

He said...

The Pursuit of Happiness and Other Oddities



"The three stepping stones to recovery are acceptance, forgiveness and letting go." – Brian Damon

I often ask patients where is the happiest place on Earth? Their answers range from a neighbor's home, where people smile a lot, to some place found in nature and even the headquarters of the mega dollar lottery, where they hand out all those big checks.

Actually, the happiest place on Earth is Denmark, according to a study that was completed a few years ago. Why Denmark? The study revealed that people who live in Denmark set lower expectations for themselves and others. As a result of these lower expectations, things turn out much more often than not. Could happiness really be that simple?

Well, maybe so, if I am in control of the expectations I set. Now, others may try to influence my expectations, but ultimately they are mine and mine alone to make. And as long as my expectations are not for others, but for myself, requiring only my efforts, my changes and my decision-making, they will be 100% manageable. So, if accepting less leads to a whole lot more, happiness that is, why not?

Acceptance is really a much broader subject than just expectations. Can I accept my spouse the way he or she is without trying to change them? Is accepting less than perfection seem like something outside of my realm? Can I accept that the past will never change? Will accepting less or accepting things as they are be the death of us all? Maybe not.

If accepting less decreases stress and enhances happiness, maybe the opposite is true. Lowering our expectations for ourselves and others could extend our lives and enhance the overall quality of life.

Now what about forgiveness? In his book "Dare To Forgive," Dr. Edward Hallowell says that "letting go of anger and the desire for revenge results in emotional growth and a higher degree of happiness." There's that "H" word, again. I tell my patients that when we forgive, we do so for ourselves first, not for others. Whoever wronged us is just as responsible for what they did after we forgive them as they were before. Forgiveness is the gift to ourselves that just won't stop giving and according to Hallowell "is never impossible."

Hallowell identifies a four step process for achieving what he describes as true forgiveness. First, we must feel the pain of being wronged. Second, we need to relive and reflect on this pain. Third, we need to work through our anger and resentment, and fourth, we need to renounce that anger and resentment.

Hallowell recommends before we forgive others, we forgive

ourselves. So end the suffering by experiencing the freedom of forgiveness, allow peace to descend and let's move on to letting go.

How do we know if we need to let go of something? While there is no single answer that's a good fit for every situation, consider this. If something from our past is getting in the way of living today to the fullest, maybe we need to let go. Holding on to the past interferes with living in the present, and we can only manage the here and now. Letting go of unmanageables, such as situations, things, memories, people, mistakes and even our old selves, can be just the ticket.

Oprah suggests, "Breathe and let go. Remind yourself that this very moment is the only one you have for sure." Living in the past or in the future prevents us from living today. It has been said that forgiveness and letting go are steps on the road back to our happiness. Sounds great to me!

Well, there you have it. What kind of a difference could acceptance, forgiveness and letting go make in your life? That sure is something to ponder. Thanks for listening.

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