

*Learn the
Secrets to Daily Joy
and Lasting
Fulfillment*

HAPPIER

TAL BEN-SHAHAR, Ph.D.



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To my family

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Happiness in Education

Our best chance for happiness is education.

—*Mark Van Doren*

My brother studied psychology at Harvard. Before he came to school, he spent his free time reading psychology, discussing it, writing and thinking about it. As a student, however, he disliked it.

His feeling was not unique: most students dislike schoolwork. What, then, motivates them to devote so much time to their studies? While talking to my brother about his unhappiness at school, I came up with two models that illustrate how students are motivated: the drowning model and the lovemaking model.

The drowning model shows two things: that the desire to free ourselves of pain can be a strong motivator and that, once freed, we can easily mistake our relief for happiness. A person whose head is forced under water will suffer discomfort and pain and will struggle to escape. If, at the last moment, his head is released, he will gasp for air and experience a sense of intoxicating relief.

The situation may be less dramatic for students who do not enjoy school, but the nature of their motivation—the need to avoid a negative consequence—is similar. Throughout the term, drowning in work that they do not enjoy, students are motivated by their fear of failure. At the end of the term, liberated from their books and papers and exams, they feel an overwhelming sense of relief—which, in the moment, can feel a lot like happiness.

This pattern of pain followed by relief is the model that is imprinted upon us from grade school. It is easy to see how, unaware of alternative models, living as a rat racer could seem like the most normal and attractive prospect.

The lovemaking model, however, offers a different way of thinking about learning, one that can encompass both present and future benefit. The many wonderful hours that we put into reading, researching, thinking, and writing can be looked upon as foreplay. The Eureka experience—when the boundary between knowledge and intuition breaks, when we reach a solution to a problem, for instance—is like the climax. As in the drowning model, there is a desirable end goal, but in the lovemaking model, we derive satisfaction from everything we do along the way.

Ensuring that the process of learning is itself enjoyable is, in part, the responsibility of each student, especially in college and graduate school, where they have more independence. Yet by the time students are mature enough to take responsibility for their education, most have already internalized the rat racer's ethos. They learn from their parents that grades and prizes are the measure of success, that their responsibility is to produce outstanding report cards rather than to enjoy learning for learning's sake. Educators—parents and teachers—who care about helping children lead happy lives must first themselves believe that happiness is the ultimate currency. Children are extremely sensitive to cues and will internalize their educators' beliefs even when these beliefs are implicit.

In school, children should be encouraged to pursue the paths that afford them pleasure and meaning. If a student wants to be a social worker and has taken the time to consider the costs and benefits of such a career, then his teachers should encourage him even though he might earn more as an investment banker. If he wants to become a businessman, then his parents should support him, even though their wish had always been that he pursue politics. For parents and teachers who believe that happiness is the ultimate currency, this is the natural and logical thing to do.¹

TIME-IN Think of the best teacher you had in school. What did he or she do to draw the love of learning out of you?

In emphasizing achievements (which are tangible) over the cultivation of a love of learning (which is intangible), schools simultaneously reinforce the rat-race mentality and stifle children's emotional development. The rat racer learns that emotional gratification is secondary to the kind of achievements that others can recognize and validate, that emotions only get in the way of success and are best ignored or suppressed.

The irony is that emotions are necessary not only for the pursuit of the ultimate currency but for the attainment of material success as well. Daniel Goleman, in *Emotional Intelligence*, says, "Psychologists agree that IQ contributes only about 20 percent of the factors that determine success. A full 80 percent comes from other factors, including what I call emotional intelligence." The mind-set of the rat racer is antithetical to emotional intelligence and thus to a happy *and* successful life.

What, then, can teachers and parents do to help students experience pleasure in school and at the same time perform well? How can achievement and the love of learning be reconciled? The work of psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi on "flow" provides us

with important insights and guidelines on how we can create environments at home and school that are conducive to the experience of present and future benefit, pleasure and meaning.

Flow

Flow, according to Csikszentmihalyi, is a state in which one is immersed in an experience that is rewarding in and of itself, a state in which we feel we are one with the experience, in which “action and awareness are merged.”²

We all know what it feels like to be so absorbed in reading a book or writing a paper that we fail to hear our name being called. Or while cooking a meal or talking to a friend or playing basketball in the neighborhood park, we discover that hours have gone by when it seemed that only minutes had passed. These are experiences of flow.

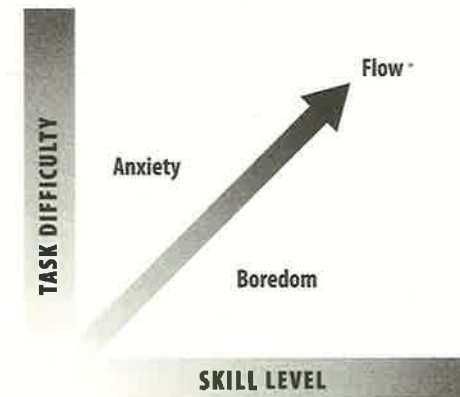
When in a state of flow we enjoy both peak experience *and* peak performance: we experience pleasure and perform at our best. Athletes often refer to this experience as being in the zone. Whatever we do in a state of flow—whether kicking a ball, carving wood, writing a poem, or studying for an exam—we are completely focused on our activity; nothing distracts us or competes for our attention. Performing at our best, we learn, grow, improve, and advance toward our future purpose.

Csikszentmihalyi explains that having goals, having a clear sense of purpose, is necessary in order to attain flow. While goals can and do change over time, the direction of the activity has to be unambiguous while we are performing it. When we are not distracted by all the other possible things we could be doing, when we are wholeheartedly committed to our objective, we are free to devote ourselves fully to the task at hand. As I discussed

earlier in the chapter on goals, having a clear destination in mind liberates us to enjoy the journey. In flow, present and future benefit merge: a clear future goal is not in opposition but rather contributes to the experience of the here and now. Flow experiences lead to higher levels of happiness by transforming the formula of “no pain, no gain” to “present gain, future gain.”

Csikszentmihalyi’s studies of flow show that the “no pain, no gain” model is based on the myth that only through extreme and sustained overexertion can we attain our optimal level of performance. Research on flow shows that pain is not, in fact, the optimal condition for peak performance. Rather, there is a specific zone, the line between overexertion and underexertion, where we not only perform at our best but also enjoy what we are doing. We reach this zone when our activities provide the appropriate level of challenge, when the task at hand is neither too difficult nor too easy.

The graph shows that if the difficulty of a task is high and our skill level is low, then we experience anxiety; if our skill level is high and the difficulty of the task is low, we experience boredom.



We experience flow when the difficulty of the task and our skill level correspond.

TIME-IN When do you experience flow?

Because many students experience either boredom or anxiety in school, they neither enjoy it nor perform at their best. For students to derive more present and future benefit from school, teachers should, whenever possible, structure lessons and activities to meet the skill level of each individual student. As the graph suggests, there are two distinct ways of hurting students' prospects of experiencing flow. First, by creating a stressful environment, leading to anxiety; second, by creating an environment that is devoid of struggle and challenge, leading to boredom.

In the first case, the teacher applies the drowning model to the child's education. The child is pushed too hard, beyond her stretch zone, and schoolwork becomes synonymous with pain, anxiety, and unhappiness. She is encouraged to focus on outcome rather than process, on the destination rather than the journey. The child very quickly becomes a rat racer, finding it hard to experience flow not only in school but also throughout her life—at work and in leisure.

In the second case, rather than overexertion and anxiety, there is underexertion and boredom. The consequences of too little struggle are no less detrimental than too much struggle, and they go beyond flow deprivation. Educators, especially parents, confuse struggle with pain; wanting to protect their children from pain, they cater to their children's every wish and rescue them from every challenge. In trying to provide a "privileged" life for their children, these parents deny them the opportunity to struggle, thereby keeping them from experiencing flow as well as the satisfaction of overcoming challenges.

When I was growing up, my favorite cartoon was *Richie Rich: The Poor Little Rich Boy*, about the struggles of a child who, seemingly, had it all. The oxymoron in the title, of being poor and rich simultaneously, makes perfect sense if we invoke the ultimate currency: in our relatively well-to-do society, we see an increasing number of wealthy children—and adults—who are unhappy. Some refer to this phenomenon as a form of "affluenza"; I have come to think of it as the underprivilege of privilege.

The Underprivilege of Privilege

Samuel Smiles, father of the modern self-help movement, wrote in 1858 that "every youth should be made to feel that his happiness and well-doing in life must necessarily rely mainly on himself and the exercise of his own energies, rather than upon the help and patronage of others." When parents "help" their children circumvent hard work, it can lead to much unhappiness in the long run: "It is doubtful whether any heavier curse could be imposed on man than the complete gratification of all his wishes without effort on his part, leaving nothing for his hopes, desires, or struggles." When challenged, children, like adults, will find meaning in their accomplishments and enjoy the process of attaining their goals.

The underprivilege of privilege can explain, to some extent, why in this culture of relative plenty levels of depression are on the rise and why depression is hitting at a younger age than ever before. Life, for many young people, has quite literally been too easy.

Struggles and hardships and challenges are a necessary component of an emotionally rich life; there are no easy shortcuts to happiness. And yet our immediate response to others' struggles—especially if those others happen to be our children—is to want to make things easier. Letting them struggle when we have the

means to make life easier seems unnatural; but there are times when we have to curb our impulse and allow them the privilege of hardship.

Unhappiness is also common among the rich because they are under increased pressure to feel happy. I've encountered this phenomenon among a number of my students who come from a privileged background. "What possible right or reason," a student would often ask, "do I have to be unhappy?" He feels guilty for being ungrateful, for not fully appreciating his lot in life. Moreover, because he cannot find a good reason for being unhappy, he blames himself for his predicament and feels inadequate. The pressure to be happy—the feelings of guilt and inadequacy in the face of negative emotions—leads to further unhappiness. What he and many others in our material world fail to recognize is that emotions are largely indifferent to material wealth.

Emotions as the Great Equalizer

We all have the capacity for, and we all experience, great pain, great joy, and everything in between. While not all people have the same access to material goods, most have equal access to the ultimate currency. As I pointed out earlier in the book, aside from those who are living under conditions of extreme poverty or political oppression, happiness and unhappiness are equally distributed in the population. In their article "Who Is Happy?" David Myers and Ed Diener summarize research on subjective well-being: "Happiness and life satisfaction are similarly available to the young and the old, women and men, blacks and whites, the rich and the working-class." The ultimate currency is the great equalizer.

In the words of eighteenth-century economist and philosopher Adam Smith, "In what constitutes the real happiness of human

life, they [the poorer class] are in no respect inferior to those who would seem so much above them." While Smith wrote from the vantage point of the privileged class—and with an aloofness characteristic of his time—he is right that we have no reason to believe that the pain or joy of the poor is different in quality or quantity from that of the rich. Once basic needs—food, shelter, and adequate education—are met, not much distinguishes among different income groups in the realm of emotions.

The unhappiness of the rich is no less real, no less natural, no less prevalent than the unhappiness of the poor, and it is therefore no less justified. We all, at different times throughout our lives, experience sadness and anxiety and joy and happiness; depriving ourselves of the permission to experience any or all of these emotions makes us underprivileged in the ultimate currency, whether or not we are materially well-off. No privilege in the world can protect us from experiencing emotional pain, even nihilism at times, and the expectations that it should only leads to further unhappiness. We, regardless of our income and social status, need to give ourselves the permission to be human.³

TIME-IN Do you accept negative emotions as natural or do you reject them? Do you give yourself the permission to be human?

Prejudice Against Work

Csikszentmihalyi's research shows that twelve-year-old children already make a clear distinction between work and play, a distinction that stays with most of us for the rest of our lives. It is very clear to children that their education is about schoolwork, homework, and hard work. Perceiving school as work largely prevents

students from enjoying their educational experience, because there is a society-wide prejudice against work. This prejudice is deeply rooted in the Western psyche and can be traced to our most influential texts.

Adam and Eve lived the quintessential life of leisure—they did not work and did not plan for the future. Yet when they ate the forbidden fruit, they were banished from the Garden of Eden, and they and their descendants were condemned to lives of hard work. The notion of hard work as punishment has become so embedded in our culture that we tend to depict heaven—the ideal place in which we would have the ideal life—as devoid of every hardship, including work. As it turns out, though, here on earth we do need to work to be happy.

In their article “Optimal Experience in Work and Leisure,” Csikszentmihalyi and Judith LeFevre show that people prefer leisure to work, a conclusion that no one would find startling. However, they also discovered something else: that people actually have more flow experiences at work than they do at home.

This paradox—that we say we prefer leisure at the same time that we are having our peak experiences at work—is strange and revealing. It suggests that our prejudice against work, our association of effort with pain and leisure with pleasure, is so deep-rooted that it distorts our perception of the actual experience. When we automatically and regularly evaluate positive experiences at work negatively, simply as a learned response, we are severely limiting our potential for happiness—because in order to be happy we must not only experience positive emotions but also evaluate them as such.

Work can, and ought to, be a place in which we experience positive emotions. In *The Courage to Teach*, educator Parker Palmer writes that “in a culture that sometimes equates work with suffering, it is revolutionary to suggest that the best inward sign of vocation is deep gladness—revolutionary but true.” Our equating

work and effort with pain and suffering poses an internal barrier that prevents many people from experiencing happiness at school and in the workplace.

To help us experience more joy in school and in the workplace, we can cognitively reframe our experience—rid ourselves of the prejudice we have against work. A study run by Donald Hebb back in 1930 can help us understand how this reframing can take place.

Six hundred students between the ages of six and fifteen were told that they no longer needed to do any schoolwork. If they misbehaved in class, their punishment was to go out and play; if they behaved, their reward was getting to do more work. Hebb reports, “In these circumstances, all of the pupils discovered within a day or two that, within limits, they preferred work to no work (and incidentally learned more arithmetic and so forth than in previous years).” If we can learn to reframe our work and our education as a *privilege* rather than as a *duty*—and do the same for our children—we will be much better off in the ultimate currency. Not only that, but we will also learn more and perform better.

TIME-IN Can you learn to see your experience of school or work as a privilege? What do you, or can you, enjoy in this experience?

When our vision of happiness is rigid—when it precludes the possibility that effort and struggle can be sources of the ultimate currency—we overlook some of the best prospects we have to create a fulfilling life. In school or at work, we fail to recognize and realize opportunities for happiness; outside of school and work, we squander our “free” time by freeing it of effort, of challenge, and, hence, of much meaning. We are then left with a feeling that happiness is hopelessly elusive.

Education, at its best, ought to help students prosper materially and emotionally. To do so, schools must focus on more than the technical aspects of education—they must go beyond the three *Rs* (*wRiting, Reading, and aRithmetic*). I suggest a fourth *R*: *Revelry*. Teachers need to create the conditions in school that will allow students to revel in learning, in growing, in life itself. Most of us spend many years in the classroom, and many of our expectations and habits are established during these formative years. If, in school, students are encouraged to pursue happiness, to focus on activities that will generate the ultimate currency, they are more likely to do the same throughout their lives; if, on the other hand, all they do is race like rats, from one grade to the next, they are more likely to continue along this path long after graduation day.

Rather than helping students find meaningful and challenging goals and activities, rather than helping students experience the joy of learning, many educators are more concerned with getting students to score well on exams. Csikszentmihalyi writes:

Neither parents nor schools are very effective at teaching the young to find pleasure in the right things. Adults, themselves often deluded by infatuation with fatuous models, conspire in the deception. They make serious tasks seem dull and hard, and frivolous ones exciting and easy. Schools generally fail to teach how exciting, how mesmerizingly beautiful science or mathematics can be; they teach the routine of literature or history rather than the adventure.

The love of learning is hardwired: young children are always asking questions, are always eager to find out more about the world around them. Educators who support children in the pursuit of the things that are important to them and who help chil-

dren attain flow experiences cultivate this innate love of learning. They can turn education into a mesmerizingly beautiful adventure—the lifelong pursuit of the ultimate currency.

EXERCISES

●● Education Program

The most successful people are lifelong learners; they constantly ask questions and never cease to explore the wonder-filled world around them. Regardless of where you are in life—whether you are fifteen or a hundred and fifteen, whether you are going through a rough patch or are thriving—create an education program for yourself.

Your program can include the following two categories: personal development and professional development. Under each category, commit to learning material that will yield both present benefit (that you enjoy reading and thinking about) as well as future benefit (that will contribute to your overall growth). Ritualize your program by putting aside regular times each week for your education.

For example, under the personal development category, commit to reading Nathaniel Branden's *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem* and doing the sentence-completion program in it. In addition, pledge to take a positive psychology course at your local college and to keep a personal journal. For professional development, you may wish to seek out a mentor whom you trust, as well as read up on the latest developments in your industry.

●● The Privilege of Hardship

While I do not believe that things necessarily happen for the best, I know that some people are able to make the best of things that happen. Hardship, which we would never voluntarily invite into our

life, can play an important role in our development; a struggle-free life is not always the best thing for us.

Write about a difficult experience that you went through—a particular failure or a longer period during which you struggled. After describing it in as much detail as possible, write about some of the lessons and benefits that came about as a result of the experience. Without minimizing or trivializing the pain associated with the experience, write down what profits, especially in the ultimate currency, you were able to eventually derive. Did it make you more resilient? Did you learn important lessons? Are you more appreciative of certain things now? Are there other lessons that you can learn from it?

If you do this exercise in a group, help one another identify more benefits that can be derived from the experience. Make the most of the difficulty. As my colleague Anne Harbison once said, "Never let a good crisis go to waste."

2. I highly recommend doing a longer sentence-completion program, such as the one found in Nathaniel Branden's *Six Pillars of Self-Esteem* or online. For example, see nathanielbranden.com/catalog/articles_essays/sentence_completion.html.

Chapter 5

1. For a good overview of the academic literature, see Locke, E. A., and Latham, G. P. (2002). Building a Practically Useful Theory of Goal Setting and Task Motivation: A 35-Year Odyssey. *American Psychologist*, 57(9), 705–717.
2. See Rosenthal, R., and Jacobson, L. (1968). *Pygmalion in the Classroom: Teacher Expectation and Pupils' Intellectual Development*. Holt, Reinhardt and Winston; and Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*. W. H. Freeman and Company.
3. Philip Stone introduced me to the idea of being while doing.
4. In his book *Happiness*, Matthieu Ricard points out the problem with the expression “killing time.” Ricard, M. (2006). *Happiness: A Guide to Developing Life's Most Important Skill*. Little, Brown and Company.
5. For a more elaborate process, see Chapter 11 of *Built to Last*. Collins, J., and Porras, J. I. (2002). *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*. HarperCollins.
6. Research in the area of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, L. [1957]. *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Stanford University Press) and self-perception theory (Bem, D. J. [1967]. Self-Perception: An Alternative Interpretation of Cognitive Dissonance Phenomena. *Psychological Review*, 74, 183–200) suggests that when we endorse a certain position, our commitment to the position is strengthened. So if we tell others how important the ultimate currency is and remind them to

pursue meaningful and pleasurable activities, we are making it more likely that we ourselves pursue activities that will make us happier.

Chapter 6

1. I am not advocating a laissez-faire approach to education in which parents simply cater to their children's whims, allowing them to indulge their immediate likes or dislikes. The most successful educators find a balance between externally imposed boundaries and democratic practices, between firmness and allowing for independence. For a more in-depth discussion of child rearing and educational practices, see Lillard, P. P. (1996). *Montessori Today: A Comprehensive Approach to Education from Birth to Adulthood*. Schocken Books; and Ginott, H. G. (1995). *Teacher and Child: A Book for Parents and Teachers*. Collier Books.
2. Csikszentmihalyi's work on flow has wide implications for the individual and for society. For a more complete discussion, see Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1998). *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life*. Basic Books.
3. I will elaborate on this and other related ideas in much greater depth in my forthcoming book *The Permission to Be Human*.

Chapter 7

1. Survey conducted by the Conference Board (2005). See online report: conference-board.org/utilities/pressDetail.cfm?press_ID=2582.
2. See Wrzesniewski, A., and Dutton, J. E. (2001). Crafting a Job: Revisioning Employees as Active Crafters of Their Work. *Academy of Management Journal*, 26, 179–201. Originally, the distinction between a job, a career, and a calling was made in