



The 7 Steps for Cultivating Authentic Happiness

You were born to be happy. In fact, everyone has a deep-seeded impulse to blossom into a radiant, joyous, ecstatic human being.

So why all the gloomy faces?

Happiness has held our attention for thousands of years, but only recently has 'positivity' become the focus of behavioral scientists. We're now beginning to look deeper into the root causes of joy and understand the science of authentic happiness--how it develops, why it gets lost, and what can be done to reclaim and sustain it.

Studies from neuroscience show that happiness is wired into our brain. Like an acorn holding the promise of a giant oak, the infant's brain is packed with happiness potential, ready to sprout into a life-time of edifying laughter, pleasure and bliss. But like all brain functions, if we don't stimulate our happiness potential early and often, we risk losing the capacity. If our latent potential for joy is ignored or only marginally evoked, we may never know what it means to feel truly happy, deeply connected, passionately in love, or wildly euphoric.

But here's the good news. Research also shows that our brain has a remarkable capacity to grow new neural networks (called 'neuroplasticity'). Given the right kind of attention and enriching environment, our brain can be "rewired" so that specific functions that determine how we think, feel and laugh can be recovered and enhanced.

For happiness to flourish, it needs to be carefully nurtured from fragile neediness, through confident independence, into the ultimate blossoming of its fullest potential. But how can we feel joy if it's never been nourished in our life? How can we boost our HQ ('happiness quotient') without using addictive drugs, medications laden with side-effects, or risky thrill-seeking? And what does it take to reach the height of pleasure--*ecstasy*--which has been the inspiration for countless poets, mystics and lovers the world over?

Gardening Tips

If there were a handy guidebook of gardening tips for growing happiness you'd read about the basic art and science of joyful living. You'd learn how specific methods for promoting gladness are scattered among various disciplines and traditions around the world, some dating back hundreds of years. You'd see how some perfectly natural methods for achieving peak experiences of ecstasy and pleasure are sometimes buried in unfamiliar terms or concepts that you may need

some help translating and time to master. Taken together, our little pocket guide would illustrate seven essential techniques for cultivating and sustaining happiness:

1. Tend the Soil

First, if you expect to reap the rewards of a joyful nature, you'll need to attend to your physical body with the same degree of knowledge, care and attention that a gardener uses to cultivate beautiful flowers or delicious fruits. You can begin by "tending the soil", that is, learning to support and enhance physical conditions within your body that create a fertile environment for growing positive physical, emotional and mental states. Like every living creature on the planet, you need sufficient exposure to sunlight, adequate oxygen and hydration, and the right amounts of vitamins, minerals, amino acids, fats, and other nutrients to live a healthy, happy life. In addition to eating right, targeted use of 'nutraceuticals' (nutritional supplements) can help provide a natural means of nourishing the body while stimulating hormones and peptides within the brain that make you feel good. By ensuring that your body is provided with the right kind of nourishment, you'll maximize your internal defenses against disease, keep your body running strong, enhance your cognitive abilities, boost your mood, and improve your optimism. Happiness is far more likely to take root and flourish in this kind of nurturing environment.

2. Seed Your Positivity

Just like cultivating a garden with a rich array of exquisite flowers, you can engage in activities that continually seed your inner garden with a wide range of positivity states--from optimism to sheer joy. For example, physical exercise is an excellent way of growing a heightened sense of vitality and contentment in your life. When you swim, jog or play tennis you not only keep your body healthy, but also stimulate your brain's reward center, enlivening your sense of pleasure. When you immerse yourself in the expressive arts--poetry, dance, music--you not only boost your feel-good hormones, but often lose yourself in the moment and open to the experience of 'flow' (more on this later). Humor and playfulness also play an important role in bringing joy and happiness to fruition. By seeding your positivity, you'll feel more awake, more alive, and more enthusiastic. However, if you ignore your joyful nature, hurtful feelings and negative thoughts--like weeds in a neglected garden--can quickly choke-off your capacity to feel lighthearted, joyful, and exuberant.

3. Feed Your Awareness

Happiness has a strong impulse to grow spontaneously and it needs the freedom to do so. But when we cling to limited perceptions of ourselves and the world in an effort to make sense of it all, we create psychological and emotional barriers that often prevent us from flourishing. To grow, you need to let go. But to let go, you must first see what you're hanging on to! That's why the cultivation of 'mindfulness' becomes critical for nurturing a more joyful nature. By feeding your awareness with mindfulness practices, you accomplish several important goals: first, you learn to relax--*totally relax*. With time, you can take a blissful vacation whenever and wherever you want. Secondly, mindfulness means that you develop the capacity to recognize the moment-to-moment cascade of thoughts, feelings and desires that keep you pre-occupied, often burying you in a quagmire of worry, distress and agitation. By feeding your awareness, you nurture an important skill that allows you to more easily identify and let go of those attachments that erode your attention, stifle your growth, and prevent you from living more radiantly. Thirdly, mindfulness plays a central role in opening you to 'flow', allowing your true nature to blossom.

4. Follow the Light

Just as plants exhibit a natural, upward growth toward the sun--the source of vitality and life--humans also have an innate heliotropic tendency to seek-out and follow positive, life-affirming ideas and images. These take many forms--dreams, career goals, cultural and political heroes, fairy tales with happy endings, and epic mythologies that call us to a higher purpose. Visualizing your 'best possible future self' can help feed and nourish positive images of yourself as a whole, healthy, radiant, and beautiful human being. Visualizing in this way can help rewire the brain, creating new neural networks that support behavioral changes critical for leading a healthier, happier life. Picturing a radiant image of yourself, an image enriched with daily affirmations, gratefulness practices, and other positivity exercises, can also serve as a powerful beacon, guiding you along the path to joyful living. It can warm your heart and give you hope, no matter how cold and dark your life might seem.

5. Heighten Your Sensuality

Our mind/body has evolved into an exquisite array of sensory organs and refined forms of consciousness. We both feel and know that we feel. Like a rare orchid, this higher-order 'sentience' is the most distinct expression of our species' uniqueness and beauty, giving us the novel ability to perceive such refined sentiments as empathy, compassion, and love. By staying in touch with your body, playfully exciting your senses, and engaging the world in ways that naturally stimulate your pleasure, you can ensure that your sentience continues to thrive. Massage, for example, is a perfect way to excite your senses and turn-on your brain's pleasure center. A virtual *Miracle-Gro* for heightening sensuality, massage or any form of affectionate touch can immediately increase the level of oxytocin in your blood stream--the powerful hormone that makes us feel closer and more loving. Other activities that promote sensuality are using incense and flower scents around the home, listening to relaxing music, and enjoying fine cuisine. With heightened sensuality, you begin to experience yourself as a lush garden of erotic delights, rather than a mechanical device built only for practical use. You also soften your boundaries of 'self' and 'other', leading to more intimacy in your relationships and a deeper merging with your lover, leading to even more ecstatic states of love-making.

6. Feel the Bliss

But the flowering of happiness into *ecstasy*--the fullest expression of a joyful nature--requires more than a stimulating massage. You must open to *flow*. The state of flow occurs with a single-minded immersion into the present moment so intense that you lose your habitual sense of 'self' and merge with an 'oceanic feeling of oneness'. This merging generates a profound sense of peace, overwhelming joy, even rapture. Yogis, monks and mystics use the term 'ecstatic union' to describe this heightened state of presence (ecstasy means 'to stand outside the ordinary self'.) This is why contemplative practices that center us in the moment, like meditation, prayer, yoga and chanting, play such an important role in most spiritual traditions.

But flow is not confined within the walls of ashrams and monasteries. Flow can occur in all kinds of endeavors where we passionately engage ourselves in the moment--through the arts, in sports, while hiking in the woods, and in various other activities at work, home and play. The concept of flow was developed by researchers at the *University of Chicago* when they began studying the phenomenon experienced by artists who get so immersed in the moment that they disregard their need for food, water and even sleep. Some historians believe that Michelangelo painted the ceiling of the *Sistine Chapel* in a flow state. In

sports, the concept of 'being in the zone' during an athletic performance fits the flow experience. Many musicians and dancers, especially improvisational soloists, perform in this ecstatic state. And flow is certainly the experience that lovers know so well and poets dwell so tenderly upon:

*As the river surrenders itself to the ocean,
what is inside me moves inside you.*

--Kabir

The more your awareness is opened to the present moment and the deeper your connection with the source of Nature itself, the more likely you will blossom into the blissful being you are meant to be.

7. Radiate Your Beauty

Every flower has its own unique set of features that express its beauty. Some give-off a delicate scent. Others radiate a brilliant color. When you cultivate a joyful nature, 'character strengths' (such as sympathy, charity, and loving-kindness) naturally blossom within you, allowing you to express a rich bounty of unconditional love, joy, and happiness. People who radiate such beauty are often said to have "heart" because they make the world a more compassionate, peaceful and inspiring place to live. But then something even more extraordinary begins to happen. As you selflessly share your gifts with others, you are naturally filled with a special joy or elation--the kind that only comes with the profound recognition that, despite our differences, we all share a common bond. Jesus encouraged this blissful exchange with his proverb: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." And *sympathetic joy* is one of the four fundamental virtues taught by Buddha.

Our fragmented, fast-paced culture makes it difficult to develop and maintain authentic happiness. But if you use an enlightened approach to cultivate your joyful nature, you can enjoy the fruits of your labor by living a life full of optimism, joy and pleasure. By carefully tending to your inner garden and 'raising your ecstasy', you can also come to know the fullest expression of yourself as an ecstatic human being and freely experience the sweetness that life has to offer in the here-and-now.

Uncovering Your Natural Gifts

If you're like most people, you probably focus nearly all of your attention on what's wrong with yourself-- your problems, struggles, and stressors-- and lose sight of what is precious and good in yourself. In a manner of speaking, you allow the weeds to take over the gorgeous garden that you are inside! When you place your focus on what's best about you as a human being and shift your focus from what's *wrong* to what's *strong*, your life almost immediately takes a turn for the better. A good way to start 'raising your ecstasy' is to identify those character strengths that are already an essential part of your nature--these are your "natural gifts", those sometimes hidden forces within you that ultimately give your life meaning and measure to your happiness. Once identified, you can apply these strengths more proactively in your life-- to help you find direction, build confidence, lift your spirits, and sustain your happiness.

Where to Begin

Researchers at the *VIA Institute on Character* spent several years exploring what is best about human beings and how to use those best characteristics to develop better lives. They created a comprehensive 140-question online survey that has been used more than 1.3 million times by people worldwide to identify their

personal character strengths. You can take this online character strengths survey and review your results with a professional coach **AT NO COST**. To arrange for your survey and coaching session, contact Paul Nelson, M.Ed. at paul@raisingecstasy.com. Both the survey and coaching session are FREE for a limited time.

Paul Nelson, M.Ed. is a professional life-coach who can help you recover your joy, sustain your happiness, and realize the fullest expression of your ecstatic nature. Before starting his coaching practice, Paul served as a Staff Therapist at a Boston-area mental health center and as a Clinical Research Associate in the Dept. of Psychiatry at *Dartmouth Medical School*. He received his B.A. in Psychology from the *University of Massachusetts* and an M.Ed. in Counseling Psychology from *Harvard University*. Paul also has extensive experience as a *HeartCoach*, helping people with heart disease and associated risks factors make critical lifestyle changes related to nutrition, exercise, smoking and stress (see: heartcoaches.com). Paul received his training as a coach through *iPEC/NE Coaching*, *Wellcoaches Corp.*, and the *Institute of Coaching*.

A life-long student of transpersonal psychology and the world's wisdom traditions, Paul has personally studied with Ram Dass, Trungpa Rinpoche, Joseph Goldstein, Jean Shinoda Bolen, Deepak Chopra, Jean Houston, Dan Goleman, Clarissa Pinkola Estes, Thomas Moore, and native American elder Medicine Story. He has studied *Creation Spirituality* with Matthew Fox, *Tantra* with teachers from the *Divine Feminine Institute*, *A Course in Miracles* with Robert Perry, *Shamanism* with Michael Harner, and the *Abidharma* (the ancient text of Buddhist psychology) with Robert Thurman. Paul has been practicing vipassana meditation for more than twenty-five years.

To arrange for a FREE initial coaching session with Paul via phone or Skype, contact him at paul@raisingecstasy.com.

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