

Norcross MD Advocacy

Miles Tobitt

The Keys to Happiness: What can be done to achieve true “happiness”?

Happiness: Life’s greatest virtue

Life is tough, a constant barrage of this and that and when you’ve finally gotten your head above the waves, another current will rip you right back down. The life preserver that will always be there for those who know how to grab a hold of it; happiness.

To truly be happy is something that, on paper, feels very much attainable, but it can be harder said than done for a lot of people. Happiness is something that we can get from things ranging from a big promotion at work to getting a better score on your test than you thought you would to something as small as just making your bed in the morning and getting that feeling of accomplishment. It all depends on how you are to define happiness itself, which can be defined by everyone differently. But inherently, happiness is within all of us on some level¹. While some conditions make it difficult to experience these positive emotions, happiness is something that is born with us.

The sources of happiness that we’ll be discussing in this month’s newsletter are daily practices/routines as well as your environment. There are more ways to attain happiness, but these two in particular are seldom mentioned when discussing the topic. Furthermore, there are also things to avoid when talking about finding happiness, just as much as those things you want to implement into your life in this journey.



¹ *Happiness: Inherent or acquired?*. The Meaningful Life Center. (2020, March 5). <https://www.meaningfullife.com/mlc-tv/happiness-inherent-or-acquired/>



Constructing a World of Happiness

While happiness is inherently a human quality, this does not correlate to feeling happy every second of every day. We are all gifted with the capability of experiencing some level of happiness and a really effective way in which a lot of people are able to feel naturally happy is by constructing an environment around them that triggers

positive responses and emotions. Things like gardening, planting, or just life and nature in general have profound impacts on happiness.



For this newsletter, I got in touch with high school Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and accelerated environmental science and biology teacher at Bonita Vista High School, Mrs. Jennifer Ekstein. Mrs. Ekstein has been a big inspiration for me during my educational journey and enthusiastically has agreed to assist in the making of this month's newsletter. When asked about how plants and gardening can improve one's quality of life, she had this to say:

*“When you put your hands in dirt or you're around plants, **it elicits natural endorphins**. They filter the air, they give us oxygen, but there's also some **peace of mind** when you're gardening. You also have this aesthetic beauty that you're surrounded by that makes it **calm and serene**. There's something to be said about being surrounded by nature, when you're in the elements, and **you connect with what I call your 'basic rawness'**. You're a living thing immersed in other living things. Not to mention the smells and the wind that assist in this **reciprocity of peace and serenity**.”*

Mrs. Ekstein has done her part to immerse the high school with plants and nature to improve the quality of life for not only her students but the school's students as a whole. Worldwide, there has been an outcry for schools to use nature to improve the mental health of students of all ages. Hagley Museum in Wilmington, Delaware released an article that discusses how students being surrounded by

nature have shown to **improve cognition and performance** while also **lowering the risk of developing psychiatric disorders**.²

While it is undeniable that plants provide an immense psychological benefit, not only to students, but to anyone surrounded by nature of this sort, what could you do to begin a lifestyle intertwined with nature? As someone who has practiced this lifestyle her entire life, here's what Mrs. Ekstein had to say on the topic:

*"It starts with **bringing one home**, and then you get addicted, and then you bring more home. There is this almost **positive feedback** that once you get one, you just can't stop and you feel a desire to get more and more and more. You get to a point in which **you feel like a connoisseur, like a hobbyist**. You start thinking 'I love this species of succulent' but then you get sucked into the other kinds of succulents. Taking one plant home, it becomes more. If you aren't good at plants, which I wasn't when I first started out, **bring home a succulent**. Just water them every once in a while and let them be and they'll figure it out."*

The habit of taking home a plant and taking care of it, maybe even adding it to a growing collection, becomes part of your life. Pretty soon, you're surrounded by a vast collection of **different species, different colors, different aromas**, and it creates an atmosphere that you've never felt before. You **combine your home life with nature** and you immerse yourself into **opportunities for yourself** that you would not be able to feel or experience otherwise.

According to The Spruce³, an indoor aesthetic and home atmosphere organization, some of the easiest and most aesthetically pleasing plants to start with that can be grown and kept indoor include:

- Aloe Vera
- Jade plants
- Snake plants



To close the topic of plants and how to construct a lively home or work environment, Mrs. Ekstein said:

*"I have always felt that it is important that you surround yourself with living things and life. As an environmental science teacher, these are amazing climate change drawdown beings. They suck carbon dioxide in while giving your space more oxygen, all on top of providing a serene and immersive space that gives so many great psychological benefits, **why wouldn't you want to contribute to things like that?**"*

² The benefits of spending time in nature. Hagley. (2022, July 19).

https://www.hagley.org/benefits-spending-time-nature?gclid=Cj0KCOjw06-oBhC6ARIsAGuzdw3vL2NyzikH9nardfjevpxPZn6QZ3nfketp2apxPrTuK7PdRDJeipAAApiJEALw_wcB

³ Iannotti, M. (2022, November 22). The best easy houseplants to grow in any home. The Spruce.

<https://www.thespruce.com/easy-houseplants-hard-to-kill-4141665#:~:text=Easy%20houseplants%20can%20take%20care,they%20are%20great%20for%20beginners.>



Social Media: Thief of More than Joy

I touched on this topic last month regarding teen mental health, but the negative influence that social media has on overall happiness among not only teens but primarily young adults in general is profound.

As someone who's career revolves around working with the biggest demographic that social media

targets, Mrs. Jennifer Ekstein answered some of my questions regarding the topic of social media and the impacts she observes first hand on the students she teaches. When asked about her opinions on the impacts it has on the wellness and performance of her students, she had this to say:

*"I could tell you that they are addicted to their phones. As a teacher, I notice they can't go more than a minute or two without their phones. And looking at **images on social media that are mostly fake**, it completely **affects their self esteem** and **they judge themselves** based on these photos. What's interesting is do teenagers understand that they're fake? Maybe they do on some level but the more exposure they have to these photos, the more you **tend to aspire to be like these fake figures**. Even influencers are faking everything from where they are to what they're eating to what they do on a daily basis. For this, it's extremely dangerous, it **twists teen's views on their bodies** and it allows youths to hide behind a screen and **encourages them to say awful discriminatory things**; it conditions youths into **cowards**."*

Predominantly what youths are exposed to on social media is the best 1% of a person's life. What people post on social media is a very small sampling to their life. Unfortunately what many of these young viewers see is what they think is closer to half of this person's life, sometimes even more. Whether it be generally false depictions of wealth or body image or success or even just happiness, it gives the youths seeing these posts and, as Mrs. Ekstein talked about, ruins teen's views of their own bodies, lives, etc. Comparing your life to someone else's, especially when done to their best 1-2% is not a recipe for good mental health.

*"For this reason, I'm not shocked by a lot of mental illnesses, like I am not shocked by the increase in **body dysmorphia** and **anorexia** and **bulimia** because they're seeing all of this. AI is great for some things but it **doesn't paint a reality for what life really is**."*

Why is this of such importance?

No matter what person you are, what purpose you have in life, or what you strive to be or achieve, being able to feel and embrace true happiness is something that everyone should strive to do. While happiness can look very differently for everyone, true happiness can be attained to some degree further by taking these two topics very closely to mind.



The benefit that plants and nature give to us is immense to say the least. Especially over the last 100 years, the need for it has grown tremendously. As Mrs. Ekstein touched on, climate change has become a very real problem worldwide. Not only do plants provide a great deal of benefit for us as individuals, the benefit they can provide our world is bigger than any one person.

While the benefits of surrounding yourself with plants and nature provide peace and clarity, among so much else, social media will only do anything but. Not only have anxiety rates skyrocketed among users of social media but so have self esteem issues, body image issues, and users have been conditioned to live cowardly lives with false senses of freedom to say heinous things on the internet as well. While social media and the internet has provided some very good things to our world, these things have been deteriorating predominantly the youth of our world and all others who are on social media. Being able to live a happier life is one that rids yourself from having to be in the middle of such things.

Being able to surround yourself with something as lively and real as nature is a far superior substitute to that of surrounding yourself with something as artificial and fake as something like social media and leads to a life happier than you could've ever thought was possible before in a plethora of ways.

Further resource links:

10 keys to happier living. Action For Happiness. (n.d.). <https://actionforhappiness.org/10-keys>

Degges-White, S. (n.d.). *4 keys to happiness*. Psychology Today.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/lifetime-connections/201507/4-keys-happiness>

Gora, A. (2023, January 31). *What is the key to happiness? we look at the science behind it*. LiveScience.

<https://www.livescience.com/what-is-the-key-to-happiness-the-science-behind-it>