



# EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH CONNECTION

## MOVING LIVES FORWARD

### FIND HAPPINESS IN HARD TIMES...because life is messy

*"I have never seen such a convergence of pillars in our life."* (Dr. Gilliland, clinical psychologist)

"Messy" may be a bit minimalizing considering the last few months have included a global pandemic, police killings and civil unrest. All three, the virus, social injustice and killings, are major issues and they ALL THREE are occurring at the same time. It's no wonder that 75% of people polled report that their mental health is not as good. Again, no wonder! As normal human beings we all experience some fear or anxiety when we feel threatened.

The definition of 'messy' is: a situation that is confused and difficult to deal with.' Herein lies the dilemma i.e. "to deal with." How can we deal with all the issues we are coping with during this time? Is talking about 'happiness' during dark times being self-absorbed or not proper? The answer is "No, we need to focus on happiness now – more than ever!

Laurie Santos, professor from Yale University, says, "Happiness gives us the resilience to get through." Laurie was referring to the mental and physical health crisis. Feeling good and healthy is vital during these times, but happiness? Still, the answer is 'Yes.' Happiness helps create and sustain emotional resilience.

The definition of resilience: Resilience is made up of four pillars: self-awareness, mindfulness, self-care, positive relationships and purpose. The latter is very important because without purpose

we may not have HOPE – which is what helps us be optimistic – even in hard times. The other pillars help form a foundation upon which to build happiness. Happiness cannot be pursued; it must ensue. So, IF we find a reason (purpose) to be happy, one can experience happiness. Or as President Lincoln said, "We are about as happy, as we decide to be."

On a more scientific level, research shows that joy is wired into our genes, brain circuits and biology – an integral part of our health equation. Wow – JOY? Really? Again, 'joy' is defined as a feeling of great pleasure and happiness. In the brain, pleasure has a universal signature: in the nucleus accumbens where there is a release of the neurotransmitter dopamine. Dopamine is so consistently tied with pleasure that neuroscientists refer to this region as the pleasure center.

As interesting as this fact is, the reality of what many are doing to seek pleasure in today's stressful world is not healthy – nor do they provide long-term goal of seeking happiness. The following statistics portray how looking for a sense of 'joy' in "all the wrong places" is actually detrimental to our health and happiness.

#### *Cheryl's Corner of Caring*

*"The happiness of your life depends upon the quality of your thoughts."*  
(Unknown)

# FIND HAPPINESS IN HARD TIMES...*because life is messy*

- Television viewing has increased to 41 hours/week; up almost 30%).
- Video game usage has increased 50%
- Americans spend twice as much money online shopping since the pandemic.
- For 8 weeks, beer sales have topped \$1B – the highest rate ever.
- Unhealthy sleep patterns have emerged for 67% of Americans.
- 76% of Americans have gained weight from mid-March.

Hopefully, we don't fit into too many of these sad statistics, but they do exemplify that during stressful times, human beings tend to seek pleasure in ways that may not promote any long term sense of pleasure/happiness. Personally, I've found that ice cream has become a near daily source of comfort. Tummy loves – not so much the thighs. Thus my lead in to: how can we find bits of happiness and mini doses of joy during stressful times?

We must respect that we each have unique things that make us happy. Some people swear that exercise is the answer; other say 'NOT!' Thousands of

people find joy in music; others love to cook, trying new recipes. Experts state that reading a good book is a way that millions escape to another world and find that great source of entertainment. I tend to agree! Reading an interesting book, sitting out with Mother Nature soothes my soul. Also, one can find happiness in your relationships. Yes this can be a struggle after being quarantined with the same person (people) for weeks.( This one takes work, but so well worth it. Finally, believe that life is rich with many sources of happiness. It's somewhat easy to focus on the "messy" stuff in life, but when we do that it makes it harder to be motivated about anything.

A neuroscientist at the University of California says, "Even in older people, life experiences create brain rewiring that are as important as the circuitry upgrades that turn teenagers into adults and those that promote good parenting after a first baby." Aha, there's the answer – a newborn baby. Now that's true joy!

## SOURCES

<https://www.yaleuniversity.edu>

Train your Brain; Change your Brain (Begley)  
Man's Search for Meaning (Victor Frankl)



# MEET CENTENNIAL'S EARLY CHILDHOOD CONSULTATION TEAM



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