

The Happiness Solution Newsletter

April 2008



Quotes of the Month

You can't buy into one half of
a polarity without getting the other half.
You want good? You've got evil.
You want pleasure? You've got pain.
That's just the way it is.
-Ram Dass

Inner peace is more a question of
cultivating perspective, meaning, and
wisdom even as life touches you with
its pain. It is more a spiritual
quality than a mental quality.
-Rachel Naomi Remen

A Bit of Humor?

Three friends from the local congregation were asked, "When you're in your casket, and friends and congregation members are mourning over you, what would you like them to say?"

Artie said, "I would like them to say I was a wonderful husband, a fine spiritual leader, and a great family man."

Eugene commented, "I would like them to say I was a wonderful teacher and servant of God, who made a huge difference in people's lives."

Al said, "I'd like them to say, 'Look, he's moving!'"

Recent Research

Stress is cumulative. It builds and builds until the proverbial straw breaks the camel's back. We over-value multitasking and often oversubscribe ourselves to too many activities, obligations, and pursuits. Most assuredly, there will be a price to pay for it. Recent research from Johns Hopkins University focused on the impact of stress on cognitive functioning. About a thousand men and women were studied by measuring salivary levels of the stress hormone cortisol. Indeed, stress affects our moods, anxiety levels, attention spans, and how we think. The stressed out cortisol subjects performed worse on just about every measured parameter than did the less stressed subjects. So, don't forget to use your personal days, delegate, ask for support, take a mental health day, use your vacation time, take your vitamins, and get enough sleep and exercise.

Nutrition Corner

Curcumin is the compound that makes the spice turmeric yellow. It is being widely researched as a possible treatment for cancer and Alzheimer's. Bharat Aggarwal, a professor of cancer research says, "Curcumin induces apoptosis, a form of programmed cell death, in the cancer cell. And it slows down the metastasis, or the spread, of cancer cells." Alzheimer's researcher Gregory Cole states, "Curcumin protects the brain cells in every animal model of traumatic brain injury, whether it's stroke, Alzheimer's disease, Huntington's disease, or mad cow disease." Curcumin also may reduce both inflammation and oxidative damage. To get curcumin in your diet, order curry dishes at Indian restaurants. Use yellow mustard or take standardized curcumin extract capsules.

(Please email me about whether you find the Nutritional Corner useful or if you'd rather do without it.)

Story of the Month

"Johnny B. Goode"

The noted psychologist, Daniel Goleman, makes a convincing case that we humans are innately disposed to kindness and empathy. He believes that we are hardwired for altruism. In fact, scientists have traced the beginnings of morality to other primates. Biologists and primatologists have advanced the viewpoint that morality preceded religion by thousands of years. Acting morally was adaptive and increased chances of survival. Religion came later to provide context, rituals and a narrative that houses moral behavior.

Goleman cites the following as being illustrations of instinctive compassion:

- Six rhesus monkeys have been trained to pull chains to get food. At one point a seventh monkey, in full view of the others, gets a painful shock whenever one of them pulls for food. On seeing the pain of that shocked monkey, four of the original rhesus monkeys start pulling a different chain, one that delivers less food to them but that inflicts no shock on the other monkey. The fifth monkey stops pulling any chain at all for five days, and the sixth for twelve days – that is, both starve themselves to prevent shocking the seventh monkey.
- Virtually from birth, when babies see or hear another baby crying in distress, they start crying as though they too are distressed. But they rarely cry when they hear a recording of their own cries. After about fourteen months of age, babies not only cry when they hear another, but they also try to relieve the other baby's suffering somehow. The older toddlers get, the less they cry and the more they try to help.

This hardwiring for altruism is reinforced when we see or hear about acts of courage and kindness. Witnessing someone else's compassionate or helping actions brings about a feeling that psychologists term "elevation." It's a good feeling and sparks the

feeling of also wanting to do something kind or compassionate. It's contagious.

If it's built into our neural architecture to be this way, why aren't we like this all the time? It seems that certain things can short circuit our hardwiring. If we are too rushed, over-stimulated, or too stressed out, the chances are that we will not be as altruistic, kind, and compassionate as we are built to be. Also, if we are wrapped up in our own problems, we tend to be more selfish. Goleman puts it this way:

In short, self-absorption in all its forms kills empathy, let alone compassion. When we focus on ourselves, our world contracts as our problems and preoccupations loom large. But when we focus on others, our world expands. Our own problems drift to the periphery of the mind and so seem smaller, and we increase our capacity for connection - or compassionate action.

So, despite what the eleven o'clock news and the collective media would have you believe, we are generally a loving, kind, compassionate and altruistic species. Yes, we can be apathetic, cold, calculating, and violent in words and deeds, but on any given day, these feelings and behaviors occur much less often than caring and kind acts.

I find this somewhat comforting. We're not so bad after all. We may have bad days when we're nowhere near the top of our game, but basically, we're a decent bunch. Life is difficult, and we can make it easier for ourselves and for each other simply by manifesting our biological hardwiring towards altruism. I'll try to do my part. Think of the ramifications if we all hold up our end of the bargain. Remember, it's contagious. Catch it!

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