

SIMPLIFY MAGAZINE

· A QUARTERLY, DIGITAL PUBLICATION FOR FAMILIES ·



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A Letter from the Editor

Elissa Joy Watts

Have you ever seen a murmuration of starlings at dusk? Isn't it staggering, the swarm of birds swooping and diving like a reckless cloud billowing its way across a pastel sky?

The first time I saw one, I held my breath and struggled to believe my eyes. To glimpse a murmuration is to witness something otherworldly. It is no ordinary flock. A murmuration is an irrational display of wonder. It stretches the imagination and stirs the spirit. There is something more at play.

So, too, with joy. It exceeds delight and happiness, peace and pleasure. Like a flock of starlings, joy somehow morphs into an unpredictable, awesome, and untouchable force.

One of my favorite writers, Robert Farrar Capon, explains joy this way. "Every real thing is a joy," he says, "if only you have eyes and ears to relish it, nose and tongue to taste it."

How do we find our murmuration moments? We pay attention. We praise. We practice. Joyful living hinges on the art of attunement.

The perfume scent of peonies after rain. Your neighbor's familiar wind chime singing in the soft breeze. That side-splitting Monty Python joke that never dies. Your heirloom ring and the story it holds. Faint strains of "Hey Jude" rising over gridlock traffic. Perfect avocados. Your children's attempt at breakfast in bed. The season's first twinkling snowfall.

When surveyed as a whole, these experiences flock together. We see the bigger spectacle: Unwarranted kindness. Ramshackle community. Shatterproof hope. Forgiveness. Our spirits can't help but take flight, even if only for a moment.

This issue of Simplify celebrates joy's sparkle. It also affirms the gravity of being human.

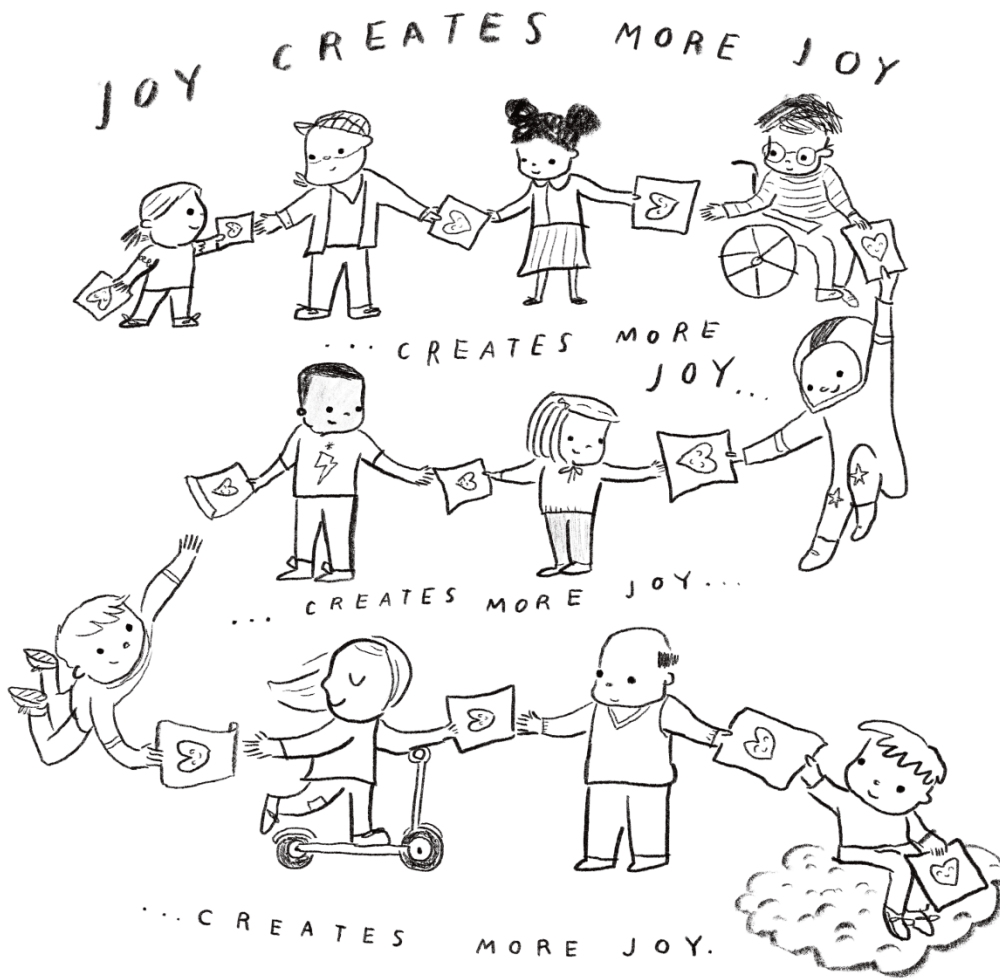
We invited bestselling authors, thoughtful experts, and sensitive souls to share their slant and hold out hope. You'll find uplifting thoughts on friendship, food, and Finland. We're sharing a buoyant illustration, simple ideas for a happier home, and a fail-proof recipe for fond memories. We trust this murmur of sorts conjures a smile.

If you take one thing away from this issue, please let it be this: Joy deserves your time. It mustn't be diminished or dismissed. Paying attention is the way to soar. Joy, you could say, is hardly for the birds.

Take a seat and cozy up. May you read, taste, and see that the world we share is indeed miraculous. May you experience deep and abiding joy this season and always.

With love,

Elissa Joy Watts



BRAD

MASTERPLAN FOR A MORE JOYFUL WORLD

SING. DANCE. THROW MORE PARTIES.
JUST REMEMBER: JOY IS MORE THAN CONFETTI and MORE THAN
PANCAKES (and EVEN MORE THAN CONFETTI PANCAKES.) IT IS NOT
JUST DESSERT. JOY IS THE MEAL. JOY IS NOT SOME SWEET LITTLE
THING. JOY IS REBELLIOUS. JOY KNOWS THERE ARE CHALLENGES, BUT
SHOWS UP ANYWAY. JOY IS ESSENTIAL. WE FORGET, BUT JOY
REMINDS US. JOY POINTS US BACK TO WHO WE ARE. JOY IS
PURSUING US. JOY KNOWS THERE'S HEARTBREAK, but ALSO KNOWS
THERE IS MUSIC. JOY KNOWS THERE ARE DOGS WITH HEADS AWAITING
LITTLE PATS. THERE'S THAT CASHIER WHO LIKES YOUR SHIRT. THERE'S
BIRDS. THERE'S CLOUDS. THERE'S THE SNORT LAUGH OF YOUR AUNT.
THERE'S YOU ... REACHING TO FIND FORGOTTEN MONEY IN AN
OLD JACKET POCKET ...

THAT'S JOY. IT'S WAITING TO BE FOUND and HOPING TO BE SHARED.

BECAUSE, HERE'S THE THING: JOY IS ALSO THE SHARING OF JOY. I
KNOW IT DOESN'T MAKE SENSE. JOY CAN BE CONFUSING. IT DEFIES
MATH and PHYSICS and ALL THINGS RATIONAL, BUT JOY DOESN'T RUN
OUT. IT MULTIPLIES.

JOY CREATES MORE JOY.

SO HERE'S THE PLAN: FIND JOY. SHARE JOY. REPEAT.

Six Simple Ways to Bring More Joy to Your Home

Melissa Michaels



I'm a homebody. By my definition, a homebody is someone who enjoys the simple pleasures and activities that center around the home.

Contrary to what many might assume, a homebody is not a hermit. They don't have to be anti-social or never want to travel far from home. The way I see it, being a homebody doesn't mean you're always holed up in your home (although I love being at home), but rather it's more about becoming whole.

We can find more joy at home if we treat it like a sanctuary, rather than a showplace. It isn't always easy to *feel* joyful, but there is joy to be found in our home, regardless of its size or style, and in whatever situation or season we're in.

Here are six simple ways to bring more joy into your home.

1. Practice the Art of Puttering

Do you ever feel overwhelmed or frustrated by your home? I do. But rather than giving in to the temptation to wallow in frustration over what I can't do, or even feeling resentful or wanting to escape all the things I have to do, I find it helpful to set aside a few minutes of time to connect to my home without pressure to accomplish anything in particular.

I call this *puttering*. Puttering may not sound like it would be productive, but when it's done right, it not only improves the state of a home but it changes how you feel.

To putter is to occupy yourself in an unhurried, leisurely, and pleasant manner with small tasks around the home. This is an activity intended to be simple and enjoyable, not complicated or stressful. That is why it brings joy—it doesn't require advanced planning and should take little effort or expense. And best of all, it teaches or reminds you to create beauty with what you already have.

Puttering can transform more than you might expect. Here is an example.

Perhaps you decide to begin puttering in the dining room on a Saturday morning. You start without expectation of any particular accomplishment, and little to no money will be spent, so all pressure is off.

You begin looking around to see what is possible with what you already have. You start to rearrange a few things on the buffet cabinet and find that the room already looks better. But suddenly you have an idea. A new paint color would transform that old buffet cabinet into something beautiful!

While you are dreaming of creative color options, you spot your grandma's dishes stashed in the cabinet. The dishes inspire you

to set a table for dinner. The next thing you know, without even thinking about it, you begin decluttering the junk that was piled up on the table for months, so you can set it with the pretty dishes. Your family can now gather for a memorable dinner around the table for the first time since last Thanksgiving.

Puttering will bring more joy and might even work miracles in your home.

2. Do a 10-minute Cleaning Frenzy

Some may say a messy house is a sign of a well-lived life, but an overly cluttered, chaotic, or dirty home can also be a source of overwhelm in our lives. I doubt anyone is inspired or energized by the two-week-old dried lasagna noodles on the plates piled in the sink.

Doing a daily cleaning frenzy is a simple habit that will bring more joy into your home and order to your day. A cleaning frenzy is not hard to do; just do it regularly. Set a timer and go! Then rinse and repeat. The more you do it, the easier it gets. It's that simple.

If you aren't able to do cleaning frenzies on your own, reach out to a friend or family member for help. And start small. Even if it's just one tidier surface or corner, you'll feel better.

Here are a few 10-minute cleaning frenzies that will bring more joy into your home.

- Make your bed.
- Fold a pile of laundry.
- Wash dishes.
- Clean and polish the sink.
- Clear the dining table or kitchen counters of clutter.

When you practice these simple cleaning frenzies daily, you'll discover that you have more time and energy for living the life you want to live. Joy will be multiplied along with your efficiency in all the things you need to do.

3. Treat your home as a sanctuary.

A home shouldn't be treated like a storage room. Don't fill it with things that you can't use or that bring you stress. Your home should fill your soul with peace, contentment, and joy. Rather than letting the chaos in your home become a distraction to the life you want to live, it is better to create an environment that inspires you to go out into the world to do the great things you want to do, and then return to your sanctuary for refreshment.

Consider yourself to be the gatekeeper of your home. When you come through the door, you should feel warmly welcomed inside. What should you bring in, and what needs to be organized or taken out, to guard your sense of peace?

Begin creating your sense of sanctuary at the front entry. Start with simple things that will bring you more joy when you walk in. Declutter anything that brings stress. Add a pretty seasonal bouquet or foliage on an entry table, or a wreath on the front door. Set out a large basket to rally all of the wayward shoes. Add hooks to get the mess of backpacks and dog leashes off the floor. Set out a fresh rug to make the space feel more cared for and inviting. Add a fresh and cheerful coat of paint on the door.

Move on to other areas in your home, developing a sanctuary of peace, welcome, and joy in each room.

Create a sanctuary as a gift to your own sense of well-being. Persevere in your effort even if other family members don't contribute or feel the same way. It might take time for them to join you or more effort for them to see their home as a sanctuary. Whether they eventually get on board or not, the changes you make will inspire you and bring you more joy.

4. Fill your home with reminders of happy memories.

I recently read a quote that resonated with me and my philosophy on creating joy in our homes. James Clear, the author of *Atomic Habits*, said “My goal is not to reduce life to the fewest amount of things, but to fill it with the optimal amount of things.”

To make room for joy, I think it’s clear that our rooms can’t be overflowing with useless clutter. Yet making room for joy doesn’t mean our belongings must be reduced to the fewest items or to those that only serve a practical function.

The optimal amount of things, or the type of accessories you bring into your home, is up to you. Incorporate elements that tell your happiest stories and remind you of the good in your life.

Think of your fondest memories. What would remind you of those warm, fuzzy feelings and joyful experiences or seasons of life?

- You could frame postcards from travels (or print scenes you can frame to remind you of those adventures).
- Create a wall or cork board of funny or candid family photos through the years.
- Decorate a room inspired by a happy memory or a favorite place.

- Put a collection of shells from summer beach walks in a glass bowl on your coffee table.
- Collect random things that make you smile and display them on a shelf.
- Hang quotes on your mirror to inspire you to find joy in the present and chase your dreams, even if the past was difficult.

Not everything in your home has to tell a story, but make it a priority that more of what you see will be meaningful to you and the people you love.

5. Savor mood-lifting moments.

We can elevate our mood through incorporating our five senses into more of our experiences at home.

Rather than focusing on decorating with the latest designer trends, add elements that will enhance how you feel in your space. Consider the lighting, colors, plants and flowers, scents you love, the soundtrack of your home, the textures, and dining experiences. Then savor those mood-elevating elements more by developing daily happiness habits around your senses.

Here are a few simple joy habits I incorporate into my day.

- Open the blinds first thing in the morning to let the sunshine in.
- Set aside a few extra minutes to brew and savor morning coffee at home, rather than always just rushing through a drive-through on the way to work.
- Play music that inspires and increases joy while doing those daily cleaning frenzies.
- Turn on lamps at dusk to make spaces feel cozier.

6. Savor every season with gratitude for what is.

Seasons seem to fly by, don't they? It's hard to fit in the things we want to do. What matters most to you? It's not just the big experiences that transform how we feel at home. Joy is multiplied when we slow down to appreciate the small graces of each season at home.

Working in our garden, preparing healthy meals, serving the community, meeting our family's needs, taking care of ourselves (mind, body, and spirit) as well as our home, and gathering with friends—savoring the everyday experiences will bring more joy into our home.

Each moment that is savored builds gratitude for the season we're in. Gratitude elevates our joy and multiplies it in our home and community.

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Sparking *Sisu*: Finnish Fortitude for a More Resilient Life

Katja Pantzar



Since moving from North America to Finland many years ago, I've become fascinated by *sisu*, the unique Finnish concept of resilience, courage, and grit in the face of all manner of challenges. For I firmly believe that a good sense of *sisu* (pronounced “see-su”) holds one of the keys to living a more joyful life.

As Finland has held the title of World's Happiest Country for five years in a row (2018–2022), according to the UN's World Happiness Report, it's fair to say that there's a strong link between healthy *sisu* and life satisfaction.

Before giving you simple tips on how to boost your *sisu* through self-care, a brief backgrounder is in order.

The Seeds of Strength

The Finnish concept of *sisu* dates back to the 1500s, when it first appeared in written texts referring to both a personality trait and a quality that was part of a person's nature, the interior or inside of something, or quite literally a person's “guts.”

In the past, *sisu* has often been associated with hardcore historical achievements, such as incredible Olympic victories or warding off foreign invaders during wartime.

In recent years, *sisu* has shifted more into the realm of positive psychology—as a can-do mindset that you can develop—in part

due to the pioneering research of the world's pre-eminent *sisu* expert, Elisabet Lahti, PhD.

The bottom line is that anyone, anywhere can build up their mental and physical fortitude.

So, how exactly do you spark your *sisu*? Here are five simple ways:

1. Manage your somatic *sisu*.

Taking care of your mental and physical well-being, your mind-body, is essential to improving your fortitude. When you feel physically poorly, it will likely impact your mood. And when you feel mentally weak, it will likely impact your physical well-being.

That's why it's important to incorporate movement into your day and find a form of activity that you enjoy doing. Whether it's gentle stretches, a short stroll, getting up from your desk to walk or dance around, or a hard-core gym workout, moving your body can literally help to change your mind.

A strong body can facilitate a strong mind, but it's important to note that everybody has their own definition of strength. Simply put, fitness means having a body that's comfortable to live in, that works for you and allows you to take care of your regular daily life.

An excellent *sisu* hack is the Finnish concept of *arkiliikunta*, or everyday exercise, which means benefiting from incidental exercise. Walking or biking to work, the grocery store, or a café to meet friends, instead of driving a car, are examples. When you make *arkiliikunta* a regular habit, you may find that on the days you skip it you feel less energetic and crave it.

Simple activities such as walking and cycling also have myriad health benefits, from getting your heart rate up to offering many of the muscles in your body a mini-workout and boosting your happy hormones, such as endorphins.

2. Connect with nature *sisu*.

The Nordic way of life is intricately connected to daily doses of nature, which restore and rejuvenate us while building up our strength. According to the Outdoor Association of Finland, for the average person living in Finland, the natural environment is 200 meters away—and the doors are open 24/7.

Whether by spending time in parks, forests, near or in lakes or the sea, being in nature helps us to restock our depleted energy reserves. And it's usually a budget-friendly option when compared to an expensive gym membership or a complicated fitness regime. Nature is also the perfect antidote to a non-stop, online, digital lifestyle.

Even spending 15 minutes in a green space has been shown to help reduce stress and anxiety.

Activities such as walking, hiking, swimming, and even the Nordic favorite of foraging for berries and mushrooms help our brains and bodies find balance, but they also help us to see the bigger picture and return to our roots. Simply standing by a large, old tree can help to put some of your own problems into perspective.

3. Let it out: Mental health *sisu*.

Just about everyone struggles with their emotions from time to time, some people more than others.

When you bottle up or dismiss your feelings and don't deal with them, they can come out in unexpected ways. The simple act of dealing with and talking about what's on your mind, whether with a professional or a trusted friend, can make a big difference in your mood and how you feel.

When you deal with your own issues, it's not only good for you but it can also help others (co-workers, friends, family) so that you don't inadvertently take out your own unresolved issues or traumas on them. This can increase your self-awareness, which helps to build a stronger sense of *sisu*.

4. Make use of what you have, or pragmatic *sisu*.

One of the things that I've learned to do living in Finland is embrace the elements, whatever they may be. That includes enjoying six months of cold winter weather, which was not the default for someone who grew up predominantly in Vancouver on Canada's West Coast.

One of the local practices I've taken up is winter swimming, practiced during the cold months by taking a dip in the sea or a lake through a hole carved in the ice. A dip of just 30 seconds to a minute has many benefits, including setting off the happy hormones, which leaves swimmers with a post-dip feeling of euphoria.

Winter swimming, a popular pastime, is one of the key practices linked to happiness in Finland.

While winter swimming is an excellent example of *sisu* for its range of benefits and as an example of doing something that seems difficult (challenging yourself), it's also an excellent example of turning what may seem like an obstacle into an asset.

Instead of sitting around and complaining about the weather and daydreaming about being on a warm beach, winter swimming is about embracing the circumstances and turning them around to work to your advantage. Winter swimming is

also a way to manage both mental and physical health by spending time with other people in an uplifting environment.

5. Sustainability *sisu*.

A good sense of *sisu* means making sustainable choices that help, not hinder, life on planet earth. That means taking action and making green choices in the ways we move and eat and how we consume.

On an individual level this includes moving toward a more plant-based diet, reconsidering consumption habits (can you buy secondhand or rent or borrow?), recycling everything possible, and making greener transportation choices.

Here are a few challenges to think about: Would you invest in a few long-lasting, quality pieces of clothing over a large quantity of fast fashion that presents a recycling challenge? Can you carry a reusable bottle for water or a travel mug rather than using single-use or plastic options? Can you try to eliminate food waste by cooking creatively and only putting as much on your plate as you'll eat?

For when we take care of the planet and others, we also practice self-care and *sisu*.

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Loneliness as an Invitation to Joy

Mari Andrew



Holiday scenes dwell in collective memory. We may watch a commercial about a family decorating a Christmas tree on a bright December day, while their hands are still sticky from pancakes, and almost remember the morning ourselves. Or we may feel sentimental whenever we pass a stately city brownstone whose bright red door is decorated with a majestic wreath, even if we grew up in the suburbs. We may feel overwhelmed with wistfulness at the sight of children playing in the snow, even if it never snowed where we live.

More so than any other time of year, the holidays bring us all into a unified nostalgia. The unspoken rule is that it should elicit in us a pure happiness.

But perhaps you've had a few of your own blue Christmases and know that emotions of *all* kinds go wild around the holidays. Heartache, loss, worry, and disappointment color the season with a navy shade of loneliness.

Walking around the gorgeous townhouses in my Brooklyn neighborhood is like an acupuncture session for the heart, but with piercing images that can pump loneliness through my veins: fairytale window scenes, leftover pumpkins, aching lovely handmade decorations, small shops beckoning shoppers. None of it is particularly tragic, but the images prick my emotions and I feel like a human pincushion by the end: it's all so sweet, so sigh inducing.

There have been many lonely holiday seasons when I yearned to join in the unifying nostalgia and fondly recollect memories that I did not even have, but I felt outside of the group. If I walked through the twinkle-lit streets and felt a pang of sorrow well up, were those lights still for me?

I've come to conclude: *yes!* Perhaps they are *especially* for me.

Opportunity for Connection

We associate joy with the holidays because this is the time for gatherings, for communal celebrations, for warmly greeting your neighbor even if you never remember their name, for exchanging gifts with a co-worker you normally barely talk to, for buying train sets for toy drives. This is the season for *connection*, which is the springboard for joy.

Loneliness may feel like the opposite of connection, but actually it's the beginning of it. When we feel lonely, we are yearning, longing, reaching beyond ourselves. For those who are feeling lonely around the holidays, those twinkle lights are not insensitive to your ache but graciously beckoning you into the collective.

And, in my experience, we are *extra* observant of beauty when we're a little achy. Sensitivity isn't selective: when I'm more attentive to the throb of loneliness, I'm more attentive to the drumbeats of delight.

The twinkle lights, the vignettes of mittened hand-holding down bustling city streets, the tinsel and paper stockings in store windows, the commercials about family traditions—these belong to the lonely too. They are invitations, welcoming you to connect with those who are sharing the sidewalk, the cookies, the season with you.

Khalil Gibran wrote, “The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.” And indeed, the most joy-filled people I know are also those who have journeyed to the depths of the pain. They find meaning in both the small and big, and they find wonder in the hopeless and happy. They are the ones who recognize beauty in the optimistic hop of a bunny on a dirt trail, the last ice cream truck of the summer lingering for an extra few minutes at dusk, the cheerful crackle and shivering ache of a soul record playing from an open window, a freshly mopped kitchen floor, a rusty morning sky, a muffled cry, a funeral procession, a swift soft rain.

That makes me wonder if there are some hidden gifts of loneliness, as difficult as the acute experience can be, especially this time of year when any melancholy is amplified and isolation is exacerbated. Those for whom loneliness is carving a painful little space are in the position to fill that space with all the beauty, love, and sweetness they can find this month.

When I'm fully present to the world around me and my own feelings within it—the ache and the delight—my broken heart feels like an opportunity rather than a failure. In the wide-open broken space, anything good and beautiful makes sense there too, as though this is what being in the full experience of living on earth is like. When I let myself embrace any ache I'm carrying with me, even in the midst of the magical holiday season, I embrace more of the wonder that I also carry with me.

All the Lonely

We might ask ourselves, *Where are my holiday party invitations?* Or, *Why do some people have so many more people to buy presents for?* Or, *Is everyone decorating cookies together without me?* These insecurities are extremely uncomfortable, and it makes perfect sense why many people would prefer to just skip the holidays altogether. I've been there, many times.

We have so many ways to avoid and distract ourselves from discomfort and pain, not realizing, of course, that many of the numbing distractions actually make it worse (I'm looking at you, Instagram Stories).

But I've noticed that loneliness, a feeling I desperately try to numb, can increase the connection we have with others. And, if longing is manifested in reaching outward, then loneliness is a rich place to feel more connected to other humans.

A loneliness trick from Ram Dass is to consider how many millions of people are lonely right now along with you: the ironic community of people who feel cut off from others. Sometimes I'll think about them before I go to sleep, wishing us all more moments of belonging. Lonely, together, all wishing each other well: Isn't that a nice idea?

If you are lonely this year, know that you are far from the only one. Perhaps you can feel into Ram Dass's wisdom by lighting a candle (pie scented, please) and send your sweetest wishes to all of those who join you in the same feeling right now.

You might even imagine some really charming scenarios, like all of you coming together to ice-skate in Central Park, holding each other's mittened hands. You can think of yourselves in your *own* commercial, where you're all sharing pancakes and taking out tree decorations. A gathering of people who are longing for connection must be one of the more joyful sights.

Feliz Navidad

A couple Christmases ago, I found myself in such a lonely place that it would have been comical if it weren't so sad. I think my eyes were actually drooping down, Basset hound-style.

I had broken up with my boyfriend, but we were still living together, which turned our place into the last place I wanted to be. It seemed like the Christmas decorations were mocking us,

as we ate dinner in separate rooms and I listened to horrendously cheerful carols from my laptop. “Home for the holidays” takes on a bleak connotation when you don’t want to be in your own home. Eating the saddest sweet potato casserole I’ve ever made, I was so lonely.

From the place of isolation, I longed and yearned and pined. So I reached. My loneliness invited me toward connection—at that point, I’d have taken anything.

I grabbed some cash, took a long walk, and pretended I was wrapping myself up in the arms of the city. All these paper snowflakes and hot cocoa kiosks were enveloping me in that collective memory, the one that belongs to me just as much as it does to all the lovey-eyed couples and selfie-taking families. I wanted connection so badly that I found it everywhere, in a silly interaction with a man selling mini-trees on the sidewalk to a child outside a store who wanted to tell me about his new dinosaur. I left the cash in musicians’ buckets and in donation cans, and felt overwhelmed with gratitude for the people behind both who were taking care of the city in their own ways.

I stumbled upon a caroling party that was forming in Washington Square Park, and teenagers were handing out candles to strangers in anticipation of the group singing. I didn’t want to offend anyone with my awful voice, but I took a candle and let it illuminate the sight in front of me: clusters of

strangers, many of whom were probably also lonely, gathering and glowing.

“Feliz Navidad,” someone began, and pretty soon I forgot my self-consciousness and found myself belting out, “I wanna wish you a Merry Christmas from the bottom of my heart.” I sang it outward, to no one, to everyone, and formed a memory with people I’ll probably never see again but will forever remember.

Were it not for loneliness, I wouldn’t have found them. And were it not for them, I wouldn’t have had the most joyful holiday moment of my life.

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Let Them Eat Cake: Understanding Relational Joy

Chris M. Coursey



I remember a time my wife, Jen, was holding our son when he was a toddler. His five-year-old brother stole his favorite toy, which set off a *big* response. He lost it. He screeched. He howled.

We had a magnificent tantrum on our hands! My son was red-faced and reactive. His upset made it clear he was unhappy.

My wife attempted to use words to fix the problem. She tried helping him notice the toy was now returned and within reach.

Her words were no match for the deafening decibels of my son's screaming.

"He doesn't even know you are holding him," I said. "Try rubbing his back while you softly sing into his ear."

As my wife comforted our screaming son, he quieted down. He locked eyes with my wife. They shared smiles. Joy was coming back. He found his toy and held it close.

We all have times when we lose it. Our peace flies out the window. We melt down. We focus on pain and problems. Our body becomes tense. Our heart pounds while our thoughts race. We feel alone.

Thanks to breakthroughs in brain science, we now know more about what is happening in the brain during these turbulent

times. There is a way out of this non-relational state my friend Dr. Jim Wilder calls *enemy mode*.

In enemy mode, the people we normally enjoy feel like enemies. Like my son, we focus on what's wrong. In enemy mode, our children, spouse, friends, neighbors, and coworkers feel like problems to solve—or avoid.

Your Brain's Relational Engine

Every human brain has a relational engine. Like with a car engine, different parts must work together. In fact, it is a four-level relational hub that is progressively integrated and closely interconnected.

There are different names for this relational hub. Interpersonal neurobiology calls this engine the *right-hemispheric emotional control center*, or the *emotional control center* for short. My colleague Dr. Karl Lehman calls it by a much easier name, the *relational circuit*. My family calls it “RCs” for short.

I like to think of this relational engine as the brain's master switch because this relational circuit must be working together if we are to remain our best, most relationally engaged self. Just like the moment too many items (like a hairdryer or microwave) are plugged into an outlet and the power surge trips the circuit breaker, we lose important elements of our character when the relational circuit is offline. Like the circuit breaker that needs to

be flipped so power can be restored, we can learn to flip the switch to our brain's relational circuit to find joy.

Thankfully, when the relational circuit is running again, we gain a number of important abilities that help us stay better versions of ourselves. We are creative. We stay relational when we are upset. We predict negative outcomes. We continue to be caring, compassionate people who listen well and respond with patience, flexibility, and understanding.

When our relational center stops working together, the breakdown causes us to lose important aspects of our character and personality. We may look and sound like another person! Creativity is lost. We become rigid. We focus on who and what is bothering us. We feel like we are flailing about and taking in water. Our mouth runs without its filter. We say and do things we wish we could take back.

Just like my son and his toy, the results of enemy mode are not pretty.

Your Sweet Spot

When the master switch is online, we are more accommodating, hospitable, resilient, and relaxed. We feel compassion toward people. We put ourselves in other people's shoes to better understand their experience, even empathize with them. We can turn down the intensity of our reactions when we see others

need a breather. We can think through different scenarios to pick the best option with the least number of casualties. We are better primed to enjoy interacting with people.

In my book *The Joy Switch*, I refer to this relational state as staying in our *relational sweet spot*. Here we remain a better version of ourselves. Joy is possible as good things grow in the garden of our interactions and relationships.

Brain scientists like Allan Schore from UCLA refer to joy as the feeling we have when we are the sparkle in someone's eyes. A face lights up to see us. We light up to see others. This glad-to-be-together joy is not circumstantial happiness. Joy is relational gladness. Joy is the ideal fuel for our brain and relationships!

Joy is what gives us the endurance to remain in our relational sweet spot. When we expect joy, this master switch in the brain comes on and we are ready for interaction.

Imagine you will have coffee today with a good friend you haven't seen in a while. You feel the anticipation of something good and special. You look forward to seeing your friend's face and hearing your friend's voice. You may even navigate hardship better, knowing this important visit is around the corner. This is joy.

Once my upset five-year-old son opened his eyes to see Jen, this helped restore his joy. He was not alone; someone was with him.

She was glad to see him. Jen's face, voice, demeanor, and presence conveyed joy.

Of course, getting his toy back didn't hurt either! The toy provided happiness for my son, while my wife's presence provided relational, glad-to-be-together joy.

There is no guarantee we will get our way in life. In fact, it's pretty safe to assume we will *not* get what we want at times. How we respond in these moments largely comes down to the status of our brain's master switch.

We can learn to return to relational joy anytime we lose our joy (and peace). With practice, we quickly find our way back to relational joy from moments of upset that threaten to steal our joy. We can activate our brain's relational circuit anytime it goes offline and we slip into enemy mode where others feel like enemies or threats. This is good news!

Get Relational with CAKE

Dr. Marcus Warner and I use what we call the CAKE assessment to evaluate if someone is in relational or enemy mode. We also use CAKE to recover from our enemy mode reactions. CAKE stands for:

Curiosity

Appreciation

Kindness

Eye Contact

We first review curiosity. We ask, “Do I feel curious about what _____ is thinking or feeling right now?”

Then we move to appreciation and ask, “Can I reflect on and feel appreciation right now?” Appreciation refers to the moments of joy in our lives.

We then review kindness by asking, “Do I *feel like* being kind toward _____ (spouse, children, coworkers)?”

Last, we review eye contact. We ask, “Do I want to look people in the eyes?”

When we are able to do these steps, we are still in relational mode. When we no longer feel curiosity, appreciation, kindness, and the desire for eye contact, this is a sign we are likely locked in enemy mode, where our relational circuit is turned off.

It takes practice, but over time we can shorten the amount of time we spend in enemy mode. We do this by learning to recognize how it feels to be in relational mode and how it feels to be in enemy mode. This familiarity makes it possible to pause

and get relational anytime we feel ourselves slipping into the cold waters of enemy mode.

Live Joyfully

There are many things in this world that put us in enemy mode. However, just because I go into enemy mode doesn't mean I have to stay there. Some people find it helpful to take a walk, exercise, enjoy a coffee break, pray, spend time in nature, breathe deeply, reflect on times of joy, have a snack, and more activities to get relational once again. Some regain their relational footing by talking with a friend to share feelings, fears, or struggles.

The goal is to learn what works best to stay relational, then put these practices into a routine. We build habits of joy that keep us connected with the people we love.

Learning to distinguish relational mode from enemy mode is one way we care for ourselves and the people around us. We can learn to put our relational oxygen mask on anytime we encounter turbulence.

Relationships are one of the most important gifts we have. Tending the garden of our relationships means we address the things that keep us in enemy mode. While we can't change the people around us, we can learn to stay relational so we hold on

to joy and minimize casualties that arise during conflicts and strained relationships.

Relationships will be more satisfying and enjoyable anytime we aim for joy as our target and learn to return to relational mode. We can be the face that lights up to see others. Sharing joy with the people in our life is a gift that keeps on giving.

Make it a point today to think about joyful times in your life and pick one of these special moments to share with someone. Watch what happens!

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Chris M. Coursey is the author of *The Joy Switch*, coauthor of *The 4 Habits of Joy-filled Marriages* as well as *The 4 Habits of Raising Joy-Filled Kids*. He is a professional trainer, relational skills coach, author, and international speaker. Chris and his wife, Jen, lead the [THRIVE Training](#) program that uses brain-based exercises to equip people with skills to stay relational and sustain joy.

Why Sadness Matters Too (and Can Actually Make You Happier)

Helen Russell



I'm a big fan of joy. So much so that I have spent the last decade of my life writing about happiness and am a huge fan of both bubble machines *and* unicorns. But lately I've become convinced that sadness has its place too. Let me explain.

Reacting to Sadness

Sadness happens to all of us—sometimes in heartbreakingly awful ways—but in much of the world we don't know how to handle it. This can be isolating for those experiencing it and baffling for those trying to help loved ones through tough times.

Having spent eight years researching different cultural approaches to emotions, I began to notice that many of the people I met were so obsessed with the pursuit of happiness that they were phobic of feeling sad. I'd speak to people who had just lost loved ones who would ask how they could be happy. I'd meet people who had recently been made redundant at work, or had become homeless, or had a bad break-up, who'd still ask, "So why aren't I happy?"

I would try to explain that, sometimes, we need to be sad. Sadness is what we're supposed to feel after a loss, and sorrow is a sane response when bad things happen.

In the aftermath of a global pandemic, for instance, in a world at war where there are huge social and economic challenges, it's okay to feel sad. But a lot of us are conditioned to be so averse to

“negative emotions” that we don’t even recognize them, much less acknowledge them or give ourselves permission to feel and process them. This was certainly my experience.

When my sister died as I was growing up, no one talked about it. In my community, “successful grief” meant getting on with things, and I was raised with the erroneous belief that what you don’t talk about can’t hurt you. The pursuit of happiness was all that mattered—and happiness, I was taught from a young age, meant *never* being sad.

I went on to train as a journalist and write books on happiness, speaking about my work internationally. A wise therapist pointed out to me years later that it was no coincidence I’d forged a career in happiness: “You were terrified of being sad!”

I wasn’t the only one.

Understanding Sadness

During my research I’ve become increasingly convinced that many of us have been sold a narrow definition of happiness, a definition that means never being sad or doing hard things. A definition that does all of us a disservice.

“Many people nowadays assume that if they’re not happy, they must be depressed,” says Peg O’Connor, Chair of the Department of Philosophy at Gustavus Adolphus College, who I call up for

advice. “But life isn’t like that—there’s a whole swatch of emotions and ways of being that are viable. As Aristotle says, happiness is an on-going activity; it doesn’t mean that you’re never unhappy or that hard things haven’t happened. No one is happy all the time—sadness is part of the human experience called ‘life.’ ”

It’s important to distinguish between sadness and depression here. Depression is a chronic mental illness that needs help (I write from experience). Sadness, on the other hand, can be an awakening (ditto).

When I refer to sadness as an awakening, I mean it is the temporary emotion that we all feel on occasions when we’ve been hurt or something is wrong in our lives. It’s a message. It can tell us when something is wrong and what to do about it—but we have to listen.

The Upside of Feeling Down

The fear of facing our sadness can feel overwhelming, but the cost of not doing so is far greater. And the longer we wait, the worse it will become. Studies show that if we aim to avoid sadness, even a little, we limit our existence and our capacity to experience other emotions—like joy and happiness—too.

The Harvard University social psychologist Daniel Wegner famously led a thought experiment where subjects were told *not*

to think about white bears.[1] Wegner found that participants routinely thought about the thing they were attempting to avoid. Further studies confirmed that thought suppression (a) is futile and (b) exacerbates the very emotions we're hoping to swerve.[2]

And in fact, we can all get happier by learning to be sad, better. As the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard said, there is “bliss in melancholy and sadness.” Researchers from the University of New South Wales found that accepting and allowing for temporary sadness helps improve our attention to detail, increases perseverance, promotes generosity, and makes us more grateful for what we've got.[3]

How to Be Sad

So, how can we do sadness right? I've spent the past three years asking some of the best minds in the world this question for my latest book, *How to Be Sad (The Key to a Happier Life)*. Here's what I learned.

First up, we need to stop fighting sadness. There's shame attached to feeling sad in a world that tells us we shouldn't—and shame increases our cortisol levels and decreases our self-esteem and feelings of social worth.[4]

Even crying serves a helpful purpose in our emotional repertoire, with criers typically experience fewer “negative

aggressive feelings,” such as rage and disgust, than people who didn’t cry, according to research from the University of Kassel in Germany.[\[5\]](#) A study from Indiana University, Bloomington, found that American football players who cried reported higher levels of self-esteem and were less concerned about peer pressure than their non-crying counterparts.[\[6\]](#)

“We now know that crying is something all humans are programmed to do and that tears serve a purpose,” says Ad Vingerhoets, the “Tear Professor” from Tilburg University in the Netherlands, “and cortisol levels decrease in those who cry, since *expressing* sadness soothes us.”

Next? We can get some perspective. Many of us will feel as though, if we’re not happy, we must be sad. But this is a particularly Western approach. In East Asian culture, studies show, there is much more acceptance of the idea that, sometimes, we feel happy and sad all at once. Knowing this and recognizing the granularity of our thoughts means that we can be at peace with them.

There’s much to learn from cultures where people are more in touch with their emotions, “good” and “bad.” In Bhutan, for example, crematoriums are located centrally so that children grow up with the idea that loss and death are inevitable. Mourning in Greece is a big, public affair. The Portuguese and Brazilians have the concept of *saudade*—melancholy for

happiness that once was or even the life we merely hoped for. Because a good life isn't about being jazz-hands happy all the time (and I write this as a woman who loves a show tune).

The Chinese concept of *xingfu* is often translated as “happiness” in English but actually refers, not to a good mood, but to a good *life*—one that is sufficient and sustainable and has meaning. It isn't necessarily an easy, pleasant existence. (In fact, the Chinese character for *xing* derives from a character that represents torture.) Life may be hard, but it will have meaning. And this should be the goal—a life experiencing our entire emotional spectrum.

As well as broadening our cultural outlook via travel, we can expand our minds via books. Brain scans show that when we read, we mentally rehearse the activities, sights, and sounds of a story, stimulating neural pathways.[\[7\]](#) Reading has also been shown to boost empathy and help us connect.[\[8\]](#)

When we see world through another person's eyes and feel their sadness, we feel less alone in our own. And it's all about connection.

Frequency of contact with people we care about is one of the key indicators of well-being, worldwide. But the physical distancing and isolation over the past few years have

compromised our social connections, leading many experts to predict that the next epidemic will be loneliness.

Many of us have felt less connected and as though we have less support than before. Women tend to have more friends and socialize more than men, so we've felt that loss of connection more keenly. We need to reconnect and we need to talk.

The psychotherapist Julia Samuel says that talking about sadness “does not have to be with a therapist.” What's most important is “talking to someone who doesn't interrupt.”

Enlist a friend and make a deal that you will be each other's “buddy” for a regular check-in. When they talk, listen without interruption and without trying to “fix” anything, and vice versa. This will help you to develop a narrative around your situation, and as Samuel explains, “in enunciating the *words*, the *feelings* emerge.”

Finally, do something for someone else. If you're sad and you just do you, chances are you'll still be sad. We need to pay the love forward.

Studies show that doing volunteer work makes us feel better.[\[9\]](#) Helping others improves our support networks.[\[10\]](#) Giving our time to do something for someone else, counter-intuitively, makes us feel as though we have *more* time.[\[11\]](#)

Donating to charity makes us feel good, too, with a Harvard Business School study equating the rise in well-being achieved by donating to charity with a doubling in household income.[\[12\]](#)

The good feeling we get through generosity and volunteering is known as “warm-glow giving” or “helper’s high,” and MRI scans show that our brains literally light up, glowing with the pleasure of doing good. We should help other people because it’s the *right* thing to do; the “helper’s high” is a bonus.

Emotional Realism

I’ve tried hard to walk the walk. I’m more in touch with my emotions now, both “good” and “bad.” I’m engaged with and connected to the world around me. And I’m a better friend, daughter, parent, and partner as a result.

Because sadness is going to happen, we might as well know how to do it right.

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approaches to emotions and now speaks about her work internationally. Her Action for Happiness and TED talks have been viewed half a million times.

The Flavor of Family

Nadia Liu Spellman



Every house has a unique scent. When I was growing up, our home smelled like steaming rice, sautéed garlic, fresh ginger, sesame oil, and succulent meats. I remember picking up the scent of my mom's cooking from my bedroom and feeling excited for dinner. The delicious aromas permeated every room in the house.

On weekends, my parents would often entertain at home for family and friends. My mom, with the help of our housekeeper, would cook dish after dish. From my perch at the kitchen's kids' table, I watched as she approached the formal dining room with each course, greeted with smiles and applause.

The joyful celebrations grew louder as the night went on. We could smell cigarettes as the men drank and smoked. After dessert, the adults would progress into the basement for late-night games, and I would fall asleep to the faint sound of mixing mah-jongg tiles.

I want to recreate these kinds of family-focused sensory experiences for my kids. The scotch and cigarettes, the sound of mah-jongg tiles—those will not stick around. But I want the rest to remain. I want memorable dishes and mealtime traditions.

Good food binds generations in love. When we preserve family recipes and take time to savor not just the flavors but all that

they represent, our lives become richer, more meaningful, more joyful. My wish is for all people to taste their heritage.

Dumpling Daughter

Food has been a focal point in my life for as long as I can remember.

My earliest vivid food memory took place when I was four. We were on a family trip in Tokyo, Japan. My older sister told me that the wasabi was green tea ice cream, so I ate a big hunk of it. Tears filled my eyes as my tongue burned. I spit it out immediately. In that moment, all I tasted was anger and pain.

Thankfully, the bulk of my food memories are much happier. They are rich and complex, like the delicacies served in my parents' restaurant.

My parents owned a renowned eatery called Sally Ling's, a five-star establishment on the waterfront in Boston's North End. When it opened in 1984, many hailed it as America's first fine-dining Chinese restaurant. So, as you can imagine, there was a lot of "fancy food" on my plate as a kid. I had access to everything. But my favorite dish was, is, and always will be my mother's dumplings—simply delicious and packed with memories and meaning.

Dumplings are a throughline in my life. They were the first thing I'd order in a restaurant and the first thing I'd request at home. Dumplings are labor intensive, so the women in my family always made huge batches to have ready to go in the freezer.

As a child, on Sundays, we would gather at my grandma's house, where she often served my favorites: Beijing meat sauce and dumplings. I loved to watch my grandmother, mom, and aunt make the dumplings together. With piles of steaming dumplings in the middle of the table, and the whole family seated together, these loud dinners boasted big smiles and laughter all around. Today, the familiar taste of dumplings brings me right back to those moments of my happy childhood.

During my college years, my dad and I once sat together—enjoying a meal of dumplings, of course—and I mused, “If only non-Chinese people would eat dumplings as a meal like we do.”

My dad said most Americans saw dumplings only as an appetizer. They would never be satisfied with dumplings as a complete meal, he said.

I disagreed. And I decided to change the narrative. More than ten years later, I opened my first restaurant, Dumpling Daughter.

The inspiration for my business started with the simple joy I experienced at my family's table. My job allows me to extend my

family's legacy every day. I show my love for my parents through my celebration of their heritage, and I show my love for my children through my nurturing of them with food and experiences. I get to share my joy with the world every day, one dumpling at a time.

Joy Food

Many happy food memories extend beyond my family's kitchen table too.

In the sixth grade, I would often go to my parents' restaurant after school to do my homework. When it was dinnertime, my father and I would occupy a private booth on the quiet side of the dining room.

One time, I was sitting across from Dad at our Newton Centre location, face to face, eating Lion's Head, a traditional Chinese pork meatball, often braised. In one hand, he held a bowl of rice topped with a giant meatball; in the other, chopsticks. "This is what you call comfort food!" he exclaimed. I'd never heard the term "comfort food" at that stage, but I understood exactly what he meant. We felt right at home.

Dad and I shared many memories over Lion's Head. Whenever I eat these meatballs, whether served in soup or with sauce over napa cabbage, it brings me comfort and joy because he and I are

linked through the simple meal. I feel a connection, almost as if he's smiling at me while I'm savoring each meatball.

My parents weren't the only restaurateurs in the family. My mother's sister, Wilma, and her husband, Rick, were also in the restaurant business. At one point, between the two sisters, they owned and operated over ten restaurants. I loved visiting my aunt and uncle's restaurants. My favorite was Weylu's Palace. Its pagoda-like architecture cut a distinctive shape along Route 1 in Saugus, Massachusetts.

On the top floor of Weylu's Palace, there was a Japanese hibachi restaurant called Midori. To me, Midori was where all the action happened. My favorite dish there was my aunt's "garlic noodles," an unfussy plate of delicious sautéed yellow noodles.

I set out to recreate it at home so that I could have it anytime a craving hit. I serve it at my own restaurant too. I love sharing this simple family dish with kids, who tend to devour it as I do. Sometimes I even stand next to the chef just to smell the noodles. It brings me right back to Midori, and my heart smiles at the aroma.

Full Circle

Food played a huge role in both my pregnancy and the early days of motherhood.

In the Chinese culture, after giving birth, a new mother must stay home for 30 days, not leaving the house. The idea is to take total care of the mother, so that she can take care of the baby. Those early days should include a diet made up of soothing chicken soup, fish soup from live whole fish, pigs' feet stew, and other natural foods meant to strengthen the body and help produce breastmilk.

When I gave birth, my mom came to live with us. She cooked for me and cared for me so I could nurse my son and sleep as much as possible. Many postpartum moms struggle in the early days, but I enjoyed this time immensely. The aromas soothed me.

Life came full circle: my mother cooking, my child next to me, the familiar scent of chicken broth wafting in the air while I nursed my newborn. Food created joy in those moments for me too.

It Starts with One Dish

You may be the sort of person who appreciates food but doesn't love cooking. Maybe you don't feel confident in a kitchen or it's the last place you choose to spend your time. That's fine. You can still share the joy of food with those you love. Sometimes all it takes is one dish.

My grandmother, who I called Lau Lau (姥姥), was born in 1927 to an aristocratic family. Growing up in Beijing, she had chefs and servants and wasn't allowed in the kitchen. Lau Lau was not a trained chef or even a cook, but when I was a little girl visiting her kitchen, she sure fooled me.

My favorite dish of hers was zha jiang mian, a meat sauce that is similar to a Bolognese. Of all my childhood food memories, this is one of the warmest.

When my grandmother was diagnosed with cancer, I took her to chemotherapy appointments and cooked this sauce with her. I brought a scale and weighed ingredients as she spooned them out. Before she passed, I told her I was going to share her zha jiang mian with as many people as possible. It gives me such joy and a sense of peace to share this dish, not only through my restaurant, Dumpling Daughter, but now also in my cookbook, so that everyone can share the aromatic dish with their loved ones too.

Lau Lau did not know how to cook many dishes, and that was okay. Her flavorful meat sauce was more than enough. Today when I cook it for my kids, I feel as if she's there right by my side, sharing it with the next generation. The smiles around the table are the satisfaction I feel every time.

I'm thankful my family has recorded recipes passed down from cherished loved ones in order to recreate those boisterous weekend family feasts from years ago. In sharing these precious recipes, we share the joy of the past. We're each sharing our family's legacy with our children. It is *their* legacy too, after all. Needless to say, my children also eat their fair share of dumplings.

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Nadia Liu Spellman, after graduating from Babson College and working on Wall Street for five years, realized her true passion was food. Inspired by her parents, she founded Dumpling Daughter restaurants. She recently released her new cookbook, *Dumpling Daughter: Heirloom Recipes from our Restaurants and Home Kitchens*, with her mother, celebrity chef Sally Ling.

Big Boards: The Joy of Easy Entertaining

Sandy Coughlin



It's sad to me that, during the most beautiful time of the year, we often fall into busyness. The season becomes more about our schedules, checking things off our lists—sometimes things that we don't even want to do in the first place—and less about quality time. We succumb to the weight of worry and expectation. We are less concerned with creating space in our homes for people to join us for a meal. The joy of gathering loved ones and feeding friends gets lost in the process.

This grieves me. Food does more than nourish bodies. Food is a vehicle of connection. At the table, relationships are formed, values are shaped, and love is demonstrated. It's also where our senses etch cherished moments in our minds forever. I'm sure this is true of your experience. It has certainly been true for me!

Gathering friends for a meal comes naturally for some, but it intimidates a lot of people. Even the most seasoned hosts can overcomplicate matters and place unreasonable expectations on themselves, especially around the holidays.

I'm here to tell you it's possible to gather friends and offer them a unique experience with minimal effort. One of my core philosophies is this: you don't have to be a great cook or perfect hostess to entertain. In fact, I've made it my life's work to encourage reluctant entertainers. My signature? Big Boards.

Presenting beautifully arranged meals on one large show-stopping platter—or Big Board, as I call it—is one of the easiest ways I know to simplify entertaining. The process is relatively easy and the possibilities are endless. This method of service fosters connection, models hospitality, and creates meaningful table experiences. It's fun and collaborative, and for the most part you can easily pull it off ahead of time. All you need is a large board, basic kitchenware, adequate inspiration, and food.

Here's everything you need to get started, plus a few recipes to help you celebrate cold nights by a warm fire.

Finding the Right Board

My Big Board phenomenon started in 2017. I was hosting 12 bloggers in my little town in central Oregon. I wanted to make an epic charcuterie platter to share. I found a huge wooden board in my home, shopped for the best of the best food, and assembled each delicious component with care. The meal was literally a huge success.

The concept took off like wildfire. I began using our oversized wooden board over and over for all kinds of meals and occasions.

Over time, I discovered not all boards are created equal. For example, sunken surfaces that offer a raised lip are preferable to flat boards. The lip prevents food from slipping off.

I also love undercut handles. When I'm taking a board to a party, I often assemble it at home and secure it with cling wrap. A board with handles makes this transition a breeze, and while any sort of handle helps, I like undercut handles best because they don't distract the eye or extend off the platter and occupy space on a counter or table.

These two things are worthy of consideration if you're investing in a board. For now, there's a strong chance you have something suitable for a start.

Find a large, sturdy food-safe board or platter, something that will support a lot of food without being too heavy. Lightweight wood is ideal, but start with what you have on hand.

Big Board Entertaining Essentials

Hospitality is much easier if you have essential supplies standing by. It's tempting to purchase all kinds of specialty serving ware, but I like to keep things simple so I can focus less on accessories and more on the food. I use the same bowls and tongs over and over.

Things to keep on hand:

- A variety of bowls between 2 and 6 inches wide for sauces, dips, and condiments. (We have several nesting bowls that

are perfect.) Basic white bowls are practical, consistent, and easy to come by, but colorful bowls add visual interest.

- Small and medium-size tongs.
- Salad servers and serving spoons.
- Small knives and spreaders.
- Small spoons for condiments
- Hot pads (These are essential if you are placing a hot dish on your board. You do not want to scorch it.)

Gathering Inspiration

We often look to seasons as inspiration for meals. Farmer's markets brim with fresh produce and tempt us with other once-a-year delectables. Seasonal boards are a fantastic way to showcase the best of what's around, but here are a few other ideas to kickstart your creativity.

- Serve a favorite family recipe. When you serve it, share the history of the recipe and discuss what it means to you.
- Let special events be your guide—think bridal and baby showers, graduation parties, birthdays, achievement

celebrations, and more. It's wonderful to personalize boards for those you love.

- Explore different parts of the world and their culinary traditions. Read a book or watch a show about a given country while feasting on its cuisine. Not only will you discover new ingredients and dishes, but you'll better understand food's connection to the culture.

Planning Your Menu

You're inspired by the idea of boards, but not the cooking process? That's okay, because with boards you can find almost everything in your local deli, bakery, or farmer's market.

Simple steps to making your creation:

1. Plan your menu. Consider main dishes, sides, condiments, and other surprises. If you like to keep things really simple, choosing do-ahead recipes is the way to go.
2. Think about how many people you are serving, and scale your board and shopping list to accommodate your crowd.
3. Search your pantry before you go shopping. You might already have some of the ingredients or be able to substitute with something similar, saving yourself money or time.

4. Don't forget to borrow from your neighbor if you need to save a trip to the store.
5. If guests are coming over, ask them to bring something for the board. You might think this will be a burden to them, but it's not. Good guests want to contribute.
6. When you're tight for time, take shortcuts. Buy a rotisserie chicken, brownies at the bakery, or potato salad from the deli. Not everything needs to be from scratch.
7. Prep as much as you can in advance. You can make the main dish ahead of time and assemble the board about an hour before serving.

Assembling Your Board

You've shopped and cooked. Now's the time to bring everything together.

Once you're ready to go, it's helpful to think beyond the norm and approach assembling your spread the way an artist approaches a blank canvas.

Consider what will be the focal point. I place my bowls and dishes on the board first and then fill in the spaces between with

the remaining items, making sure that colors pop in the right places.

Once the food is sitting pretty, put necessary serving utensils in their rightful place, stack plates and glasses, utensils, and napkins, and get ready to feast with friends.

Hot Chocolate Firepit Board

Here's a simple idea to get you started. On cold winter nights, I love serving my Hot Chocolate Firepit Board with buttermilk puff pastry ribbons. The pastry ribbons are a surefire crowd pleaser and are so easy to make! (Think leftover pie crust, like my mom would have baked with cinnamon and sugar. So good!)

The rest of the board is straightforward. You can complete it with a bowl of fresh whipped cream and an array of store-bought items, like marshmallows, graham crackers, mini meringues, candy canes, chocolate bark, shortbread, pretzels, or your favorite holiday cookie. If you keep a stocked pantry, your feast will come together quickly.

I like to add a homemade touch with these buttermilk pastry ribbons. They are one of my favorite desserts in my latest cookbook. (A warning—if left on the countertop after baking, they will be gone in a matter of minutes!) They're flaky and a little tangy and have a crunchy coat of cinnamon sugar on the outside. They can be stored uncovered at room temperature,

and the dough will be moist and buttery. Dip them in hot chocolate, whipped cream, or sweet spread, or just eat them by themselves. (If you're pressed for time, use basic store-bought pastry and skip to step 4.)

Buttermilk Rough Puff Pastry Ribbons

Makes 12 ribbons. | Prep time: 15 minutes, plus 30-minute chill time and 30-minute rest time.

Cook time: 20 minutes, plus 10-minute cool time.

PUFF PASTRY

1 1/2 cups (187.5 g) all-purpose flour

1/2 heaping teaspoon kosher salt

1 1/4 teaspoons white sugar

3/4 cup (170 g) unsalted butter, grated, frozen

1/3–1/2 cup (80–120 ml) buttermilk, in ice

SPICED SUGAR

3 tablespoons (12 g) white sugar

2 tablespoons (30 g) brown sugar

1 teaspoon ground cinnamon

pinch of allspice

1/4 heaping teaspoon salt

4 tablespoons (55 g) butter, softened

1. In a shallow mixing bowl, mix the flour, salt, and sugar. Add in all the butter and toss with your hands to coat in flour. Create a well in the center and pour in about 3 tablespoons (45 ml) of the chilled buttermilk. Using your hands, lift the flour in an upward motion until the buttermilk is dispersed.

Repeat this step, adding 1–2 tablespoons (15–30 ml) of buttermilk at a time, until the dough begins to come together and just holds its shape when squeezed in your palm, like damp sand. Try not to over-hydrate the dough.

2. When the dough holds together, begin folding it on top of itself until a disk is just formed. The dough will have a few cracks, however, if it is tacky to the touch and a little over-hydrated. Simply use a little extra flour when rolling it out to compensate.

3. Shape the disk into a rectangle and transfer to a sheet of plastic wrap; cover tightly and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes to further hydrate. This can also be done overnight; just slow the dough to rest at room temperature for 30 minutes before rolling out.

4. While the dough chills, combine the white sugar, brown sugar, cinnamon, allspice, and salt in a small bowl. Set aside.

5. Preheat the oven to 350°F (180°C, or gas mark 4) and line a large baking sheet with parchment.

6. Roughly roll out the dough into a 13" x 9" rectangle. Trim the sides so they're straight; it

should trim down to a 12" x 8" rectangle. Using a pastry brush, spread the softened butter all over, and sprinkle with about half of the cinnamon sugar. Flip the dough and repeat, so both sides are coated. Using a ruler and a knife, mark 12" segments across the top. Cut the dough into long strips using a knife and a straight edge. Twist the strips into spirals and place on the sheet tray about 1" apart.

7. Place on the center rack of the oven and bake for 20–22 minutes, until the ribbons are puffed and golden on the bottom. While in the oven, the butter and sugar on the outside will caramelize deliciously into a crunchy coating, but be careful to not overbake and burn the sugar.

8. Once baked, remove from the oven and set to cool on a rack for at least 10 minutes.

Cinnamon Vanilla Hot Chocolate

Makes about 8 1/2 cup (120 ml) servings. | Prep time: 5 minutes.

Cook time: 10 minutes.

3 tablespoons (16 g) cocoa powder

1 teaspoon ground cinnamon

2/3 cup (134 g) white sugar

4 1/2 cups (1.07 L) whole milk

2 teaspoons vanilla extract

3 ounces (85 g) 60 percent bakers' chocolate, finely chopped

pinch of salt

1. In a medium sauce pot, whisk together the cocoa powder, cinnamon, sugar, and salt. Add the milk and bring the mixture to a gentle boil, then reduce to a simmer. Whisk until the sugar is dissolved, then remove from the heat, and add the vanilla and

chocolate. Stir until the chocolate melts and the hot cocoa is creamy.

2. Keep warm until ready to serve.

Enjoy!

Hosting friends doesn't need to be a burden, especially during the holidays. A creative Big Board can surprise and delight with minimal stress. The do-ahead nature means you can focus less on particulars and spend more time creating joyful memories with friends. They're fun and beautiful, and best of all, everyone can participate.

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[**Sandy Coughlin**](#) is the guru of all things hospitality and designer of the ultimate [**Big Board**](#) collection. Her blog, [*Reluctant Entertainer*](#), provides easy tips, tasty recipes, and inspiration so all readers can open their hearts and homes to beloved guests. She is the Oregon-based author of *Big Boards for Families* and *Big Boards and More*, and she has been featured by *Better Homes & Gardens*, the *New York Post*, and more.