

# SIMPLIFY MAGAZINE

· A QUARTERLY, DIGITAL PUBLICATION FOR FAMILIES ·

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# Positivity: An Introduction

*by Elissa Joy Watts*

My son is fascinated with ocean life. He's nine. Boys his age tend to hoard trivia fodder in their hamster-wheel brains. Isaac is definitely one of those kids. He runs over, hair tousled, enormous book in hand. He throws it open and points.

“Mom! Look! Sunlight zone, twilight zone, midnight zone—that's how you measure the depth of the ocean.”

Meanwhile, I'm covered in flour, distracted as I prepare dinner under pressure. “Cool, Isaac!” Cool.

Since then, I can't help but measure life like an ocean too: sunlight, twilight, midnight.

Sometimes you float; sometimes you flounder. Sometimes all of life feels dark and cold. Highs and lows are inevitable. The good news? We can practice positivity and swim to the surface every single day, regardless of our circumstances. With the right mindset, even the

Eeyores among us can escape the depths, reframe a situation, and spy something worth celebrating.

Compiling the articles you're about to enjoy has kept my head above water in recent months. Optimism and laughter are hot commodities. Hope is precisely what the world needs now.

This issue of Simplify is the equivalent of swimming skyward, breaking the surface, and exhaling with joy. Connection, love, happiness—it's all here. You'll find practical, heartfelt stories and plenty of fun in the margins too.

You'll learn from bestselling authors, notable changemakers, and entertaining storytellers. A decorated professor here, an entrepreneur there. We've even invited a weasel (because why not?). It's no wonder these people have collectively reached millions with their joyful messages. Positivity is contagious.

My son—the same son who delights in algae and sea turtle facts—can sometimes cling to pessimism too. Storm clouds hovered over his spirit the other day, so I decided to wield my newly acquired tactics on him.



“Get over here, kid. We’re making a list. Name one hundred things you’re thankful for. Be specific.”

He threw me a blank stare and a furrowed brow. Isaac wasn’t into it.

“Come on, buddy. You can do this.”

We walked through the house, room by room.

He blurted out the obvious. “I’m grateful for...Legos? And my loft bed? Harry Potter. My new p.j.’s.” I spotted a twinkle in his eye. “Reading my ocean book at night! My cute baby brother! Video games!”

Then it spewed out like a tidal wave. “That bread you made last night! Hot chocolate with marshmallows! Movie night! Just the right amount of holidays!” (His precise words.)

“How do you feel now?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. He leaned in with a smile.

“I feel better. Can I play video games now?”

As you spend time with this issue, we invite you to create your own list as you go. I guarantee you will exhale and smile too.

A suggestion? Enjoy this with a tall glass of something delicious. And do yourself a favor. Make sure that cup is at least half full.

Enjoy.

Elissa Joy Watts, Managing Editor

# Love Is All Around: Positivity, Resonance, and Social Connection

*by Barbara Fredrickson*



If you're like many, you might liken your emotional life to the weather: it's hardly something you can control—it just happens. Yet the science of emotions not only upends such resignation, but it also lays out the reasons you'd want to tend your emotions. In short, science offers both “how to” and “why to.”

If the emotional climate of your day-to-day life seems unchangeable, don't blame your DNA. While it's true that you inherited aspects of your emotional outlook from your parents, a large piece of it also reflects your day-to-day activities and habits of mind. These can either coax emotional wellness into your life or chase it away. For better or worse, many people's activities and mental habits tend to be pretty stable, creating an illusion of unchangeable emotional tendencies.

To cultivate emotional wellness today, then, the first step is to shift your activities and habits of mind. Fortunately, this requires no money and hardly any time.

### **Easy Ways to Cultivate Positivity**

I've spent decades exploring the realms of well-being and positive psychology as both a student and a professor. I've discovered that one

of the simplest ways to foster positivity is to consciously engage with your everyday world.

### Silent wishes

As you are out walking each day—or whenever you find yourself waiting—instead of checking your phone for updates, look around you. Select one person, then another, and silently wish each one to be happy. If the person you pick looks happy already, silently wish for her good fortune to continue. If he looks troubled, wish him peace.

Offering silent wishes like this does more good than you might think, and there's no need to invoke the metaphysical. Thinking kind thoughts like this can condition your mental habits to be more open and attuned to others, which raises the odds that you can create genuine positive connections with others throughout your day. Well-being naturally follows.

My studies suggest that when you connect or “click” with someone else in person, a discernible though momentary synchrony emerges between the two of you, as your gestures and biochemistries, even your respective neural firings come to mirror one another in a pattern I call *positivity resonance*. This is what the elusive state of “love” looks like, from your body's perspective: a biological wave of

good feeling and mutual care that rolls through two or more brains and bodies at once.

If you're more of a homebody, you can implement similar practices without stepping outside. At the end of each day, for instance, take just a minute to ponder how kindness manifests itself in your life. Reflecting on moments when you've been kind to others can help you value these moments more. Reflecting on times when others have been kind to you can kindle grateful feelings.

### Loving-kindness meditation

For a still more powerful shift, try loving-kindness meditation. It's been honed over millennia and is scientifically proven to be especially beneficial. Loving-kindness meditation involves slowing down, taking several deep breaths, and specifically focusing warm thoughts toward particular people.

If you're interested, there are many guided loving-kindness meditations online. Devoting just 15 to 20 minutes to this activity three to four times a week is all it takes to seed warmer and more positive connections with others as you step outside.

### **Benefits of Micro Moments of Positivity Resonance**

Turns out your body needs micro moments of positivity resonance just like it needs good food and physical activity. These micro moments, our research shows, nourish both you and the other person. The more of these micro moments you each have, the more each of you grows happier, healthier, and wiser.

Indeed, my team's research shows that micro moments of positivity resonance fortify the connection between your brain and your heart, making you healthier day by day. Decades of research have shown that people who are more socially connected live longer and healthier lives. Yet precisely how social ties get under the skin to affect health has been one of the great mysteries of science.

My research team discovered that when we randomly assign one group of people to learn new ways to create more micro moments of love in daily life—namely, through loving-kindness meditation—we lastingly improve the functioning of the vagus nerve, a key conduit that connects your brain to your heart. This discovery opens a new window onto how micro moments of love serve as nutrients for your health.

What's more, your immune cells also reflect your day-to-day experiences of kindness and love. Too often you get the message that your future prospects hinge on your DNA. Yet the ways that your

genes get expressed at the cellular level depends mightily on many factors, including whether you consider yourself to be socially connected or chronically lonely. One study shows that when people perform random acts of kindness, they unlock healthy shifts in gene expression within their immune systems.

Although it may seem surprising that experiences that last just a few moments can have any lasting effect on your health and longevity, we've learned that there is a positive feedback loop at work here, an upward spiral between your social and your physical well-being. That is, love—defined as micro moments of positivity resonance—not only makes you healthier, but being healthier also builds your capacity for more love, which keeps the cycle going.

Little by little, love begets love by improving your health. And health begets health by improving your capacity for love. Fortunately, your body has the built-in ability to “catch” the emotions of those around you, making your prospects for love nearly limitless.

As hopeful as this sounds, I also learned that you can thwart this natural ability if you don't make eye contact with the other person. Meeting eyes is a key gatekeeper to neural synchrony. This is part of why connecting face-to-face is more gratifying than connecting virtually. Even when we enable video connection, true eye contact is



never quite established and so our thirst for connection is never truly satisfied.

## **Love Reimagined**

One thing science has taught me is not to take loving relationships for granted. I used to uphold love as that constant, steady force that all but defines my marriage. While that constant, steady force still exists, I now also see my bond with my husband as a product of the many micro moments of positivity resonance that we two have shared over the years. This shakes me out of any complacency that tempts me to take our love for granted. Love is something we need to re-cultivate every single day.

Love and compassion can also be one and the same. If we reimagine love as micro moments of shared positivity, it can seem like love requires that you always feel happy. I learned that this isn't true. You can experience a micro moment of love even as you or the person with whom you connect suffers. Love doesn't require that you ignore or suppress negativity. It simply requires that some element of kindness, empathy, or appreciation be added to the mix. Compassion is the form love takes when suffering occurs.

Bottom line: Simply upgrading your view of love and connection changes your capacity for it. Taking a scientific perspective on love offers new lenses through which to see your every interaction.

The people I interviewed for my book, *Love 2.0*, shared incredibly moving stories about how they used micro moments of connection to make dramatic turnarounds in their personal and work lives. One of the most hopeful things I learned is that when people prioritize feeling connected and attuned to others, they initiate a cascade of benefits. And this is something you could start doing today, having learned even just this much more about how the emotion of love works.

## **The Upward Spiral**

Just like it takes money to make money, the more you connect, the easier connecting becomes. That's because physical health drives emotional wellness just as emotional wellness drives physical health. The causal arrow runs in both directions, creating that dynamic I call an upward spiral.

This dynamic can buoy you up to an ever more balanced and meaningful life. Yet there's poignancy in this dynamic too: Your capacity to connect obeys the biological law of "use it or lose it."

So choose it. Choose to tend to your emotional life. Devote more of your days to activities and habits of mind that will coax more emotional wellness into your life.

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**Dr. Fredrickson** is director of the Positive Emotions and Psychophysiology Laboratory at UNC-Chapel Hill and the author of *Positivity* and *Love 2.0*. Her research has been recognized with numerous honors, and in 2017, she was honored with the Tang Prize for Achievements in Psychology, awarded to recognize exceptional career contributions to humanity's wellbeing.

# Positive for Life

*by Marta Zaraska*



I'm an extrovert who likes new experiences, so the strict coronavirus lockdown imposed on us in France, first in the spring, and now, once again, in the fall, has been hard on me. We are only allowed to leave our houses with a special permission form, and apart from grocery shopping and emergencies, we can go outside just once per day, for a maximum of an hour, within a 0.6 miles range. To me, that's stifling.

Thankfully, though, performing acts of kindness helps me get out of darkness. My daughter and I have baked muffins for our neighbor who came down with COVID-19 (we left them at his doorstep).

Inspired by others in our community, we decorated our garbage bins with happy drawings of flowers and rainbows with the message "merci" scribbled in-between, to thank those who pick up our potentially infected trash. We've sent flowers to nurses and doctors fighting the virus at our nearby hospital. We make sure to support local businesses by ordering from them online. It makes us feel better, more optimistic, less closed off.

Weekends within 0.6 miles from home are a challenge, but we try to savor experiences we are allowed to have as much as we can. Last Saturday we ordered a fancy takeout meal from an upscale local restaurant and, while eating at our own kitchen table, pretended we were having a night out. We wore our best clothes and lit candles.

History teaches us that challenging times can help us shift our perspective and appreciate more what we already have, as well as push us to find meaning in our existence. The French, for instance, haven't been as happy since the Second World War as they were *during* the war.

A quote by Friedrich Nietzsche hangs on my home office wall: “He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.” For me, that “why” is to try my best to help prevent catastrophic climate change, even if my contribution is tiny.

Studies show, meanwhile, that looking for purpose in life can lead to a more favorable gene expression pattern related to inflammation and boost our antiviral response. In COVID-19 times, that's great news.

Simply, happy humans live longer—encouraging us to find ways to be more optimistic and live with more purpose, as I have during COVID-19. Let's look to science for the evidence.

## **What the Evidence Shows**

There are plenty of studies showing that being optimistic means living not just longer but also healthier. Take Catholic nuns, for instance.

Researchers at University of Kentucky analyzed handwritten autobiographies of 180 nuns from the early 20th century, coding each word as either emotionally positive, negative, or neutral. Gratitude, hope, and relief would be marked as positive, for example, while anger, disgust, and fear would be marked as negative. The scientists also checked which of the nuns were still alive, and at what age the others had passed away. The results were clear: the sisters who were the most joyful and optimistic in their bios were also the ones who lived the longest. Sunny disposition meant on average an additional ten years of life. [1]

A similar finding emerged from an analysis of autobiographies of 88 deceased psychologists, including such stars as B. F. Skinner and Jean Piaget—the happy ones lived up to six extra years. Here what mattered was using words such as “lively,” “attentive,” or “humorous,” among many others, of course. Consider this passage, for instance: “I entered with zest all those extracurricular activities which make up college life in a small town. Life was vital and enjoyable.” That’s an

account of a psychologist whose optimism was likely to extend life.  
[2]

One particularly well-done British study in which existential enjoyment was measured every two years for six years in total concluded that people who each time reported to feel full of energy, to enjoy everyday things, and to look back on their life with a sense of happiness were 24 percent less likely to die than were their less cheerful peers. That's an effect similar to that of eating at least six portions of vegetables each day. [3]

But maybe it's just that being in poor physical shape makes people miserable, and if you are in poor physical shape you die early—logical, right? However, such cause-and-effect issues can be fairly easily controlled for by taking into account initial levels of health when happiness is measured, and by checking the physiological outcomes years down the road.

If you've ever found yourself reaching for a cookie when feeling sad (I certainly have), you have experienced how our moods influence our health behaviors. Research indeed confirms that happy people are more likely to be physically active, eat well, and sleep long. Yet when scientists control for such effects in their studies, all this still doesn't explain the full impact of optimism on health and longevity. In turn,



both animal studies and experiments on people show that our subjective well-being influences our biology directly, too.

## **Laughter or Screams**

When in spring 2020 COVID-19 hit my region of France, I was anxious. As I observed hospitalization rates soar, I felt my distress soar too. No amount of cookies seemed to help. What did help, however, was stand-up comedy. I found myself obsessively watching shows by comedian Michael McIntyre, laughing at his parenting jokes and feeling instantly better. Research shows that was likely no coincidence.

Laughter can be a powerful medicine. It can decrease the levels of the stress hormone cortisol, affect the levels of pro- and anti-inflammatory cytokines, as well as increase the activity of natural killer cells—lymphocytes that launch attacks against infections and tumors.

On the other hand, fear creates opposite effects.

If, instead of Michael McIntyre's comedy, I chose to watch horror movies, I might have found myself with a worsened immune system. I know because, in one experiment, a group of students watched the

1974 version of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. The results indicated that their leukocytes fired out tons of reactive oxygen species, and their leukocyte coping capacity scores plummeted, suggesting that their immune systems got temporarily messed up by the stress.

So if you ever find yourself affected by an infection, don't indulge in a horror-movie marathon at that very moment. Instead of helping you feel better, it could make your immune system less efficient.

## **A Better Kind of Happiness**

Research reveals one other important fact about the effects of optimism and life satisfaction. There is more than one kind of happiness.

*Hedonic happiness* is happiness derived from material or bodily pleasure, such as eating well or getting a massage. *Eudaimonic happiness* is happiness derived from having meaning in life, a deeper satisfaction you may obtain from intellectual pursuits, social relationships, or charity work. It turns out, hedonic happiness is not as good for you as eudaimonic happiness.

In one study, people with eudaimonic happiness had a more favorable stress-related gene-expression profile than people with

hedonic happiness. This made them likely more resistant to viruses and less prone to inflammation—and, in the long run, potentially less at risk of diabetes, stroke, heart disease, and cancer. [4]

We live in stressful times and it may be difficult to stay optimistic. Yet working on our happiness is at least as important to our health as eating well and exercising. That's why I urge, focus on the pursuit of eudaimonic happiness, rather than hedonic happiness, as my daughter and I did when we baked muffins and thanked our garbage removers.

Need a few ideas to get you started in positive directions? You can raise your subjective well-being through...

- cultivating gratitude
- counting your blessings
- performing acts of kindness
- visualizing your best possible self in the future
- savoring experiences

I'll admit that, even when I do all these things, the pandemic still gets to me sometimes, and dark moods creep in. That's when I reach for the weapon of last resort, a medicine that's particularly easy and fun to apply—a healthy dose of stand-up comedy.

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**Marta Zaraska** is a science journalist, public speaker, and the bestselling author of *Growing Young: How Friendship, Optimism and Kindness Can Help You Live to 100*. Her work has appeared in publications worldwide, including the *Washington Post*, *Scientific American*, and *The Atlantic*, among others. An avid traveler, she now lives in a tiny French village with her husband, daughter, and a spoiled cocker spaniel.

# Chisel Away at the Excess to Reveal Your True, Happy Self

*By Jay Harrington*



Over 300 years ago, as Burmese forces prepared to launch an attack into Siam (now Thailand), a group of Siamese Buddhist monks sprung into action to protect a large, precious, golden Buddha statue from the looming invaders. The statue was covered with a thick layer of clay to mask its significance.

The monks were overrun, and for centuries the secret of the golden Buddha statue was laid to rest with them. In the 1950s, in an attempt to move the statue to make way for a new highway, the clay began to crack and the gold that lay beneath was revealed.

This story was popularized by author Jack Canfield in the blockbuster bestseller *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. It's a metaphor for what many of us, as we seek to simplify life, desire to manifest, which is to reveal our true selves to the world.

We have goodness, hope, and dreams inside of us, but through a lifetime of striving, comparing, and accumulating, we build layer upon layer of layer of "clay" that hides our light within. It is only through the purposeful act of chiseling away these layers that we can become, or become again, who we are truly meant to be.

**Does Your Happiness Live in the Shadows?**

One of the saddest circumstances of modern life is the fact that so many people are chasing happiness from external sources when the key to their happiness lies within. We foist our desires for happiness onto someone else, and then resent when our hopes go unfulfilled.

We believe that a material possession—be it a house, car, or new outfit—will lead to contentment, but save for a fleeting rush, end up with remorse every time. We think “only if I get that promotion...” or “when I meet the person of my dreams...” but our happy future doesn’t materialize the way we expected.

Author Tal Ben-Shahar calls this the “arrival fallacy,” which is the belief—often false—that when you arrive at a certain destination, you’ll be happy.

We live our lives in the shadow of happiness but have trouble drawing it into the light.

For much of my 30s (I’m now 43), my own happiness lived in the shadows, close enough to sense but always out of grasp. By all outward appearances, my life was idyllic. I had a beautiful wife, a large, expensive house, two successful businesses, lived in a great community, and was blessed with three healthy, happy girls. Despite all this, a deep sense of discontent permeated me.

I struggled with this seeming paradox. I had achieved much of what I spent my early life striving for. Wasn't I on the road to happiness? The further I traveled along the road, however, the more imbalance I felt. It was only by stopping, stripping away, and in many ways starting over that I was able to see the light.

What I was seeking wasn't outside of me, in the form of something or someone. My happiness was already inside of me. Like the golden Buddha, I just needed to chisel away at the layers of clay that enveloped me. Fundamentally and foundationally, I was okay. Not perfect, but certainly good enough. I became mindful of who I was, and what I wanted, and realized that everything that I needed to be content existed within my true, authentic self.

This realization was like a pressure valve being released inside of me. I came to understand that the edifice I had built around me—the material trappings of success, the yearning for approval, the desire for acceptance—was inhibiting, not furthering my happiness. It was ego run amok and it had to go. I was struck with the realization that happiness cannot come from externalities, but rather must be tapped from within.

## **The Hard Lessons of the Pursuit of Happiness**



What I've come to learn in the years since is that happiness is not a linear path. The pursuit of happiness is full of pitfalls, fits, and starts. And it's hard work.

Anyone who believes that happiness, itself, is a fixed destination will suffer from the "arrival fallacy," too. Throughout my experience of trying to live a more purposeful, intentional, meaningful life, I've hit a number of road bumps. There have been hurt feelings. It has been hard to let go because sentiment and perceived self-worth are embedded deeply in the objects, beliefs, and relationships we spend a lifetime accumulating.

The point is, there will be good days and bad days, triumphs and disappointments, but once you step out of the shadow and reveal your true self to the world, you'll come to realize that everything will be okay. No matter what happens, you'll be resolute in the knowledge that no one can rob you of your happiness, because no one controls it other than you. This understanding will bubble to the top of your consciousness and guide your hard choices. As Rachel Archelaus once wrote, "The more of me I be, the clearer I can see."

**Break Free to be Free**

If you, like me, are interested in transforming so that you can show up in the world as more of your true, authentic self, it's important to begin the process of chipping away at the heavy layers that suffocate our intrinsic happiness and keep it relegated to the shadows.

What follows are three important areas to work on. If you're a regular reader of Simplify Magazine, this will undoubtedly sound familiar, but the resistance that rears up to stop us from taking the hard actions, thereby suppressing our true selves, means that they bear repeating.

Minimize, and if possible banish, these things:

### **1. Limiting Beliefs.**

We all have stories about why we're not good, strong, pretty, smart, [fill in the blank] enough to be who we are, chase what we want, be with whom we deserve, or achieve what we're capable of. Understand where these stories derive from. Sit with them. Recognize them for what they are. Rid yourself of them.

### **2. Comparisons.**

Mark Twain once wrote, "Comparison is the death of joy."

It's hard to avoid comparing ourselves to others in today's world. Modern marketing tactics, social media feeds, and misguided people try to lead us to believe that happiness lies in something other than our own circumstances. Don't try to live someone else's idealized self—embrace your own true self.

### **3. Stuff.**

We've all fallen victim to the idea that more stuff will bring more happiness. The odds are that this pernicious belief is the reason you spend your time and attention on the pages of this magazine—they serve as a counterbalance to our cultural norms.

The truth is, everything that we accept in our lives, from the people we spend our time with to the things we spend our money on, is a trade-off for something else.

All that we bring into our life carries a price in terms of the time, money, and energy it requires of us. To break free of the shadow we must break free of our dependence on shiny new objects to bring us fleeting moments of happiness, and embrace what really matters.

Conventional wisdom suggests that there's something more out there that will make us happy. Real, hard-fought wisdom, born of life experience, tells us otherwise. Happiness lies within.

Often, like the golden Buddha, happiness is simply cloaked by layers of grit and grime that accumulate over the course of a lifetime. If you can come to accept, to the core of your being, that you are good enough exactly as you are—even if it takes considerable work to reveal it—then you'll find it within yourself to bring your true self to the surface.

By breaking free, we can be free.

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**Jay Harrington** is a lawyer-turned-author and entrepreneur who lives with his family in a small town in northern Michigan. Today, along with his wife Heather, he runs a marketing agency and a lifestyle apparel brand and authors a blog about living purposefully.

# Prime Your Day for Positivity in Two Minutes

*By Neil Pasricha*



Okay. You're alive. You're awake! You're reading this article. It's another day.

Do you know how many minutes each of us is awake every day? On average, 1,000 minutes. Every single day.

What if you could take the first two minutes of every day and make the other 998 happier? Would you do it?

If you're like most people—if you're the way I always was—the first two minutes of your day are a total blur. You're darting out of bed. Your alarm didn't go off. Your kid is screaming and you need a coffee. Then you're running out the door and the day feels like a disaster right from the get-go.

It's not just you, believe me. Frantic mornings and spinning wheels are a real problem.

## **Cue Positivity**

About ten years ago, I picked up a book called *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*, by psychology professor Roy Baumeister and *New York Times* journalist James Tierney. It highlighted that decision fatigue was part of my problem.

So I started carrying a little cue card in my pocket. Each morning, I'd write down one thing I wanted to get done. One. That's it.

I would scribble down, "Write one article for that newspaper," or "Write one blog post," or "Call one person." Clear and simple. At the end of each day, I'd pull out the cue card and feel great when I crossed off that one task.

I noticed that if I *didn't* write down that one thing right away, it would live in my head all day but I wouldn't actually do it. It interfered with my thoughts. So instead of letting the task wander in my head for hours, I committed to write it down in the morning. Decide to do it, focus, and get it done.

I liked this practice so much that I started using the cue card's other side at night. I started writing down a few gratitudes.

There's a lot of research to back up the benefits of gratitude, like the study by Emmons and McCollough. They discovered if a person writes down five things they're grateful for, once a week over a 10-week period, then compared to people who documented five weekly hassles or events, the grateful person is not just happier—they're also physically healthier. [1]

But the research also shows that in order for this gratitude practice to be effective, you've got to write down specific things. Little things. Not vague or repetitive stuff each week—family, friends love, family, friends, love. The gratitudes need to be pint-sized and meaningful.

For example, Toronto is home for me. It's winter here. I'm strolling the sidewalk. A car speeds by and sprays slush everywhere, but the wave completely misses me. My pants are okay.

Or maybe you're like my wife. You're outnumbered in a house of boys. At the end of the day, you notice all the toilet seats are miraculously down.

Your partner remembers to make the bed. You teach your dog to shake a paw. Your boss commends you in front of *their* boss. You roll over to the cool side of your pillow in the middle of the night.

Recording these tiny moments increases positivity and literally makes you a healthier person. Once I started writing a couple things down on the flip side of my cue card each night, it cheered me up.

But then I noticed a problem.

## **Promptly Positive**



Around this time, I was running a massive corporate leadership development team and wrapping two book projects. I was literally writing *The Happiness Equation*, a book about living well, and even though I was using my cue card each and every day, I'd still wake up with some bubbling anxiety in my stomach.

Maybe it's just me, but I'm betting it's you too. You wake up and you're anxious about a big presentation at work. Or there's a deadline looming. You're stuck in the comparison trap or you're annoyed by five pounds you gained over the holidays. Whatever it is, you're suddenly more worried about it when you wake up because you've been sleeping on it all night.

I stumbled upon another study called “Don't Look Back in Anger!” [2] It showed that if you can crystallize your anxieties through writing them down, you can actually eject them from your mind.

This is like the Catholic confession practice. A lot of world religions have something similar to this. If you confess your anxiety, you can exorcise it. Write it down and you can remove it from your mind.

Now every single day, I start by answering three simple prompts.

1. *“I will let go of...”*

This is the anxiety thing. Let go of the five lingering pounds. Let go of comparing yourself to the business mogul or best-selling author or picture-perfect parent.

## 2. *“I am grateful for...”*

These are those few specific things worth celebrating. Your new pair of socks. The 7:00 am meeting your boss canceled. The fact that you got to savor a hot coffee in solitude before the kids barged in.

## 3. *“I will focus on...”*

This is how it all started for me. Close the dozen browser tabs in your mind. Eliminate distractions. Write down one thing to accomplish by the end of the day. Focus on getting it done, cross it off, and feel happier.

## **The Two-Minute Morning**

Now you’ve got a science-backed two-minute exercise to impact the 998 minutes that make up the rest of your day. I call it the Two-Minute Morning.

The best part is tracking your progress in a journal. I compiled a book to serve as a guide, but any notebook will do. The magic for me is

looking back on stuff that had me anxious two weeks before. I often think to myself, “I was worried about that?!”

All it takes is commitment and two minutes in the morning. Give it a try. Make the other 998 minutes happier and more productive. I know it will work for you too.

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Neil Pasricha is the *New York Times* and number-one international bestselling author of seven books, selling millions of copies in dozens of languages. His latest, You Are Awesome, is for anyone who needs to be reminded that every problem is an opportunity, that every dead end has a hidden door, and that every step back is ultimately a step forward. His ad-free podcast, 3 Books, is listed among Apple’s Top 100. He has dedicated the past fifteen years to developing leaders—creating global programs inside the world’s largest companies and speaking to hundreds of thousands of people around the world. He lives in Toronto with his wife, Leslie, and three sons.

# Noticing the Gs: Why Journaling Matters and How to Start It

*by Erin Loechner*



One year ago, during a long night of restless sleep, I found myself padding to the kitchen for a glass of water. It was quiet, dark. The day's cacophony of dog barks, toddler harmonica duets, and dishwasher hums had already drifted away to the moon.

My thoughts had not.

Amidst my mind's noise was a simple comment, one hardly worth acknowledging, that I'd heard earlier in the day. "You didn't see the G," is what she'd said. My young daughter, hard at work on a letter to her grandmother, had finally mastered a G that wasn't backwards, upside down, or some version between. Ever proud, she'd displayed her letter with absolute gusto. Ever distracted, I'd seen all but the point.

The question was clear: *When had I stopped noticing the things that mean everything?*

More importantly, when will I begin to? Is it even possible?

Can any one of us truly pause a day's frenetic pace as we wade through the traffic, the noise, the heaviness to witness something altogether lovely? A rare finch shaking seeds from the birdfeeder. A new constellation of freckles on my son's nose. The perfect avocado, a toddler's lisp, the timeworn sweater draped on an entryway hook.

Can we learn to see the G's?

## My G-List

Just days after my fitful night's sleep, I embarked on a mission to try. And I began, first, by ruthlessly documenting the smallest of joys.

The many benefits of scrawling fragments of gratitude onto the page are often touted in lifestyle circles. Spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle calls gratitude “the true prosperity.” Oprah preaches that the practice can “transform any situation.” Even the Greek fabulist Aesop cites gratitude as “the sign of noble souls.”

But self-improvement aside, science points to gratitude lists and expressive writing as key practices in maintaining unshakeable perspective throughout your life. Journaling every day offers the opportunity to “recover from the daily stressors and leave the unimportant stuff behind,” writes Courtney E. Ackerman, master of science in positive organizational psychology. “It can help you identify things that would otherwise go unnoticed, such as patterns in your thinking, the influences behind your feelings and behavior, and any incongruencies in your life.” [1]

As a writer, I found myself tempted to turn such documentation into something official, something noteworthy, perhaps a book project, an Instagram caption, or a blog series. But no, there was something about this challenge that felt ill fit for consumption. It would need to be sacred, necessary. Healing, even. For my eyes only. No filtering, fluff, or fixing allowed.

The experts might call it journaling. I called it my G-list.

There were no rules, not really. I simply jotted down things worth noticing. I wrote memories on grocery receipts, drafted quotes in my Notes app, sent myself voice memos of moments that made me smile.

What I hoped would happen was this: I'd learn to host a staring contest with my life. To get dead honest about what matters, to spill the rest.

What actually happened was this: a worldwide pandemic.

## **Journaling in Plague Time**

With the onset of COVID-19 and surrounding quarantines, our days began to bleed into each other. Celebratory milestones—baby showers, school plays, everyday coffee dates—were postponed, later

canceled altogether. The social rituals and routines we'd all come to rely on had evaporated. Life felt thin, consuming. Anxiety-ridden.

I wondered: how could my pen and paper possibly offset such loss? Sure, journaling can help us tune in to the small stuff, teach us to see the big picture. But what happens when the big picture looks bleak, blurry? Unknowable? Could a single daily list truly rein in the debilitating weight of a worry-steeped mind?

As it turns out, I wasn't alone in my skepticism, nor my search. Since March, Google queries of "journals for anxiety" have increased more than 8,200%. [2] And for good reason: data surprisingly suggests that journaling keeps our mind healthy, yes, but also our body—even when up against a global pandemic.

In one specific study, researchers recruited a group of students who were positively infected with the virus mononucleosis. Their task? Journal three times weekly for 20 minutes. Based on continuous blood sampling, the students who wrote honestly about their stressful experiences gained increased antibodies in their immune systems and "achieved the greatest improvements in cognitive change, self-esteem, and adaptive coping strategies." [3]



The takeaway? A journaling practice widely assumed to be little more than a soul booster can, indeed, make a profound impact on the body as well, especially in the midst of a global pandemic.

Kathryn Ely, a licensed and nationally certified counselor, might surmise why. “Right now, there is so much that is going on around us that is out of our control,” she explains. “Focusing on what you can control versus what you cannot makes all of the difference in your level of stress.”

### **Invite Yourself In**

How, then, can we end a tumultuous year on a positive note? How to take control of the ship? *We can wield the pen. We can write the plot. And we can start today, in all our frantic glory.*

What I’ve learned from my pandemic journal—my own G-list—is this: Where there is room on the page for fretting, there is room in the margins for fancy. It’s up to us to decide how much ink we spill on each.

If you’re unsure where to begin, enjoy a few reflective questions as you peer in the rear-view mirror of the past twelve months:

- What is one specific challenge—small or large—I overcame this year? Where can I carry that momentum into this next year?
- What, or whom, helped me through this season of life? How can I effectively incorporate that support into the coming season?
- How did this year’s hardships wake me up to myself? What have I learned? Where have I grown? What’s next?

Listen, I know you’re busy. I know you have small children, or aging parents, or needy dogs and grown-up responsibilities and you’re way behind on your dental check-ups. But this is your life—your gift.

Allow yourself five minutes to see it.

Get to know it. Read it in black and white. Journaling is the welcome mat to your own soul. Knock. Answer.

It’ll be well worth the visit.

*For a free, printable download containing 52 journaling prompts you can use, [click here](#), or scroll to the end of the magazine for printable pages.*

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# Simplifying Parenting Through Mindfulness

*By Susan Kaiser Greenland*



Being a parent can feel like an ongoing high-wire performance. Regardless of our children's ages, we walk a tightrope to balance practical demands, existential worries about how our children's lives will take shape, our children's and co-parent's needs, and our own needs. Caring for a family skillfully and consciously is nothing short of a balancing act.

I was grateful when a mix of unexpected circumstances brought my adult children home to shelter in place during the pandemic. We're a closely knit family, and I felt relieved to live together again, thankful for the refuge of our family home. And even though the pandemic raged on, I also felt relieved when they left to capably resume their lives.

We joked that having the whole family living under the same roof again was like a rock band coming back together for a reunion concert. This gift of time and connection is something that I couldn't have imagined before the pandemic and an experience I'll forever appreciate. Still, four of us working remotely from home was logistically challenging. The house, abuzz with activity, Zoom meetings, and overlapping conversations, felt more like a fledgling start-up than the spacious and quiet empty nest to which I'd grown accustomed. The extent to which I now carve out extra time to spend

alone and rely on having the physical space in which to spend it surprised me.

I also was surprised by how much cognitive real estate my grown children still occupy. I found myself entertaining fleeting worries about how they were faring in their virtual jobs, whether they felt socially isolated, and even if they were eating right.

Mindfulness isn't a magic wand to wave over problems and solve them. Still, it has qualities that sometimes feel miraculous to me. During the pandemic, mindful awareness helped me recognize when I was at the end of my professional or parental rope and prioritize what mattered most. When I was able to simplify my life, my frazzled nerves could settle, and I could enjoy our time together.

Here's an example of how to recognize where we're stuck and prioritize what matters most that might resonate with parents of school-aged children.

When we feel overwhelmed or frustrated, for instance, we can bring awareness to how we internally react to the demands of meeting a work deadline while simultaneously getting dinner on the table and overseeing our third grader's math homework.

In moments like these, we notice if our mind is racing with a million to-dos and what-ifs. Then we check in with our bodies. Is there a golf ball-sized pit in our stomach, or are our shoulders inching upward toward our ears? If so, we can pause to take a few purposeful breaths to soothe our frayed nerves. Breathing slowly and consciously for only a few moments can settle our nervous system and help us see things in perspective. With a more spacious glimpse of our lives, we can glean what matters most to us—our kids, our co-parent, and our community—both at the moment and in the long run.

We might decide, for example, it's okay to be a smidge late on a work deadline. It's okay if dinner is a tad cold and math homework can wait, if doing so makes us calmer and able to enjoy our family more.

The ability to notice and interrupt moments when we feel overwrought and sense what we're thinking and feeling requires mindfulness. It also takes a willingness to be with things as they are, even if they're unpleasant. The more we practice doing so, the more comfortable we become with our discomfort and the less shadowy worries and fears drive our behavior. As a result, we have a greater capacity to connect to our hearts and trust we have the wisdom to know what's best for our family.

Sitting in meditation is, of course, an excellent way to develop mindfulness. But so, too, is being playful. Over the many years I've worked with kids and families, I've learned that connecting through mindful exercises and games is a powerful way to cultivate awareness, balance, and kindness. It's also fun.

Below are a few of my favorite exercises and games for parents and kids to settle their frayed nerves, discover what matters most to them, and usher in gratitude for pretty much everything, even all of the ups and downs of family life.

### **A Cooling Out-Breath**

Much of the time, we're not aware of our breathing. The body marvelously and automatically breathes for us, giving us life with each new breath. Another wonder of breath is that we can use it as a tool to help settle our nervous systems. When we take a purposeful breath in and attend to a long breath out, it helps focus our minds and quiet our bodies so we can see things more clearly and simply.

Here are some guidelines for how to do the "Cooling Out-Breath" practice and how to guide your kids to do it as well. This exercise is appropriate for all ages.



1. “Sit with your back straight and your body relaxed. Rest your hands gently on your knees.”
2. “Breathe naturally while I count the length of your inhale and exhale.” (Count out loud, adjusting your pace to the natural rhythm of the child’s breathing.)
3. “Now, breathe in for two counts and breathe out for four counts.” (As the child gradually increases the length of their exhale to four counts, adjust the pace of your counting so that it syncs with the pace of their breathing. There’s a natural pause between the inhale and the exhale.)
4. “Let’s go back to breathing naturally.”

## **Is it Helpful?**

When we feel stressed and confused, reflecting on whether something is helpful allows us and our kids prioritize what matters and simplify our lives.

In the reflective exercise “Is it Helpful?” we ask ourselves or our kids whether our response to a situation is helpful. (The game is appropriate for young children up to teenagers and, of course, adults.) I’m not suggesting that parents and kids stop, reflect, and run

through a series of questions every time they're about to do or say something, only when they find themselves in situations where choosing an appropriate response requires some thought.

As parents, when we feel conflicted, overwhelmed, or confused by the circumstances of our lives, we can take a few moments to settle and then ask ourselves whether our thinking or our reaction to a situation is helpful:

- *Is it helpful to me?*
- *Is it helpful to other people?*
- *Is it helpful to the planet?*

We can then reflect on the question *What matters most in this situation?*

We also can guide our kids through a similar process. Asking children and teens to check in to see if a response is helpful to themselves before considering whether it's helpful to others isn't an implied message for kids to prioritize their interests over their friends' or the community. Children and teens are encouraged to check in with themselves first because it's difficult to see other people and their experiences without self-awareness.

You might discover when reflecting on these questions that what's most helpful isn't always clear-cut. There are situations when we all must choose between competing but equally important priorities. We also might have differing opinions about what matters most. But by creating more awareness around the circumstances of our lives and how we react to them, we might happily discover that things aren't as complicated as they seem.

### **Three Good Things**

When we're under pressure, it's often difficult to see the good in our lives. Our attention naturally zeros in on what wrong, and that can skew our perspective. Often we can feel grateful for one thing while feeling sad about something else. The game "Three Good Things" helps us to see this bigger picture by encouraging us to acknowledge what's wrong and also think of a few things in our lives that are right.

It's important to keep in mind, though, that the point of the game isn't to sweep big feelings under the rug. Instead, it's to widen our perspective to include what's good in our lives.

Feel free to help your kids brainstorm what they can feel grateful for if they're struggling to come up with ideas. This game is also a fun way for families to connect around the dinner table or at bedtime.

Here are some guidelines for doing the “Three Good Things” practice yourself and sharing it with your kids. The game is appropriate for all ages.

1. “Do you ever feel disappointed?” (Listen to children’s stories.)
2. “How did that make you feel?” (Acknowledge children’s feelings and, if appropriate, talk about them.)
3. “I bet even when you’re disappointed there are good things in your life too. Let’s name three good things together.”

Family life seems like a juggling act sometimes, but it has a way of getting much simpler when we tune in to how we feel and our priorities are clear. When we become comfortable with our thoughts and emotions, we can relax and turn toward our family members to see how they feel. When we step into their shoes and see things from their perspectives, they feel better understood. As they feel more connected to us, we feel more connected to them. This feedback loop of warm family connection soothes frazzled nerves and offers kids and their parents a sense of spaciousness and playfulness where we can enjoy our time together.

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# The Family Habit of Going Away

*By Jeff Shinabarger*



For the Shinabargers, going away always brings us closer together. When our family is in a new place, we create new memories. The time off encourages us to release stressors and make space for love to flow in. But getting to that place of rest and rejuvenation seems really hard.

Is that why more of us don't get away? Is it the process of getting away that keeps us from going? Has the anxiety of boarding a plane, the hassle of travel restrictions, and the health protocols been the most recent excuses for not taking time away from our work and connecting with the people who matter most?

Going away doesn't always mean flying across the world, but it does mean separating from the familiarity of daily life and choosing to connect with the people who matter most. What keeps us from these shared experiences?

## **Taking the Time**

For three years, my wife, André, and I interviewed 100 American working couples and surveyed 1,500 American couples on the tension of love and work. Our research was recently released in a new book, *Love or Work: Is it Possible to Change the World, Stay in Love, and*

*Raise a Healthy Family?* One of our most surprising research findings was related to the use (or disuse) of vacation time.

For working couples trying to sustain work and love, you'd think that taking vacation time would be a priority. Rest and relaxation. White-sand beaches and popsicle stands. Board games and spike ball. Books and bike rides. But these vacation must-haves aren't a reality. We all instinctively know that we need to slow down, but we are struggling making this healthy habit a reality.

Our findings show that the majority of people we surveyed do not use paid vacation leave. Specifically, 59 percent do not use all the annual vacation days their workplace offers. Let that sink in: nearly six out of ten people do not use their paid vacation days! If you chose ten working couples and told them all to go on vacation and you would pay them to leave, only four of them would go. In addition, only one-quarter of the people interviewed take one "getaway" trip per year. In 2018, Americans left more than 768 million vacations days unused. [1] That may give us a clue as to why we all feel exhausted.

Are you one of those people who doesn't use paid days off? Isn't vacation time intended to be taken and used? When did we begin passing up getaways with family and friends in favor of work?



We all have great intentions and ambitious fantasies of places to go and people to see, but too often our work holds us back. When work productivity replaces family possibilities, it's time for a new perspective.

## **Rethinking Work and Vacation**

I understand the pressures that exist in always wanting to be a contributor in my work and the struggle of releasing the responsibility, being a founder, entrepreneur, and purpose-minded worker.

Learning from a young age to follow my dad's advice as a nineteen-year-old eager-to-please intern has made it difficult to accept taking time off. "Jeff, be the first person into work and the last person to leave. Then you will get more opportunities. If they give you something to do, get it done that day. Then the next day they will entrust you with something even more important."

His pep talk has guided my approach to my work ever since. That summer I did everything asked of me (and more), and because of that, I was given more and more to do.

This mindset and the accompanying habits became my work ethic, but it also set me up for an unsustainable lifestyle when I got married and started having kids. I appreciate the advice my dad gave, but I took it to an unhealthy, workaholic level.

This advice became hard to shake. As a leader of an organization, I thought I needed to be present for everything. If there was a meeting, I needed to be in it. If there was an event, I needed to be at it. This mentality helped me grow my influence, but it started an unhealthy pattern. It also created an untenable work environment for others. Worst of all, it created an unsustainable family life.

I had created a culture where everyone needed to be at everything. Everyone needed to come early. Everyone needed to stay late. Work was everything.

My approach to work needed to change, and for that to happen, I needed to change. It would take some serious intentionality to integrate a new way of living into an old way of doing. But I know now that one of the most liberating things about change is pouring into the things you love, taking a step away from the repetition of work, and leaning in to those you love.

We all want to go away; we just don't know how to make this luxury a reality.

My family's story matches our research findings; we wanted an adventurous story, but we didn't know where to begin. Why? Why can't we just pack up and use the time we're supposed to be taking?

The responsibilities of life can feel like a knotted ball of Christmas lights we pull out of the box the first day of December: intertwined so thoroughly that unwinding them can seem impossible. We are stuck. We can't separate from the urgent requests because of the constant access to work through our phone in hand. We can't loosen the calendar because of commitments. We can't see beyond the task list because it guides the ins and outs of every day. Instead of trying to find one knot to untangle, we choose to set aside the whole ball of responsibilities, go to sleep, and think about it another day.

Sometimes we must decide to step away from our work to remind ourselves of the purpose we are trying to live. Without dedicated moments when we can slow down productivity, remember our sense of calling, and take time for our first love, we will forget why we are doing what we are doing. Getting away will either reinvigorate our mission or send us in a different direction. Both can be good, but if we want it to happen, getting away is a must.

So, we started asking ourselves: what if we went away more?

## **Keeping Things Interesting**

My wife and I love to travel, explore, and see new things. Finding a new coffee shop. Taking a walk in a new city. Going for a bike ride. It energizes us. My imagination always expands when I see creative expressions in uncomfortable places by unpredictable people.

To keep things interesting, we need to see interesting new things. We need to do interesting new things. We need to be in interesting new places.

There's not much to talk about when life is not new and different. Even risky, scary new things are shared experiences that force us closer. These shared experiences give us plenty to talk about and always strengthen our connection with one another.

As a family, we created a habit to travel out of the country every year to introduce our children to different cultures. We started this practice before the kids turned two. And let's just acknowledge that traveling with kids under four can be more work than relaxation. But we are teaching our kids to see the world. And accepting and adapting to different cultures is easier for kids than adults. When kids

meet people from different cultures, they don't question the differences as much.

Now, we have a bit of an extreme view on time off for the average household, but we believe it's part of what refreshes a commitment to love and work. We take one month off every year, which is much more common in Europe than in America. But when you see what an extended period away will do for you and your family, for your love, and for your work, you'll be hooked.

You may be reading this, thinking about all the trips and experiences that you are not able to do given the pandemic realities, or maybe you are in a season of financial challenges. It's easy to see all the restrictions we endure through life, but there are also creative experiences you can do in the midst of our limitations. We could take a day trip to a farm to pick seasonal fruit. We could plan a camping trip and sleep under the stars. We could find a trail or explore a creek. We could go for an adventurous bike journey through our city. Given the current realities, we are forced to be creative, but we still get away.

The benefits of going away are endless. Getting away directly addresses our greatest dissatisfaction in life and gives us a glimpse of better days. Slowing down and separating from work creates a

healthier version of ourselves. Getting away plays a role in reducing stress, preventing heart disease, improving sleep, and enhancing productivity. It also increases awe and whimsy and creates an opportunity for adventure. [2]

Moreover, getting away creates a healthier family. Our family explores, learns, and grows closer together. Our relationships with one another strengthen. We share uncommon experiences, make new memories, and laugh more freely. As a committed worked couple, getting away invites more flirting with each other and increases (dare I say) sexual interest in each other. These are direct results of claiming a season of rest and getting away together. Taking time off to be with each other tips the scales back in love's favor.

## Closer

If you are in a rut in work, in relationship, in family connectedness, maybe you should go away. Go camping for a weekend. Plan a staycation and everyone sleeps in the living room together. Or take off and go to the beach for a week.

Every time we go away, it brings us closer together.

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# Why So Serious?

*By Dan Murray-Serter*





What's the worst impact a little joke has had on you?

A few years back, my dad received a call from Magdalene College at Cambridge University. The man on the other end, the dean, told my father, Howard, that I'd been accepted to study at what is arguably England's finest university.

I know what you're thinking. *Oh, here we go. Some smart ass from an elite school dropping by to boast about his achievements.*

This isn't one of those stories.

You see, Cambridge chose April 1st to tell my father the happy news. What they didn't know is that for a man like Howard, April Fool's Day was basically Christmas. He looked forward to it. He spent decades pranking his brother Stuart each and every year.

Therefore, my dad—a veteran of quality April Fool's jokes—received this lovely call regarding his son's achievements, and do you know what his response was?

“Oh, piss off, Stuart.”

And then he hung up!

This from a man who always said he had blind faith in me.

Fortunately, Cambridge responded better than we expected. I earned a first-class degree in economics and went on to work for the World Economic Forum.

Just kidding. Of course Cambridge didn't take it well.

Let's just say I ended up at Nottingham studying art history and English. I spent my first year of graduate life pulling pints all day and night in a pub. Hardly the World Economic Forum.

So I'll ask again. What's the worst impact a little joke has had on you?

Since university, I've taken matters into my own hands. I'm what some people might call a serial entrepreneur. I've had my share of ups and downs, including a rather embarrassing failure when my well-funded tech company folded. My response to the situation was simple.

I laughed.

Why? Because it's what my dad would have done.

He was the most resilient man I've ever known. He left an incredible legacy, personally and professionally. Howard passed away a few years ago, though not without a fight. His philosophy is now mine and it's the secret I want to share with you in his honor.

Laughter at work builds resilience.

## **The Best Medicine**

Now, while there's nothing revolutionary about suggesting laughter makes you *happy*, it's learning *where* and *when* to use it that fosters resilience on the job. When done right, laughter reduces stress. It leads to a balanced, happy life.

There's a tendency at work, especially in business, to take everything so seriously.

But *why* so serious?

My dad was a business owner. He never called himself an entrepreneur, though. It's not the kind of thing you did back then.

Defined formally, an entrepreneur is "someone who starts a business, at their own financial risk, in return for profits." He ticked all the boxes, but he didn't really approve of the word. He'd tell you he "just

ran a business.” Whatever you call it, running a company is stressful. You need resilience at work and you need to look at stress differently.

His ambition was simple: build a sustainable company, make people happy, be a great boss, and earn enough money to make a good life for his family. He never really wanted anything more than that.

Dad worked in the fashion manufacturing industry. He employed more than 200 people across four countries and ran the company through two recessions. He started at the age of 17, when he founded the company with my grandpa. He ran the business for an incredible 50 years.

Some say the ups and downs of running a company are the ultimate test of resilience. Dad’s work was no exception. Bottom lines don’t manage themselves. His ability to lead under pressure impressed us all.

His knack was telling jokes. Whether they were clever quips, puns, or straight-up and highly inappropriate jabs, dad had a joke. Every flavor for every situation. When it felt like everything at work was about to snap, he would lighten the load and make everyone laugh. Slowly, the tension would ease.

I mentioned dad ran his company for 50 years, until the age of 67. What I didn't mention is that he should never have lived past 40, after his first heart attack.

Dad battled a remarkable list of illnesses over the next 27 years of his life: two heart attacks, lung disease, two bouts of pneumonia, a stroke, a triple bypass, a *quadruple* bypass, gout, type 1 diabetes, and a few slipped disks for good measure.

He was, quite literally, falling apart.

One New Year's Eve, a bout of pneumonia sent him to the ICU, where he remained on life support for six long months. All the doctors said he'd never make it out, and those of us around him had to make a tough decision.

But dad was a fighter. And despite all the prognoses, he did indeed make it out of the hospital and into a recovery home.

His show of resilience was astounding by any measure, but then, despite it all, his time ran out. He died a week later.

You may be reading this and thinking, *This is a little intense. I thought I was reading about laughter, but so far all you've done is depress the hell out of me.*

I'm not writing to upset you nor to make you laugh. I'm writing to demonstrate how laughter combats stress and builds resilience.

Life dealt Dad a challenging hand. Two heart attacks, lung disease, pneumonia, slipped disks, two recessions. The works. Enough to send anyone over the edge, right? Not someone with relentless resilience. Dad always overcame. He saw the world differently. In fact, Dad didn't see the world at all. He was blind.

Laughter was his medicine. He was a man who could have surrounded himself with pity and sadness, wallowing in defeat at every challenge, unable to see the positives in a world that had literally gone dark on him.

Instead, he laughed and made those around him laugh too. This laughter is what built up his resilience to help him fight everything that came his way, at work and beyond.

### **A Lesson in Gelotology**

In the process of reverse-engineering Dad's secret, I inadvertently became a "gelotologist." (Apparently there is an official term for people studying the effect of laughter on the physical and psychological states. Niche, I know.)

I learned that when we laugh, we increase the blood flow around the body, aerobically working the diaphragm. It's almost like we are internally jogging and releasing muscle tension.

There's no denying that's good for you, but to ward off alarming stress, it's side-splitting we should be aiming for. That's more of a workout. To see a lasting physiological impact, one where you actually build resilience, you need to learn to specifically laugh during times of stress.

We are born with this coping mechanism. Babies laugh before they can speak. Even children born blind and deaf can laugh. They laugh, on average, over 400 times a day! Adults over 35? On average, they laugh only 15 times a day. The problem is we lose our childlike joy as we grow up. Unless we go looking for humor, we lose the opportunities to laugh on a regular basis.

Think of a time in your life where you've had to struggle with stress and muster resilience just to make it through the day, maybe even just to get out of bed.

Perhaps you were fired. Or your business failed. Or you found out you had a life-changing illness. Or maybe something less intense. Perhaps you fell out with a good friend.

The point is, we all go through tough times. It's important to learn resilience so we can manage stress.

You might look in frustration at the cards life dealt you. You might see nothing but stress. In order for you to develop Dad's type of relentless resilience, you would, as I said earlier, need to look at stress differently.

### **Laugh Your Way to Resilience**

So, how can we learn to be more resilient? Do we just need to watch more comedy? Well, yes. And no.

It's clear we need to laugh more. But traditionally, this is not a skill that comes easily.

But again, what matters most when we're laughing to build resilience is learning to laugh at what appears to be the most inopportune times. Stressful times. Times when it feels like everything is about to hit the fan.

There are a few occasions when our bodies will do that naturally for us. Nervous laughter, for example. Most of the time, however, we're far too serious. This "laugh our way to resilience" thing is not easy. We have to start somewhere.



Next time you are overwhelmed with stress, I want you to promise you'll at least give this a try.

Let's play out some circumstances:

- You're 30 minutes late for the most important meeting of your life.
- You've just been fired.
- You realize your timeline is tighter than expected.

Or maybe it's more serious. Maybe you've woken up in the hospital after a heart attack. Or pneumonia. Or a stroke.

As you can tell, the obvious reaction is not to laugh. But what would happen if you did? Your unconscious mind will want you to wallow, but now you're a gelotologist too. Now you know you can do better.

Everyone has a favorite comedy film or TV show. Maybe you like a certain comedian, or have a hilarious friend. That's your starting point.

When you are feeling intense pressure, step back, take a few minutes out and get laughing. Call that hilarious friend of yours. Pull up YouTube. Whatever your go-to comedy is, start there.

This small trick will help to train your mind to laugh in the face of stress, and in turn, build resilience. The more you do it, the better trained that elastic band of yours is, and the less likely it is to snap.

## **The Last Laugh**

In Howard's case, it was irony that had the last laugh. Dad fended off loads of major ailments, but it was a common cold that ended up killing him.

True to form, of course, he was the person who pointed this out to me with his dying breath. Laughing at life's last joke, he told me he loved me and literally died with a smile on his face.

It was hard not to smile back, but naturally I didn't find it quite as funny as he did!

Dad's funeral was remarkable. A cemetery full of characters from all walks of life spanning every decade. People who had been touched by him, no matter how briefly. They all came to pay their respects. There must have been over 500 people there.

Upon leaving the funeral, my mum burst out laughing. The guests were startled. Then she explained how dad always walked away from other funerals with her proclaiming, "Well, that was a brilliant

funeral. At least we walked away alive.” It felt like an appropriate way to honor him.

They say time heals all wounds. If time itself is what we hope to extend—days, weeks, decades—then we must build up our resilience to enjoy a long and satisfying time on earth. As my dad, Howard, would say, if you can’t see the funny side to life, you can’t see life at all.

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# Journaling Prompts

As a gift to you, we've included 52 journaling prompts below. One for every week of next year, yes, but you needn't worry over structure.

Write when you can, where you can. Waiting for your deli meat. While the kettle is on. In bed, in the woods, in the swirling swish of the car wash.

Just write.

1. What's the last random act of kindness I witnessed?
2. The words I'd like to live by are...
3. What do I need to ask for right now?
4. What is enough for me?
5. What would my ideal day look like?
6. My favorite body part is...
7. What would I like forgiveness for?

8. What makes me feel calm?
9. What would I like to say no to?
10. Write a letter to a parental figure in your life.
11. What are three things I'd tell my younger self?
12. What are the words I most need to hear today?
13. What has most surprised me about life?
14. What is something I can let go of?
15. What would I write in a letter to a beloved child on how to find happiness?
16. What brings tears to my eyes?
17. I couldn't imagine living without...
18. What am I most looking forward to right now?
19. What would I like to say yes to?
20. What can I do today that I couldn't do last year?

21. What is a reality I need to accept right now?
22. How can I better advocate for myself today?
23. What makes me feel powerful?
24. What boundaries can I set this week?
25. How can I challenge myself today?
26. What are my greatest strengths?
27. Name 10 things you love about your life.
28. What is my biggest, most audacious dream?
29. What is my happiest memory?
30. Where do I feel the safest?
31. What would I like to be remembered for?
32. What current situation can I positively reframe?
33. What went right this week?
34. How can I lift someone's spirits today?

35. What makes me laugh?
36. What skill am I most proud of?
37. What is worth focusing on today? What isn't?
38. What is something I have the power to change?
39. What privilege do I often take for granted?
40. What is a new habit I'd like to establish?
41. How can I be kinder to myself today?
42. How can I reassess my expectations to invite peace into my day?
43. What makes me feel loved?
44. What activities give me energy?
45. What thought patterns have I noticed lately?
46. What are my deepest values?
47. How would I like to carry myself today?
48. What makes me unique?

49. What is my most treasured possession? Why?

50. What can I control today?

51. I'm learning lately...

52. How can I serve my loved ones today?