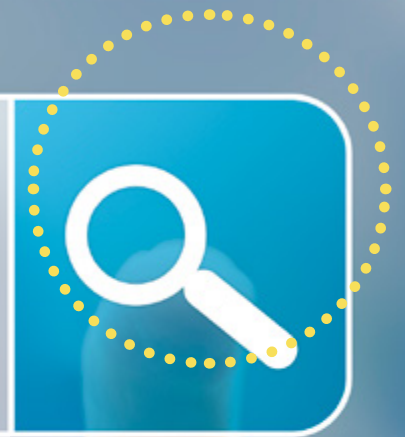


# The Hunt for **HAPPINESS**



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## I was living the gospel. Why was happiness still so elusive?

**By David Dickson**

Church Magazines

It's the middle of the night. My eyes snap open as my restless sleep is cut short. "Oh no," I pray. "Not again."

But the tremors begin almost immediately. In a terrifying burst of trembling that's as baffling and foreign as it is debilitating, my entire body begins to jerk up and down as if in a seizure. My hands and feet burn with heat from an unseen source. My wife jerks awake and holds me tightly, reassuring me with her quiet presence.

Happiness, what I had once considered my default state of being, is nowhere in sight.

If I had one question that dark night—other than to wonder what was going on physically (which I later learned)—it would have been to ask why I was feeling so unhappy when I was striving to live the gospel of Jesus Christ.

There are many potential obstacles to happiness. Wickedness is certainly one of them (see Alma 41:10). Yet even for the faithful, happiness can feel out of reach at times.

We all have moments when we need to hear that happier times are ahead. Maybe you're living through one right now. If so, please allow me to say with all sincerity that brighter days *are* indeed coming your way. I hope you'll be willing to stick with me a bit longer before dismissing such a sweeping statement as foolish or naive.

I truly believe, no matter what you're going through, that greater happiness can be yours to claim.

Please allow me to explain why.

### What Is Happiness?

What *is* happiness, anyway? Is it the feeling you get when someone sneaks a favorite treat into your lunch box? Is it a raise at work? Marrying your eternal companion? Feeling cleansed from sin through the power of Jesus Christ's Atonement?

Is it all of the above?

This discussion will look at what the gospel, as well as psychological science, can each teach us about happiness. Beginning on page 18 of this issue, Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles teaches us the critical truth that true joy is a life centered in Jesus Christ.

Similarly, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught: “Ultimate happiness, true peace, and anything even remotely close to scriptural joy are found first, foremost, and forever in living the gospel of Jesus Christ. Lots of other philosophies and systems of belief have been tried. Indeed, it seems safe to say that virtually every other philosophy and system has been tried down through the centuries of history.”<sup>1</sup>

If *every* other philosophy has been tried, an exhaustive list would be impossible to include. Even so, let’s consider a few worldly myths regarding how to be happy.

According to the world, lasting happiness is found by:

- Achieving financial prosperity, especially if it’s *more* than those around you.
- Being popular.
- Living a life of ease, leisure, and excitement.
- Traveling extensively and experiencing many of the world’s wonders firsthand.
- Achieving a position of power or authority in your career, community, or any other setting.
- Changing your body to look a certain way.

What do those various strategies have in common? For one thing, they’re all linked to circumstances. But as President Russell M. Nelson taught, “The joy we feel has little to do with the circumstances of our lives and everything to do with the focus of our lives.”<sup>2</sup>

Again, what should our focus be on to find that joy? President Nelson taught, “For Latter-day Saints, Jesus Christ is joy!”<sup>3</sup>

Joy is not an emotion that’s merely nice to have if you can get it. No, President Nelson described joy as “a principle that is key to our spiritual survival.”<sup>4</sup>

So joy and happiness are clearly worth the struggle. And

most of us are willing to work at it. Why, then, do so many—including the righteous—continue to struggle?

For one thing, that very struggle is key to why we’re here in the first place.

### Here to Grow

Sometimes we think of happiness as a life without problems or hardships. However, a life without struggle would not allow us the growth we came here to experience.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell (1926–2004) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles once taught: “One’s life . . . cannot be both faith-filled and stress-free.

“. . . How can you and I really expect to glide naively through life, as if to say, ‘Lord, give me experience, but not grief, not sorrow, not pain, not opposition, not betrayal, and certainly not to be forsaken. Keep from me, Lord, all those experiences which made Thee what Thou art! Then let me come and dwell with Thee and fully share Thy joy!’”<sup>5</sup>

Clearly we need struggles in life in order to grow, and being righteous plainly doesn’t spare us suffering. Examine the lives of Joseph Smith, Job, the people of Alma, and especially of our Savior Jesus Christ.<sup>6</sup>

No, righteous living does *not* spare us from all trouble and trials. None are spared. Yet you can also expect God’s help and healing (see Alma 36:3, 27). Elder Neil L. Andersen of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught, “For you, the righteous, the Healer of our souls, in His time and His way, will heal all your wounds.”<sup>7</sup>

If you are feeling wounded, healing is within reach. Of that you can be certain (see Mosiah 14:4–5).

### Happiness and Genetics

One item to consider early on: research has shown that a significant portion of our baseline mood, mental health, and corresponding happiness in terms of day-to-day functioning can be influenced by genetics.

Not everyone has the same body type or hair color. Similarly, not everyone has the same naturally cheerful disposition. But that’s only one piece of the puzzle.

Brigham Young University professor Hank Smith wrote, “What if you happened to get a really bad hand of cards in the DNA game? Does that mean you’re dead in the water—that you’ll never be happy and there’s nothing you can do about it? Absolutely not. . . . If the chemicals in your brain are just not working the way they’re supposed to because

of inherited tendencies (aka depression, anxiety, etc.), there are medications and practices that can get those chemicals to healthy levels.”<sup>8</sup>

Let’s examine some of the intentional strategies—some from the gospel, and others from scientific study—that can increase our opportunities for happiness.

## NINE STRATEGIES OF HAPPY PEOPLE



### **Strategy 1: Live the Gospel**

As President Nelson, Elder Holland, Elder Bednar, and others teach, true happiness comes from living the gospel. The gospel of Jesus Christ is also referred to as the “plan of happiness” (see Alma 42:8). The scriptures are full of counsel about righteousness being requisite for true happiness (see 2 Nephi 2:13 and Mosiah 2:41 for two examples among *many*).

It’s simple, it’s powerful, and it’s foundational. Fully embracing and living the gospel of Jesus Christ is the most important step you can take in finding greater joy and happiness in this life and the life to come.

### **Strategy 2: Spend Your Days “Engaged in a Good Cause” (Doctrine and Covenants 58:27)**

Inheriting a fortune that allowed you to lounge on the beach forever would almost certainly be detrimental to your happiness—even though worldly logic shouts otherwise. The truth is, we need to stay engaged in meaningful work to be happy.

“Franklin D. Roosevelt had it right: ‘Happiness lies not in the mere possession of money; it lies in the joy of achievement, in the thrill of creative effort.’”<sup>9</sup>

Meaningful work creates a satisfaction we can’t get any other way.

Elder Ulisses Soares of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught that “achieving happiness typically involves a long-sustained effort for something more important in life.”<sup>10</sup> Such meaningful work may extend beyond a sort of job or career. It includes raising kids, serving in the Church, or volunteering your time and talents.



### Strategy 3: Choose Gratitude

The power of choosing to live with gratitude is so transformative to everyday thinking that the practice is often referred to as a way to “rewire your brain.”

Let’s be honest—even when life is running smoothly, a piercing eye can still detect something to complain about. The reverse, however, is also true: no matter how hard things become, we can *always* find something to be thankful for.

And that’s where something beautiful happens.

Here’s a simple but powerful experiment: try keeping a gratitude journal. Every day for at least three weeks, write down three things you’re grateful for that happened *that day*. In addition, feel free to add a few general things you’re thankful for such as flowers, family, or food.

Soon you’ll find that you not only notice more easily those things you can add to your list, but you actually start expecting to find them. Living with more gratitude helps you better find joy in your current circumstances, which has a significant and direct effect on your happiness.<sup>11</sup>

*Forbes* magazine reports, “Cultivating gratitude doesn’t



cost any money and it certainly doesn’t take much time, but the benefits are enormous.”<sup>12</sup>

What are you thankful for today?



### Strategy 4: Spend Time Outside

Spending time outdoors, especially in nature, offers all sorts of benefits, like lowering stress and heart rate, or clearing your thoughts.

*Time* magazine reported on a study about nature’s ability to revitalize us. According to the study, “People began to feel psychologically restored after just 15 minutes of sitting outside in both the park and forest.”<sup>13</sup>

It’s hard to feel happy if we feel constantly drained and stressed. Try to get outside for a half hour or so most days of the week, more if you can manage it. Why not get out and enjoy it a little more often?

### **Strategy 5: Limit Screen Time**

Too much screen time isn't good for our happiness. The time you spend staring at a TV screen, computer, tablet, or phone adds up and can have negative effects on our mental health, especially when it comes to social media. Best-selling author Jean M. Twenge, who studied this topic extensively, explains: "The more time [people] spend looking at screens, the more likely they are to report symptoms of depression."<sup>14</sup>

President Nelson has said, "If you are paying more attention to feeds from social media than you are to the whisperings of the Spirit, then you are putting yourself at spiritual risk—as well as the risk of experiencing intense loneliness and depression."<sup>15</sup> So go ahead, give yourself some time away from your screens. You'll thank yourself later.

### **Strategy 6: Be Present**

If you're human, there's a roughly 100 percent chance you've said or done something you wish you hadn't. Most likely, a lot of somethings. What's odd, though, is how often most people choose to relive such moments in their mind.

Latter-day Saint author John Bytheway writes about the problems of dwelling on the past: "Miserable people have a recycle bin full of past mistakes. Every day they rethink their regrets and recycle their remorse. Their language is full of phrases like, 'I should've,' 'I would've,' 'I could've,' 'Why didn't I?' and 'If only.' They never look where they're going because they can't take their eyes off where they've been."<sup>16</sup>

He also writes about the complementary problem of dwelling too much on the future: "Miserable people look for some outside event to make them happy. 'As soon as I graduate, I'll be happy.' After they graduate, they say, 'Well, as soon as I get a job, I'll be happy.' After they get a job, they say, 'Okay, as soon as I get married, I'll be happy.' . . . If you're determined to be miserable, then think of life as a waiting room, and happiness as your doctor."<sup>17</sup>

We tend to find the greatest happiness and well-being when we live in and focus on what's happening in our lives right now.

In mental health and psychiatry circles, the term "mindfulness" is a shorthand way of describing being fully engaged in the moment.

Mental health experts advise, "Fears and insecurities about the past and the future can make it difficult to fully enjoy the present."<sup>18</sup>

Here are a few tips to practice living with mindfulness:

1. Keep a gratitude journal (see strategy 3 above), especially listing several things you are grateful for from that day.
2. Spend time meditating daily. Find a peaceful spot to sit without distractions. Close your eyes and pay attention to your breathing. If thoughts come, acknowledge them, release them, then return to focusing on your breathing. This may sound odd, but it's great mental practice for focusing on the present.
3. Pay closer attention to mundane tasks you normally do on auto-pilot, like washing the dishes, driving, or even eating. Feel the soapy water over your hands. Observe the trees, people, and buildings as you drive. Savor the taste and texture of each bite.
4. Pray to notice people who need your help that day. Then pay close attention and be prepared to act.
5. Switch up your routines from time to time and truly experience a new route home, the unfamiliar layout of a different grocery store, or a change in your typical evening activities.

### **Strategy 7: Connect with Others**

In terms of happiness and overall health, focusing on meaningful relationships is vital.

Emma Seppälä, PhD, writes that “strong social connection:

- leads to a 50% increased chance of longevity
- strengthens your immune system . . .
- helps you recover from disease faster.”

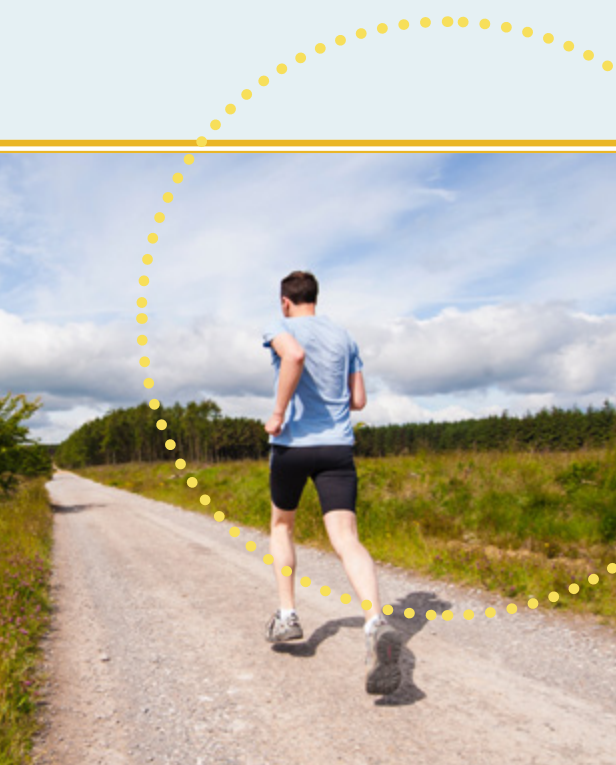
She continues, “People who feel more connected to others have lower levels of anxiety and depression.”<sup>19</sup>

When it comes to meaningful relationships, a few deep ones are probably better than many shallow ones. We needn’t

overschedule our free time with constant social events, but we desperately need human connection. Even for introverted personality types, there are many ways to deepen connections among your circle of friends and family.

With regard to family, Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles once taught, “In family relationships *love* is really spelled *t-i-m-e*, time.”<sup>20</sup>

Since you’ve already carved out extra time by cutting back on screen use (hint, hint), consider replacing some of it with face-to-face interactions. Ministering visits, sports leagues, stamp-collecting clubs . . . or anything that lets you connect with others can help increase your happiness and well-being.



### **Strategy 8: Take Care of Your Temple**

Giving your body quality sleep, proper nutrition, and adequate exercise can yield big happiness gains. Our emotions are centered in our brain, which, like any other organ in your body, benefits greatly from improved health practices.

The steps you take to improve your physical health ultimately includes improving your brain, which is part of your physical body. This can help you think more clearly, focus more readily, and stabilize your emotions.

With health habits, a good rule of thumb is to start slowly and make one change at a time. Start with small things like walking more or improving what you eat, when possible. Small changes add up.

### **Strategy 9: Look Outward**

The previous eight strategies might seem more obvious than this final one, but happiness is often found when you’re not focused on it directly.

Elder Holland has taught: “Happiness is not easy to find running straight for it. It is usually too elusive, too ephemeral, too subtle. If you haven’t learned it already, you will learn in the years ahead that most times happiness comes to us when we least expect it, when we are busy doing something else. Happiness is almost always a by-product of some other endeavor.”<sup>21</sup>

By all means, do everything possible to cultivate strategies and habits for happiness. After doing all we can, though, it’s time to turn outward and let happiness find us as we seek to help others.

## Happiness and Mental Illness

When it comes to medical conditions like depression and anxiety, happiness becomes a more complex creature. The late-night tremors I mentioned earlier turned out to be symptoms of anxiety brought on by clinical depression.

In my life, when I've been in the full throes of darkness and uncertainty that is clinical depression, I could no more "choose to feel happy" than choose my height or eye color.

What I can *always* choose, however, is to fight back against the darkness. I can reach up to God. I can use all the tools at my disposal, from faith and prayer to modern medicine.

For me, emerging successfully from depressive episodes over the years always involves a multifaceted approach. I must look to my physical health (exercise, nutrition, sleep), my medical health (medication, vitamins, consultations with doctors), my emotional health (counseling, connecting with others), and my spiritual health (prayer, scripture study, serving in the Church, time in the temple) in balanced measures.

Despite some of the painful lows I've experienced over the years from depression, I am blessed to experience happiness and positivity *most of the time!* I feel deeply for those of you more strongly and more persistently affected by mental illness than I, but even for you, I fully believe that the Prince of Peace will heal all your sorrows (see John 14:27).

Depression tells many lies when it comes to happiness. It asserts that things won't ever improve. One potent antidote to this particular lie—for me, at least—is found in my favorite hymn, "Be Still, My Soul."

*Be still, my soul: Thy God doth undertake  
To guide the future as he has the past.  
Thy hope, thy confidence let nothing shake;  
All now mysterious shall be bright at last.*<sup>22</sup>

Beautiful truths, aren't they? As I look back over my life, I have no doubt that God has blessed, strengthened, and guided me all along the way. Thus, I know He will be there for me in the future, just as I know God will guide you along your path to happier days.

Through Him, your happiness will someday be made complete. ■

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