



8 SIMPLE WAYS TO CREATE A GOOD LIFE

How to Use Scientific Strategies for More Peace, Joy & Contentment

A good life is not the result of being born with a “silver spoon” in our mouth. Quite the contrary. Many of us have suffered a lot, often when we were too young to defend ourselves. Creating a good life in the present is about moving beyond the pain of the past by practicing sound & simple, scientific methods aimed at healing. It's about consciously choosing to create a brighter future, no matter what you have experienced in your past.

Creating a good life begins with an acceptance that **all potential and knowledge are within** - that you are already whole. Living with a sense of inner harmony, a positive connection to yourself and others, and a sense of fulfilled purpose and direction is waiting for you. Staying curious about how you can transform your life and joyfully following simple suggestions means that you are on a path to ever-increasing self realization.

The suggestions below are an expansion of a previous document I wrote on enhancing emotional sobriety. It asks you to concentrate your efforts on “creating” a new and more rewarding life. Creation involves concentrated effort so the more effort you put in, the more change you will see. Simple, but not easy. Be gentle with yourself and stay engaged. And most of all, enjoy the process because that's what having a good life is all about!

**Below are 8 simple ways you can begin to
create a good life:**

1. Come Clean on Your Addictive Behaviors

If addiction is a problem in your life, your first goal in recovery is to **abstain from the substance or behavior**. It is only after you stop self-medicating and self-soothing in destructive ways, that the buried feelings can surface and healing can begin. Because this is easier said than done, here are some simple strategies that others have found successful.

What can be helpful is to:

- a) **Attend support groups** to find people who can understand you and be there to help you. If you are to give up a substance or behavior you are dependent on - you must replace it with something else. In support groups, you can replace it with the love that you receive from those who understand, hope for a brighter future and guidance from those who have transformed their pain to joy.
- b) Engage in **personal therapy** in order to provide a safe environment for you to work on the emotional issues that underlie your addiction. If you are using substances or behaviors in an addictive way, you are doing it to regulate/numb your emotions. In therapy, you can begin to heal your emotional wounds and regulate your internal states in healthy ways.
- c) Accept that you must **avoid** the people and places that are associated with your **addictive lifestyle** if you are to avoid relapse. Focus your energy on surrounding yourself with positive people and support networks that provide role modeling for how you can grow in a clean and sober lifestyle.

It takes time to get comfortable with a new way of life. Be patient with yourself, but be persistent. As you commit to facing life's challenges by staying present and working through your emotional responses, rather than escaping through addiction, healing and a new sense of wellbeing can occur on a deep and profound level.

2. Outsmart Your Reptilian Brain

Many years ago I heard a Buddhist monk talk on "overcoming negativity". He used an analogy of a blank white page which represented the 90% of ourselves that is positive, on which he drew a small black dot, which represented the 10%, about ourselves that is negative. He stressed the point that too many people **spend 90% of their time focused on the dot - the 10% that is negative.** We seldom allow ourselves up onto the white page.

Rick Hanson, a neuroscientist, therapist and author (The Buddha Brain, One Simple Thing), has helped us understand why this occurs. The primitive part of our brain has a **negativity bias**. What this means is that a part of our brain habitually scans the environment looking for 'perceived danger or threat'. It tells us, "something's wrong", "someone is out to get me" or "there is an enemy nearby", when often there isn't. Each of these statements, and ones like them lead the nervous system to go into a heightened state of fight or flight. Using our thinking brain to analyze our state of perceived danger, we can't 'make sense' of it. So guess what we do? We default to blaming ourselves. Yes, we become our own worst enemy by focusing on what we 'think' we are doing wrong and how we may be the cause of the problem.

This chronic negative thinking, turned on the self, becomes a habitual, unconscious and distorted focus of who we are. By orientating this way, we skip right over what we do well, never giving it more than a few seconds of our attention, if we notice it at all. In fact,

brain research tells us that if we are someone who engages in chronic negative thinking, **brain pathways that register success, accomplishment and feeling esteem for ourselves, will be underdeveloped.** It's imperative that you change this by engaging in the following activities that have been proven to make a real difference.

Challenge your negativity bias by:

- a) **Focusing on the good:** One of the world's greatest spiritual Masters, Paramhansa Yogananda gave the following advice in "How To Be Happy All The Time:

"Avoid speaking negative things. Why look at the drains, when there is beauty all around? You could take me into the most perfect room in the world, and still, if I wanted to, I would be able to find faults in it. But why should I want to? Why not enjoy it's beauty? If we concentrate on the bad side, we lose sight of the good. Doctors say that millions of terrible germs pass through our bodies. But because we aren't aware of them they are far less likely to affect us than if we sensed their presence, and worried about it. When we look at the negative side long enough, we ourselves take on negative qualities. When we concentrate on the good, we take on goodness".

- b) **Being proud of yourself:** As easy as this is to say, it's harder to do and will feel uncomfortable at first for many people. However, make acknowledging your accomplishments a part of your daily routine in all areas of your life - your work, your family & your relationship with yourself. It is not self-centered to think well of yourself. It's called self-esteem.
- c) **Being grateful:** Make a gratitude list and put yourself on it. Develop a new healthy habit of listing 3 new things each day that you can be grateful for. Keep your eye out all day long for new things to be grateful about - that way you are rewiring your brain pathways towards a brighter future.

- d) **Smiling more!** It's known that smiling has a positive effect on our emotions and is infectious. Most people who are smiled at, will smile back at you. It's an automatic reflex based on the fact that it feels good to be smiled at. It's virtually impossible to feel depressed while smiling. As you begin to do something as simple as smiling, you can build in your 'positivity bias' and learn that no matter what else may be going on in your life, small things you do can make a big difference.

3. Believe in Yourself

What we tell ourselves has a huge influence on our experiences. In his book, "The Biology of Belief", scientist Bruce Lipton describes how **our beliefs are the single most important factor in determining whether the cells in our body move towards health or towards illness**. These ideas are getting increasing support by other researchers as well.

Repeated negative self-talk, based on a belief that we are unworthy or unlovable (usually originating in our childhood), is **toxic** to our health and will literally make us sick. If we breathe polluted air we know it is hazardous to our health. If we think negative thoughts, Lipton argues that it pollutes our inner world and it is equally hazardous to our health.

Whatever the origin of your negative thinking is, you can be a healthy & happy adult if you are willing to **be a cheerleader for your own life**.

Clean up your inner environment by:

- a) **Paying attention to your inner voice:** Whenever you hear yourself saying something negative about yourself, like "that was stupid", "I'm an idiot" or "everyone hates me", put a large Red Stop Sign in your mind.

- b) **Interrupt the negative downward spiral:** Take a deep breath and regroup in the present, reminding yourself that these are old messages that you no longer care to listen to. Replace the toxic thoughts with healthy alternatives like "It's ok to make a mistake" "I am lovable", or "I am a good person", or any other caring, nurturing statement that fits for you.

- c) **Hardwire a positive upward spiral:** As you do this, remember a time when you felt your absolute best - when you were happy, relaxed or excelling at something you are good at. Let that image permeate your mind as you repeat one of the above affirmations. As you do this, raise your arms overhead and put a big smile on your face. Do this as often as you can, in order to create a new pathway in your brain for positive self respect.

4. Embrace Joy

"Those who cannot grieve with their whole hearts cannot laugh either".
Golda Mier, (former Prime Minister of Israel)

As human beings we relate to the world primarily through our emotions, especially in the early years of life, when language is not yet developed. Emotions are communicated via sensations channeled from your heart & your gut to your brain. **Your emotions are the thread that connects you to yourself and the world.** Joy is the queen of hearts of emotions because when we are joyful we love ourselves and the world around us. **I believe joy is our true state of being.**

If growing up, your parents or other significant adults did not model healthy emotional expression, it will not come natural to you. You may have come from a family that never expressed any emotion at all so you learned that

you had to shut off your emotions in order to survive. As an adult, you function more like a talking head with little connection to your heart. Or, you came from a family where violence or emotional upheaval was the norm. Now you are emotionally over-reactive and have trouble containing your outbursts.

Developing the capacity to embrace, contain and express your emotions in healthy ways, is what is necessary to embrace your joy. **Learn to own your emotions rather than letting them own you.**

Try these tips to embrace the wisdom of emotion:

- a) **Go within:** Spend a little time noticing how your body registers each different emotional state, so you can **deepen your connection to yourself** through the sensations that make up your different emotional experiences.
- b) **Label your emotions:** Recent brain research has discovered that just by labeling an emotion accurately, for example, "That really hurt", will result in diminishing the intensity of that emotion. So as you begin to identify the sensations that allow you to label the emotion, you will be able to down-regulate or soothe unpleasant states.
- c) **Ride the wave:** Emotions are 'energy in motion' and are meant to be felt, not acted out. An emotion is experienced like a wave - the intensity rises and peaks and then declines and disappears. Do not define yourself by an emotion you are having, i.e, "I'm a depressed person", but rather let the feelings of sadness, fear or loneliness come and go. As the so-called 'negative' emotions are felt and integrated, we are able to return to our natural state of joy.

- d) **Get out from behind your anger:** Watch for how anger may be your "go-to" response. Anger is often a secondary emotion, meaning it is covering up some other, more vulnerable emotion. Practice asking yourself what you might be feeling underneath your angry response. While anger is a healthy part of boundary setting and of the grief process, "fixed rage" can be a maladaptive strategy for avoiding underlying sadness, helplessness, or a hurtful interaction with a loved one.

5. Find Your Herd

We all have a need to belong that is primitively encoded in our brain. Sharing ourselves with others creates intimacy - something we all crave and never grow out of the need for. Research shows that when we are in the company of supportive people who understand us, it increases the amount of serotonin (a soothing neurotransmitter) in our brain. We feel 'safe' and can begin to let down and relax at a deep level.

Dan Siegel, in his book, "Parenting from the Inside Out", explains how our early relationships and the brain interact to shape who we are. We are literally 'wired for connection'. If your early relationships were unpredictable, dismissive or hostile, you may have difficulty letting others get close to you, or even avoid relationships altogether.

If your boundaries were not respected in early life (e.g. experiencing abuse or abandonment), you may either shut others out to stay safe or tell your whole life story to virtual strangers in an attempt to belong. You tend to live in the extremes of emotional contact rather than in emotional balance.

Since human beings are essentially relational - we don't live well in isolation. It is extremely important that you improve your capacity to connect in a positive way. Choosing people who will respect and value who you are is crucial to achieving lasting emotional sobriety.

You can begin by:

- a) **Joining a healthy social, recreational or spiritual community** in order to create and nurture a sense of belonging. When you commit to a group of people you can experience a sense of being known in a deep and important way. As Ron Rudin notes in "The Craving Brain", it meets our biological need to be in the middle of our "herd", where we know we are not vulnerable to prey. The release of these 'feel good' neurotransmitters, translates into a state of relaxation and comfort. So, **take some time to find your herd!**
- b) **Experience healthy trust** by learning how to open up slowly to people you meet and only disclose things that do not leave you feeling too vulnerable. Avoid the 'urge to merge' by obsessing on the need for constant contact with someone you just met. Instead, go slow and let your new relationships grow over time. Practice being respectful to others and expecting that in return. This is the cornerstone of a deep bond of friendship.
- c) **Be open to new experiences:** Ships are safe in harbor but that is not what ships were built for. Taking some healthy risks and getting out of your comfort zone will result in you being more engaged with the world. In doing new activities you not only have more fun, but you meet others who have similar interests. You spend less time alone and more time interacting with others.

6. Consider Work Your Worship

Mahatma Gandhi is someone whose life I admire deeply. He lived his life guided by the principle of "Ahimsa" (Truth & Nonviolence) and although less than 100 pounds in weight, he was a true spiritual giant. He coined the term "work is worship" as a way of explaining that by adjusting our attitude in a way that makes everything we do an act of giving, we can accomplish much more and do so joyfully. Life becomes more tolerable when we remember that what we do is an extension of who we are

"Please remember it is what you are that heals, not what you know."

Carl Jung, Psychologist

Since recent statistics show that approximately **one-third of working Canadians don't use up all of their annual vacation time**, it would seem that, as a group, we take our work seriously. This makes an even greater argument for adjusting our attitude so that we can go to our jobs each day with a fresh perspective of giving our unique selves - including our skills, talents, caring and time, to **benefit others** in some small way.

Try Practicing the following:

a) **Be kind:** It's easy to be nice to people who are friendly. But too often we have to interact with difficult people who trigger us. Yet, I have found that a little kindness goes a long way - even when others are not cooperating or collaborating. It allows for more ease in tough situations. Rather than focus on what others are doing and then use their bad behavior as justification for an angry or aggressive response on your part, do as Gandhi would suggest:

"Be the change you wish to see in the world."

b) **Be ethical:** Be your best self at work and know that no matter how easy it may be to cheat, your integrity is what counts the most. Don't sell your soul for some temporary gain, but rather consider that whatever you do will come back to haunt you in the quiet of the night. Be mindful of all your actions and know that self-esteem results from doing esteemable things.

c) **Be of Service:**

"Providing service is itself a blessing. When you have this thought, you will have heaven everywhere." ~ Swami Sri Yogi Satyam

It's fascinating that we are now scientifically proving what Eastern spiritual practices have known for millenniums - that when we give to others, it has a positive biological effect on us. The old adage that it is **'better to give than receive'**, has new scientific merit. So go ahead and find an organization, a charity or even a neighbor or friend who needs some help and commit yourself to regularly engaging in giving of yourself, for fun and for free. This is different from 'care-taking' behavior, which is a role assumed in early childhood and practiced compulsively as a way to feel needed and loved. Care-taking behavior can also be thought of 'resentful compliance' and over time depletes the self. Instead, being of service is a conscious choice to give in a way that feels meaningful to you and that leaves you feeling satisfied and gratified when you are done. Service fulfills the self.

7. See Beauty in the World

Since the capacity to self-soothe is a developmental task that begins in infancy, if it was not adequately learned when you were young then you may not know how to make yourself feel better when you are down. **The idea that you choose to see beauty in your daily life is the quintessential way to self-soothe.** If you are someone who lacks the capacity for self nurturing, you may also do things to constantly scare yourself, like engaging in high risk behaviors. (Examples of high risk behaviors include substance abuse, attraction to those who treat you abusively, driving your car at high speeds, extreme sports or having unprotected sex.) These high states of arousal are based in fear and release stress hormones including adrenalin and cortisol. Whenever these hormones are released, the body responds by releasing inner opiates that help calm you down. This process of internal neuro-physiological soothing in the face of fear can become addictive in itself.

Healthy soothing, on the other hand, produces a sense of ease and comfort without the need for chaos. It is the ability to calm yourself when you are distressed, lonely, anxious or scared, by engaging in activities that feel soothing. This is important because life is full of unexpected and difficult events, and despite that, you can still choose to see beauty rather than creating ongoing stress through high-risk behavior.

There is a mantra that goes like this:

Beauty on my right, beauty on my left, beauty above me, beauty below me, beauty behind me, beauty before me, beauty within me, beauty surrounds me.

You can say this to yourself while walking to work, riding the bus, sitting in a meeting or any other time you need a reminder. **Your mind is a powerful tool - use it to create the positive life you want.**

8. Pray & Meditate regularly

"We are not human beings having a spiritual experience but rather spiritual beings having a human experience".

Religion and spirituality are not the same thing. Your **spirituality is personal to you** and is an ongoing process of exploration. Religion, on the other hand, is a set of defined rules about how and what you must believe. While many religious communities provide healing for individuals, some people have had negative experiences with religion and in the process have turned away from their own spiritual development.

"Prayer is good medicine" according to Larry Dossey, M.D.. His research involved a double-blind study (neither the front line researchers nor the subjects knew which group was getting the treatment) of two groups of patients going through treatment for AIDS and open heart surgery. In

each case, one group of patients was prayed for and one was not. The results indicated that the group that was prayed for, (but who didn't know they were being prayed for), got significantly better during their treatment, than the group that wasn't prayed for. Wow! I find that pretty compelling evidence that when we pray sincerely, something miraculous happens. Since all of us have the innate ability to connect with the Infinite, our prayers can bring about amazing changes in our lives.

"There are only 2 ways to live your life - as if nothing is a miracle or everything is."
~ Albert Einstein

Prayer is about connection - with the Great Beyond. It's about asking for support and trusting that you are never alone. Meditation is about savoring that connection by being still. In the stillness, we awaken our connection to the infinite potential and knowledge that resides within. Our nervous systems literally change for the better through this process as we access parts of our brain that are related to positive emotional states, such as peace and joy.

There are many ways to pray and meditate.

Experiment with some or all of these options:

- a) **Spend time in nature** sensing yourself a part of a greater whole. Visit a temple, church or synagogue or go on spiritual retreats where you can practice centered prayer and connect with Cosmic Consciousness. This Consciousness may be thought of as Love, Peace, God, Goddess, Creator, or whatever term expresses Truth for you.
- b) **Attend 12 step or other spiritually-based meetings** and listen to the sharing of others on how their lives have been transformed by conscious contact with a Power greater than themselves. There is often a 'synchronicity' that occurs when people say exactly what it

is you need to hear. You are comforted by a knowing that you are not alone and encouraged by the fact that others have found a meaningful alternative to living with constant problems.

- c) **Attend meditation**, tai chi or yoga classes. Use these ancient and transformative techniques to know yourself better and to develop the mind-body connection.

- d) **Find a spiritual teacher or Guru** that you can trust to guide you in the right direction. Recognizing that you can go further on the spiritual path and faster through mentorship. As you consistently listen to the quiet voice of wisdom within for guidance, your life will become a demonstration of your love for self and humanity.

May you experience many blessings on your courageous journey of healing. May your life become **"the good life"**.



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