

# Choosing to be happy can make a world of difference

By Mandy Kendall

I spent last weekend with 70 wildlife enthusiasts training to be a volunteer at the Lake Tahoe Wildlife Center. This wonderful organization strives, year in and year out, to provide the necessary care to countless injured or orphaned wild animals.

By the end of the weekend I began to realize what a roller coaster of emotions these dedicated people must experience every day during their tireless work at this wonderful facility. I have no doubt that the concern, the long hours and the hard work is soon replaced with an overriding sense of joy when an animal is finally released back into the wild.



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So this brought me to wonder: Are we slaves to circumstances that determine if and when we feel joy? Or is happiness a matter of perspective, i.e. can we choose to feel happy?

Research has shown that the brain cannot distinguish very well between an actual emotion and an imagined one. The same areas of the brain get activated when we are actually feeling happy and when we are imagining, or remembering a time when we were feeling happy.

Even though we are programmed to pay more attention to the negative things that happen to us (there goes that survival instinct thing again) we can even-up the balance by strengthening the happy pathways in the brain. If every time we experience something that makes us feel happy and if we savor the moment and memorize it, the circuits in the brain that retain that feeling will be intensified and can be more easily accessed in the future.

A shift in perspective can also help change the emotion attached to something, and linking this with an attitude of gratitude can be a powerful tool to help shift a negative emotion into a positive one. James Baraz and Shoshana Alexander talk about how a change in focus from “I have to” to “I get to” can “incline the mind to gratitude even during unpleasant moments”.

Finding the time to feel happy is often a challenge in itself. Our hectic schedules have us rushing from one thing to another, that risk us leading reactive, rather than proactive lives. Taking even brief moments throughout the day, to pause and re-set our minds, can help keep us in control of our emotions.

Seeing the good in others can affect your emotional status too. Overlooking what you don't like in someone else and focusing on their goodness can benefit both parties. Interactions with that person can improve and, like a mirror, your behavior towards them is likely to be reflected back to you.

**So, here are some *Qwik-e* tips to help increase those joyful moments:**

**Memorize a happy time in every detail** – Take time to feel every aspect of a happy moment in your life, while it's actually happening or when remembering it. How did it make you feel physically? What were you hearing, seeing and thinking?

How were others reacting to you?

**Change “I have to” to “I get to”** – Try looking at a situation or task you don’t like in a more positive light. For example, taking out the garbage can go from the annoyance of I have to to a feeling of I get to. Creating an opportunity to be grateful for the health and strength to do it and thankful for the trash pick up service.

**Taking the time** – Whenever possible just take a moment, pause, breath, relax, come back to the center of yourself and regain control.

**Look for the good in others** – Try to ignore the things that really annoy you about someone and search for at least one positive thing about them and focus on that. Then notice what effect it has on your interaction with them and your state of mind too.

**Imagine feeling happy** – Only you know how it feels when you’re happy and your brain doesn’t know the difference between the actual thing and your imagination. So reprogram your brain by imagining what it’s like when you’re feeling happy in as much detail as possible. What would you be doing? What would you look like? Who would you be with? How would it make them feel to see you being so happy?

Here’s to being happy and healthy.

Until next time.

*Mandy Kendall operates Health Connective in South Lake Tahoe. If you have any questions, would like some advice, or would like to request some Qwik-e tips on any health and wellbeing topic, please feel free to drop me an email at [healthconnective@gmail.com](mailto:healthconnective@gmail.com), visit us on Facebook, or keep an eye out on Lake Tahoe News for regular Qwik-e tips on how to make healthy changes one Quick and Easy step at a time.*

