top of the bookshelf after failing at least thrice; seeing my mother explain what she learned about trending hashtags on Twitter on her second day of being on it (she realized they could be promoted, trending as something called "me-me" or "mehm").

Form a Routine

What I didn't know throughout the first three or four months of keeping a five-things-that-made-me-happy journal was that by being a stickler for routine, I had done myself a favor in guaranteeing its outcome. A 2011 study by researchers at the University of California, Riverside, and the University of Missouri-Columbia found that "happiness interventions" are "most successful when participants know about, endorse, and commit to the intervention."

Ask Why

Something I do intuitively but didn't realize until months later is ask why. When Seligman made participants of his study write about three good things that went well, he also made them explain why they went well. The additional detail adds to the deliberate nature of the practice.

Be Open-Minded

I'm the last person who expected this to work, but here we are. Plus, the science is all there. Positive psychology takes us out of our day-to-day lives and expands our field of view. While it's normal to be skeptical of such claims—bearing in mind that this is how we're wired—anecdotally, I know that this practice works for me, perhaps more so now that I appreciate the whys. I realize that a positive practice like this one sounds woo-woo and hippie-dippie. But I've seen it work firsthand: I stopped lying in a cocoon of blankets for half the day, I was less irritable, and the knots in my shoulders dissolved every now and then. I began feeling as I did before the pandemic and experienced a better sense of "normalness," too. If you feel like I did back in March, consider trying it—if nothing else changes, you'll at least have a record of what you did for a stretch of time, and if it works, well, welcome to the hippie-dippie club. ●