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BEING HAPPY IN SPITE OF SETBACKS

Wanda Krause

Introduction

How can we be happy despite setbacks? I don't think anyone is ever prepared for that difficult thing. There is the saying, too, that when it rains, it pours. In my experience that difficult thing is rarely it—there's one more thing the gods were sure we could take, and it comes hurtling out of left field. Setbacks and situations of adversity can teach some incredible life lessons; we can gain inner strength. We can gain wisdom. We can take the learnings away for better leadership, that is, applying these in a way where we lead ourselves to be stronger, reflective, humble, and grateful. The world is in dire need of leaders who are resilient, adaptable, humble, reflective, and are fighters—they fight for what they know to be true, love, happiness, joy, fulfillment, peace with what is and a reality that is different. In this chapter, I seek to impart a few pearls of wisdom I have gathered, and show how many others have found their way forward to “the good life”.

One of the difficult times in my life taught me that overthinking in trying to understand and make sense of what had happened at the time can create deep discontent, in fact disease (dis-ease), after further creating a cascade of events to compound the original setback. All the thinking and worrying doesn't help ameliorate a challenging situation. Understanding was to come soon enough. But at that time, instead, I entered the thinking vortex for about two months, awake at night, rehashing the past, trying to use (my) logic, imagining I should have been in control to somehow change course, and then worrying about the future. The vortex consumed me until a point when my doctor gave me two choices to address a health condition—a consequence of all the stress and lack of sleep, choices of interventions which would mean facing lifelong consequences. If the thinking vortex had not yet consumed me, the anxiety from researching the consequences of the suggested medical interventions, in addition to seeking out stories of people with the same challenge, would do it. This situation fully transformed (in time) when in reflective practice I reacquainted myself with one of my most important purposes in life—being healthy and vibrant to be fully engaged, present, and active with my children. Significantly, also, one my closest friends, a physician, commanded that I stop all the worry immediately, affirming all would right itself if I followed a simple non-interventionist, holistic, and medically sound plan that addressed not the symptoms, but first and foremost the core of the situation—stress.

Setbacks are an inevitable part of life – in fact, of a life well lived. The more one pursues the “good life”—doing good, working hard at goals that matter and supporting those one loves, living life fully, aspiring to create positive change—the more resistance one might face, the louder the

naysayers may be, and sometimes the higher the jump the harder the fall. The key then is to develop the tools and competencies to navigate setbacks in a way that we can continue to be happy and fulfilled. From many of these I am immensely grateful that I have gained what I have in the process, and know that I could not have grown otherwise. Growth produces fulfillment and happiness.

I further summarize the wisdoms of the several hundred people I have studied and interviewed for over 20 years around the globe on how they pursue success and the betterment of their own conditions and the conditions of others in pursuit of the good life. These are found through the seven directives for happiness in spite of setbacks I delineate. My inquiry has not been to what extent these activists and change-makers are happy, as is frequently the focus of happiness studies. Rather, the focus of my work has been on how they seek to create transformation in areas that mattered to them, and on the evaluation of to what extent they have expanded civil society. These evaluations lead to better understanding the inner subjective and collective requirements and transformations occurring to support positive change. In that process, my work has enabled me to identify what actions, behaviors, competencies, and skills contribute to well-being, happiness, and success. This process of inquiry has also illuminated what mindset, consciousness, states, and subjectivities contribute to happiness and fulfillment, thus, beyond the external to include internal factors that may also contribute to inability to succeed.

What is Happiness, Anyway?

My father would routinely ask “Are you happy?” That was his check in. Happiness is what mattered to him. What is it? How do we measure it? What determines how happy we are? How can we be happy despite setbacks? Hundreds of books have mushroomed since and there are many ideas of what happiness is from the *hedonistic*—pleasure, where one focuses on one’s own joy in the moment, and even so regardless of impact on others—to the *eudaimonic*, where one seeks to serve a deeper purpose and something greater than oneself—in a way, a life well lived. In his book, *The Psychology of Happiness*, Michael Argyle attempts to answer some of these questions about happiness with his first book published in 1987 recognized as a “classic” text in the history of happiness literature. Before his time, in the late 30s and early 40s, researchers at the Harvard Study of Adult Development began studying the health and well-being of 268 seemingly promising male students from Harvard University, and research is still conducted today on individuals, some of whom are in their 90s. Positive psychology has championed inquiry into happiness and today has contributed countless of evidence-based research pieces to the field of happiness studies. Positive psychology often defines a happy person as someone who experiences frequent positive emotions, such as joy, interest, and pride, and infrequent (though not absent) negative emotions, such as sadness, and anxiety (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

Martin Seligman, a key figure in positive psychology, argues for the need to distinguish between positive experiences that are *pleasurable* from those which are *enjoyable*. Pleasure is the good feeling that comes from satisfying homeostatic needs, for ex. hunger, sex, and physical comfort. However, enjoyment refers to good feelings people experience when they break through the feelings of homeostasis; that is, when they do something that stretches them beyond what they were. Such leads to personal growth and sustained happiness (2002, p. 12). Seligman and other positive psychologists have added to the definition of happiness “engagement”, referring to living a “good life” of work, family, friends, and hobbies. In their keynote speech at the Positive Psychology Conference (Melbourne 2019), Seligman and his wife, Mandy, co-presenting, added a significant piece to a fuller understanding around the pursuit of happiness. Being happy and being dedicated to living a life of happiness does not mean that one is free of challenges to happiness. In fact, in referencing their own example of a family disagreement occurring right before the conference, focused on well-being and happiness, they illustrated that one will be pushed to deepen

commitment to what matters and practice the things that support happiness (6th Congress on Positive Psychology, 2019).

Because it was routine, I have to admit that at times I didn't always give sufficient thought and take the appropriate moment to reflect before answering my father's simple query around my state of happiness. But often it served as a gauge for me to check in on my own state before answering, and to be honest and authentic first with myself around my state right then in the moment. Asking one if they are happy, directly, or how they are feeling are powerful questions because these nudge us to go inside to feel into our states. Happiness does not depend on outside events, but rather on how we interpret them. It's a condition one prepares for, is cultivated, and defended (Csikszentmihalyi, Harper & Row, 1990, p. 1). It is an inner experience. More accurately, it is an inner harmony. A person can choose to make herself happy, despite what is going on outside oneself (Ibid., p. 2). From my experience and work, my thesis for being happy despite setbacks and adversity is actually not the pursuit of happiness in and of itself. Rather, it is in the pursuit of success, purpose, creating meaning, and in living the "good life"—happiness is the bonus, the side effect. I put together a list, not to be seen in any specific order. I share some of the directives and practices that have kept me on track for health, happiness, and abundance, and countless others that have equally added greater perspectives and to my practices for the side effect of happiness.

Exit the Thinking Vortex

Adversity puts you in a place of asking, "what just happened?" "Why did it happen?" And ... "how?!" Understanding "why" is tricky because you probably wish that you could have done something to avert the difficult situation. But the pieces are probably not all there. The picture changes the more you think about it, remember, or pick up on "clues", "evidence", etc., if it's something you think you didn't know would happen. It can be incredibly stressful trying to make sense of a setback you didn't expect. Needing to know why an event turned out the way it did immediately can lead to misery, not happiness. Worry about the future is no recipe for happiness either. The setback happened; now it is time to practice stepping out of the vortex of worry.

When you are constantly putting yourself mentally in the past or the future, to the extent that you are not living in the now, you are not present. Both living in the future and past can freeze and numb you. Feeling hopeless happens when you feel you cannot make progress mentally in solving an issue or making headway from the challenge. A mental exercise includes shifting your thinking by becoming aware of the thinking that is causing worry and stress. A popular example is wearing a band with words on it to remind yourself about gratitude. Another way to shift focus from the setback to something that takes you out of the vortex of unproductive and anxiety-inducing thinking is to hold focus on something. This can be anything in the room as an exercise in mindfulness. However, what works well for me is being in nature. Presence in nature helps me shift from focusing on what I cannot change in the moment or make sense of and allows me to appreciate, wonder, be with something larger than myself, and simply observe.

Do the Healing

Step out of the thinking vortex, but don't rush to get out of any healing that is needed. See pain as your wise friend who wants the best for you. Through the pain is your healing. Burying it under fake smiles and fake positivity is setting yourself up for a bigger event down the road. Healing is a tool to move out of pain, and not down that slippery slope to suffering. When pain becomes a crutch and excuse for not moving onward and upward, you don't heal (meaning you don't allow greater depths of happiness in) and likely don't get to live the life you are meant to fully.

What the healing process entails and means to you has everything to do with the circumstance. As such, there is no prescription for healing but rather some ideas to consider. When my father died several months prior to the time of writing this chapter, I was fortunate to have a great deal of support and wisdoms shared with me. What an Indigenous woman told me was that grieving would have its way with me and to expect and allow for that, rather than attempt to control the process. In our western culture, we face deadlines and work commitments. We sometimes see resiliency as meaning the need to hide our inner selves. Life seems to be spinning faster and faster where we are expected to keep up, and refine ourselves in order to keep up. Her wise words couldn't be more helpful. Do not create any rigid linear plan. Where you are subject to rigid outer world schedules, timelines, and deadlines, such as if you cannot leave your job to grieve, find spaces, even if short, to be, feel and connect. Your own healing will be different to any other person's.

Nature does wonders for cleansing and holding focus. Because my father was a wildlife photographer and took us often into the bush, being deep in the woods and with nature is the first and natural choice for me to connect. Pay attention to nature – noticing the trees, leaves, sunlight coming through the forest, depending on where you are, the sun on the water, birds, squirrels, other animals. Healing may be alone, but also very often needed with others, whether with loved ones, close friends, community, or professionals. Suffering and happiness are on two ends of the spectrum. Do the healing to open your heart to peace, appreciation, celebration for all that is good and well, joy, love, and happiness. The process does not mean you do not feel pain but entails that you, in fact, allow pain to be felt, revealed, engaged, and embraced as part of life. This is part of being human, part of loving, and part of pursuit of the good life—what is purposeful and meaningful.

Pursue Purpose

The way many of us are pursuing happiness does not work because the experience of it does not last. More sadly, it serves largely to create a hole in our hearts that drives us to clamor for more fleeting moments to feel better. The thing we call happiness is so closely tied to purpose, as in Kant's "something to do, something to love, something to hope for". We wouldn't have increasing crime rates in many places, increasing rates of suicide and depression, a growing gap between rich and poor, mass shootings, civil wars and terror around the globe, if we understood and pursued *real* success (Krause, 2013, p. 4). Success lies in pursuing what is meaningful and doing everything you know to be true and aligned with higher purpose, acting with integrity, consciousness, and moral compass, in pursuit of a higher pleasure—that is, achieving something meaningful and purposeful. Doing something purposeful, something you wake up for, is what leads to happiness. It is not the goal, but the process of pursuit in what is meaningful.

Without purpose and meaning in our goals, and without taking conscious steps and engaging in mindful processes of integrity and moral conscience, when we hit that brick wall, we tend to look for quick fixes. As the world seems to spin faster, we are more apt to reacting, attending to impulses, living only in the moment to the neglect of where we are headed, seeking instant gratification, and finding quick fixes to our problems. This does not lead to longer term or true happiness. This is what Jordan Peterson refers to as expedience: "the following of blind impulse. It's short-term gain. It's narrow, and selfish. It lies to get its way. It takes nothing into account. It's immature and irresponsible", and adds, "Meaning is its mature replacement.... Meaning trumps expedience. Meaning gratifies all impulses, now and forever" (2018, p. 199).

When you pursue something of purpose, you are able to shift the meaning attached to setbacks along the way. They become surmountable, inevitable, opportunities for expansion, learning, and growth, and they make the pursuit all the more coveted and meaningful. Peterson explains meaning further:

Meaning is when everything there is comes together in an ecstatic dance of single purpose – the glorification of a reality so that no matter how good it has suddenly become, it can get better and better and better more and more deeply forever into the future. Meaning happens when the dance has become so intense that all the horrors of the past, all the terrible struggle engaged in by all of life and all of humanity to that moment becomes a necessary and worthwhile part of the increasingly successful attempt to build something truly mighty and good.

(p. 201)

Happiness is the side effect of the struggles along the way that have been imbued with meaning and the emotive power in manifesting what really matters after all. Success could not be labeled as such, in fact, without trials and the pains of a birthing process. Hence, success is the bearing of fruit for which attachment, love, yearning, and joy have grown in the pursuit of something purposeful.

Be Broader Systems Intelligent

Many people who have high IQs are simply unable to cope with many of life's challenges even though they have great analytical abilities. Our inability to truly succeed at creating happiness is because we keep using approaches to solve problems that do not consider the challenge as part of a larger system in flux, and as occurring in conjunction to often multiple factors. Despite many of our great advancements in many areas, we find ourselves in trouble because of a narrow, atomistic, de-compositional, linear, static approach we take to virtually everything. We require a higher way of thinking (Krause 2013, p. 12).

Happiness relates to our capacities and confidence that we have and for which we are up to the challenge to get through, navigate, and deal with setbacks effectively, in order to keep going successfully. A sense that we have lost control, are stuck, are spinning our wheels and going nowhere is not being happy; it's being stressed, and can even make us feel hopeless. Kant's "something to hope for", quoted above, is not only about the goal but the feeling that one has that keeps them motivated, going, and in pursuit in face of adversity and setbacks.

If our approaches, resting on a general, rational, logical approach, are failing us in addressing setbacks that are often contextualized by complexity, then we require an intelligence that is more sophisticated and systems conscious. Our brain is a significant and wondrous resource. However, it is not our only discerning centre. More accurately, "[r]eason is a spark kindled by the beating of our heart" (Apocrypha, Wisdom of Solomon 2:2). We must align our thoughts with our heart, and our heart with a better or higher knowing, or even intuition. Happiness is the capacity to navigate setbacks with confidence that you may not be able to control the situation, but that you are doing your best in order to be equipped to overcome it; you are not stuck and hopeless. You have "the ability to behave with wisdom and compassion, while maintaining inner and outer peace, regardless of the situation" (Wigglesworth, 2012). As Rumi says, "every external gives news of a hidden wisdom".

What I have taken to mean being broader systems intelligent, and from working with and studying change-makers is: using logic, at the level we do, being aware of how systems work, and our role in systems (atoms to cosmic events as part of systems in constant movement with each component impacting, changing, and transforming the others, which are mostly open and not impervious), and being attuned to how intelligence speaks through events. It also means being self-aware so that you know where your limits lie and know when to seek solutions and supports with others, or guidance from others. This is the meaning-making that helps me successfully overcome obstacles I have not fully understood and, in fact, serve as my way forward to better, higher, and often unexpected pathways and, therefore, outcomes and success.

In this approach is a politics of hope, perhaps, that is, where there is oftentimes no real logic or concrete plan forward, but an unshakable faith that the goal pursued is meaningful, right, and possible. For many of those I have worked with and studied over the many years, some challenges have been so large, previously unsolved, and at the time there were no logical solutions readily available. The process, in such case, for getting through can only be through trusting the process, listening to the system, and waiting for feedback from wherever the system chooses to speak. What this entails, in action, is dropping the idea that logic—though important—is your only tool, allowing understanding, and learning to emerge, even from the source of challenge, and then acting, using feedback from the system itself and iterating—using the head, heart, and hands, as intelligence.

Seek to Learn

Learning from setbacks is closely tied to the ability to be happy despite setbacks. Doing the same thing to address the situation over and over without results is not only failing to use a broader systems intelligence; it is failing to see when it's necessary “to make the turn” at the “bend in the road”, which can lead to misery.

My own learning has happened because of those setbacks. However, learning is a choice. We see people making the same mistake, back in the same situation of struggle with little variation, over and over. We also see those who come out of a very difficult situation with gratitude and wisdom. Those are the people who are happy not just in spite of the setback but because of the setback. They chose to learn what they would not have probably been able to learn so deeply otherwise, and they learn to appreciate the setback for the learning that was gifted to them.

When facing a setback, ask what the learning in it is for you, and for what you want to be and achieve in life. How can this situation shape you for the better? Sometimes the purpose of the adversity is unclear. Trusting the process also means trusting that there is a purpose and wisdom in the challenge, whether that is to learn not to repeat a mistake, or the challenge is there to create competencies in you to lead yourself more effectively, and perhaps lead others, as well. Seek the learning. In the pursuit of learning you'll begin to feel gratitude, hope, faith, and a sense of success and accomplishment when you pull through.

Give Yourself and Others Well-being and Love

Give yourself well-being, love and permission to live life. Love and happiness is not to be experienced after you feel you're past a difficult situation. Aim to live in kindness, love, joy, and peace, now. Love is reminding yourself you are worthy, able to succeed, and can still be happy, in spite of a setback. What did you love doing as a child? Do them in the midst of adversity. You cannot change what happened. But you can change your state of being. What helps you exit the thinking vortex? For me, it is glade skiing, fast. How might you practice loving more? Extending love might entail making it a disciplined practice. Think of ways in which you can give love to yourself and others.

Make sure you are well and healthy. Exercise. Moving physically helps your good hormones, e.g., dopamine and serotonin, and diminishes the flow of stress hormones, adrenalin, and cortisol. Taking care of your physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being is critical when facing adversity. Changing your physical state impacts your emotional and mental states, and enhancing your spiritual practice also changes the way you view the situation and the world. Changing the mental sharpens your thinking skills and ability to concentrate. You feel better and are more open to possibility and receptive to learning.

My daily routine is focused on consistency, keeping up my energy levels, and positivity—all as much as possible. It begins with eating a healthy breakfast, moving, finding a moment of quiet to sharpen my mindset, being with those I love, and preparing for the day. My practice throughout the

day is getting exercise in on most days, usually in nature, and ending with a healthy home cooked meal, also as much as possible with loved ones. Throughout the day I make sure to give love to those close to me in different ways and this is truly a goal that I keep front and center because with or without setbacks it is my purpose that fulfills me. It does not mean extending love is always easy. Often I am challenged with deadlines. More often than not items get added to my day's plan. In many places I have lived in the Middle East, and during COVID-19, big setbacks are thrown in. Yet, my family and close friends are my support system and purpose. I measure my states a few times throughout the day to know where I am at on my feelings scale. I no longer have my father with me to remind me to check within, but his teaching remains with me, and so I sometimes save random times to my phone alarm to remind myself. I follow this daily routine because it helps me be a resilient person and well. By being resilient, I am able to be adaptable for when the little setbacks are thrown into my day and when the big setbacks are thrown into my life.

One of the biggest ways to address challenges and raise your happiness levels is through giving—things, perhaps charity, but more importantly giving of yourself. Ask someone how *they* are doing. Being able to face adversity is ironically strongly linked to the capacity to step out of your own thinking, goals, and interests and be fully conscious of someone else's feelings, needs, goals, and interests. In fact, truly feeling love is in giving love. If I could say there were the times in my life I have felt more fulfilled and present than other times, despite incredible setbacks, it is during those times I have been in optimal health and well-being while giving love, in the forms that were required from my environment or as needed by others, while I was most challenged to give it. To give an example, it includes working with women who gave of themselves and took enormous risks to their lives and well-being to save trafficked children and young women although we faced devastating setbacks. For me, stretching to give love and support empowerment against incredible challenges and push back to securing basic human rights, though also extremely painful, at times, is living on purpose.

Change Course

I believe we are more successful at reaching happiness states when we are not merely trying to keep going in the face of adversity, or adapt, but reach for something more. Your world may get shaken for many reasons, but in part maybe for you to learn that life has way more joy to embrace than you may have been experiencing. The shake up might now require that you re-evaluate not just how you are addressing an issue but perhaps something bigger, perhaps how you are living life. Are you living on purpose? Or have you been moving farther away? What might you be ignoring? What might you be called for that you have yet to embrace? As part of my personal belief system, I believe that your soul sometimes nudges you when you ignore it, and does what it needs to, in order to get you to listen.

Take yourself less seriously. I have to constantly remind myself, too. Life actually becomes more joyous when we take ourselves less seriously. The irony is that when you see adversity as that wake up call to be on purpose, and start listening to your inner voice, the result is that you feel happier. Your purpose is in your compassion, your joy, and what gives you meaning. Start to do more of whatever calls you to purpose and fills you, so that when you go to bed at night you know that in some tiny way you did what you can, and are learning along the way, to better yourself and in the process make the world a better place. Keep doing more of what feeds your soul and feels on purpose for you, even if you do not see immediate results. Change in the outer world often takes time; you can change your inner state to being happy very quickly.

Conclusions

What I consider happiness in the face of adversity or when dealing with setbacks is not about a momentary, fleeting pleasure, or even the re-enactment of pleasurable activities. It is rather being,

learning, pursuing, and meaning-making in a way that creates a deep sense of fulfillment. In other words, it is a quality of life that you bring to your struggles that creates greater ease. Being happy in the face of setbacks does not mean you do not experience anger. Rather, happy people use anger to keep resolve, deepen commitment, reshape meaning, keep going, and go further. Happy people experience pain when they hit barriers and the curveballs that life throws them. However, they work through pain, and even use pain to expand in greater compassion and understanding. People who are happy despite setbacks use inner strength, grow inner capacities where needed, find support, and multiply their intelligence with others to tackle their adversities. They see broader systems and their role in systems. They are committed to something larger than themselves, their purpose. They are everyday people, like you and me, who pursue the “good life” and in that pursuit practice a politics of hope, faith, wisdom, intelligence, grit, and knowing that success is defined by obstacles, not living in absence of them. When one truly understands that happiness is a side effect of doing one’s best in pursuit of what matters with the right competencies, peace, a sense of purpose, and joy results. Happiness, thus, cannot be chased; it ensues.

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