Can You Find Happiness with a TBI?

By Dr. Bryan Weinstein & Drew Bufalini

Some define it as simply “feeling good.” Others describe happiness as being an infinitely more complex, scientifically quantifiable emotion; an equation that includes pleasure, engagement and meaning experienced in both the short and long term.[1] Still others, like Mahatma Ghandi, describe happiness as a state of being where, “What you think, what you say and what you do are in harmony.”

Happiness can stem from our own actions and sense of purpose. It may be a seed planted by someone else’s generosity or come from achieving goals or even from viewing a work of art. Happiness can be elusive and enigmatic for some people, while others seem to know just how and where to find it. Ultimately, happiness is subjective. Finding happiness is up to each of us as individuals.

But what if you’ve sustained a traumatic brain injury? Is attaining the most basic definition of happiness possible? Is happiness achievable when you’re no longer the same person you were before your injury?

We believe that the same rules for finding happiness apply to all of us – brain injury or otherwise. Each of us has the capacity within. To find it, we must make a practice of positive actions and decisions that will allow our inner happiness to rise. We must practice happiness on a daily basis to find ourselves happy in the future…and be able to look back on happy memories. What are the positives actions and decisions we must undertake to reach a state of inner-Eden?

Accept Your Limitations and Embrace Your Boundaries.
Struggling against your limitations takes a vast amount of energy. When you are aware of your deficits, your therapist can help you develop strategies to work around them. This will help you begin to move forward in your life. If you aren’t able to drive - ask a friend, relative or transportation service to chauffeur you. Don’t lament your ability to drive. Rather, embrace the opportunity to socialize with whomever is driving you. Remember, it is up to you to make the best of every situation.

Set Realistic Goals – Then Break Them Down to Bite-size Goals.
Someone who decides to scale Mount Everest doesn’t catch the first plane to Nepal and start climbing. They train first and master the variety of skills and equipment required to make the 29,029 foot ascent. The same is true with our goals in daily life. If returning to work after an injury is your goal, performing your former duties might make scaling Mount Everest seem *less* challenging! Instead, consider starting small at a sheltered workshop or in supported employment. Use a job coach to help you break down your goal into many smaller ones: explore your career options, developing your resume, rehearse your interview skills, purchase professional attire and secure transportation when you start interviewing.

Change Your Perspective.
We all have days where we feel like the world is against us or that we can't do anything right. You can choose to accept and understand the situation by changing your perspective. Taking a different view of an issue or "putting yourself in someone else's shoes" can make the difference between frustration and better understanding.

Find Insight From Your Failures and Celebrate Your Victories.
When we fall, there is always a reason. It is important to understand why we fell…but it's more critical to get back up. Rise and pat yourself on the back. But before taking that next step, figure out why you fell in the first place. This knowledge will prove priceless for your progress.

Learn to Smile in the Face of Adversity – and Everywhere Else Too.
Helen Keller wrote, "Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experiences of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, vision cleared, ambition inspired and success achieved." While you may have already experienced your fair share of adversity, Life is never done with us. You can *choose* to welcome adversity as a challenge for you to overcome.

Keep a Journal or Blog of Your Thoughts.
Writing in a journal or blog gives us the opportunity to streamline our thoughts. When what we think and feel is in black and white before us, it becomes easier to stand back and analyze our decisions and thought processes. Journaling allows us to stumble into catharsis, into witnessing a revelation in our own lives.

Seek Out New Experiences.
Living by a daily routine is important – especially with a brain injury. But sometimes routine becomes so automatic that we miss the myriad of experiences life has to offer. Seeking out new experiences can be as simple as trying a new kind of food or going to a play instead of a movie. The idea is to do something - anything positive - that is different and even potentially outside your comfort zone. Our lives and personal histories are constructs of our experiences…and you never know when you might discover something new that makes you happy.

Get Social.
Extravert or introvert, we are all social beings. When we are around others who are like us, we catch a glimpse of both ourselves and life's possibilities for us. Being around other people with brain injuries will also give you a sense of belonging. What's more: studies show that people who socialize regularly experience less stress, illness and even live longer lives![2]

Be Grateful…and Express it!
Pretend every day is Thanksgiving and acknowledge everyone in your life who has made a positive difference. You can do this in person or your journal. Cultivating an attitude of gratitude cannot only make you a happier person, but it has distinct physical and psychological benefits too. In Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky's *The How Of Happiness*, she

explains, “Gratitude boosts happiness by promoting positive life experiences, increasing self-esteem, encouraging caring acts and moral behavior, detering negative feelings and emotions AND helps us strengthen our relationships.”[3]

Don’t Sweat the Small Stuff.
Stress is at the root of practically all anxiety and, very often, illness. Although it is easier said than done, it is counterproductive to stress out or get emotional about aspects of life we cannot change. Eating healthfully, exercising and getting a solid 8-hours of sleep every night also go a long way to helping us reach a state of serenity.

Forgive and Forget.
Like avoiding stress, forgiveness can be a monumental task – but it is, quite literally, good for both your heart and overall health. Forgiveness can give you a lower heart rate, blood pressure and reduce your stress level. A study published in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, found that “Forgiveness not only restores positive thoughts, feelings and behaviors toward the offending party (in other words, forgiveness restores the relationship to its previous positive state), but the benefits of forgiveness spill over to positive behaviors toward others outside of the relationship.”[4]

Feed Your Head.
These days, there is a diet for just about everything. Because we now understand so much more about the nutritional content of food and their direct benefits to our bodies, zeroing in on a diet that can benefit your brain is simple. According to Dr. Phillipa Norman, including the following foods in our diet can provide energy, help cognition, learning and more:

- Avocados
- Fish
- Purple grapes
- Brown rice
- Lentils
- Eggs
- Flax seeds
- Sesame (seeds, oil, butter, etc.)
- Sweet potatoes
- Spinach[5]

Exercise.
According to the National Academy of Sports Medicine, exercise promotes personal happiness in several ways. “Regular exercise releases endorphins and catecholamines, which are the “feel good” chemicals released by the brain. Regular exercise also increases production of dopamine, a neurotransmitter that improves mood and decreases feeling of depression. Exercise also helps happiness by increasing self-esteem and feelings of accomplishment.”[6]

Don't Just Show Your Compassion, Act On It.
Compassion is showing sympathy for the suffering or misfortune of others. But there is an enormous difference between *feeling*compassion and *acting* on it. In the long run, the benefits of acting on your feelings go far beyond the immediate effect of helping you lead a happier life. When you act on compassion, you improve someone else's life and, therefore, all of our lives.

Laugh…So the World Will Laugh with You.
A list of the physical and psychological benefits to laughter probably runs longer than a complete encyclopedia of knock-knock jokes. Here are a handful: Laughter relaxes your entire body and relieves physical tension and stress. Laughter can improve your resistance to disease. It triggers the release of endorphins that promote a sense of well-being and even temporarily relieves pain! Perhaps most importantly, laughter strengthens our social bonds with others and enhances our own sense of resilience.[7]

Know your purpose.
When you know why you've been given the gift of survival, you'll know where to focus the majority of your energy. Yours might be to help others, make art or music, be a good son or daughter or do any number of things! Ultimately, knowing your purpose allows you to live a more satisfying and meaningful life.

Add to this list! You make your own happiness!
Seriously. Add to this list. There should be room in every happy life to grow, to be creative and share that creativity with the world. Whether it's a pearl of wisdom or a one-sentence manifesto – make your mark with a comment.

In reality, happiness requires more than a few suggestions from a blog. It takes practice. Whoever said "Happiness is a journey, not a destination," knew that the longer you travel, the easier it gets. The same is true of practicing happiness. The more accustomed you become to practicing happiness, the more happiness will seem as natural as smiling on a warm, spring morning.

[1] http://www.pbs.org/thisemotionallife/topic/happiness/what-happiness
[2] http://www.valueoptions.com/april06_newsletter/benefits_of_social_interactions.htm
[3] http://www.mindbodygreen.com/0-11819/scientific-proof-that-being-thankful-improves-your-health.html
[4] http://stress.about.com/od/relationships/a/forgiveness.htm
[5] http://www.healthybrainforlife.com/articles/healthy-food/10-tasty-brain-foods-to-enjoy-now
[6] http://www.sharecare.com/health/benefits-regular-exercise/how-can-exercise-help-me-attain-happiness
[7] (http://www.helpguide.org/articles/emotional-health/laughter-is-the-best-medicine.htm)