

Live according to your values

When I refer to values, I'm not talking about morals or anyone's concept of what's right and wrong. Instead I mean all that which you consider important in your life (ie. what you value). On your list of life values might be such things as travel, being active, having close friendships, earning enough to pay your bills as well as save, being a good parent, being healthy and fit, gaining status in your job, etc.

There are no 'correct' items for this list as everyone's will be unique to them personally. It is also likely that your values will change somewhat over your lifetime.

You may have a bit of an idea about what your values are, but have you actually sat down and written the full list out? Have you any idea which values are the most important to you? And do you know *why* you have chosen these values ... and not others?

If you're living a life in which you are not satisfying your top values, there's a big chance you'll feel dissatisfied or 'flat' in life and possibly even disheartened and wondering "What's the point?" However, once you get clear about what your values are, and have a realistic strategy for being able to live according to them (as much as is within your power) you'll find things start fitting into place and you'll notice that life becomes fulfilling at a deeper level than before.

Have goals – and reach them

Let's say you've sussed out what your values are and you're now trying to figure out how to put some kind of plan in place to boost life satisfaction and feel on track. Do you notice however that you sometimes sabotage your goals or get off track or find it hard to pin point exactly how to create the life you want?

Some people at this point give up on goals and decide just to see what life throws their way. While having the ability to roll with unexpected life events and being flexible to let go of control is really important, so too is having at least some kind of idea of where you want to head (if it's at all important to you that you get there).

You may have heard of SMART goals (Making sure it's specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time limited). And yet when you set goals, do you also consider the full consequences of what life would be like if you achieved that goal? Having a 'consequence check' is super important and is the reason behind a lot of failed goals.

Work out how to set goals in a way that you are most likely to achieve them and you will enjoy feeling like the author of your life; able to steer yourself in the direction you want and able to thus reap the rewards once you get there!

Know where you belong – build a sense of community

Studies on centenarians (people living over 100) in so-called 'Blue Zone' countries repeatedly report on the importance of community for health and well-being. Remember in the history of human-kind it is only really recently that we have been living increasingly isolated lives. While time alone is important to recharge our batteries (especially if you are more introverted according to the Myers Briggs/Jung model), *too* much time by ourselves disconnected from others can lead to loneliness in many people which in turn can contribute to depression and even social anxiety.

So value and nurture your friends and family and if you don't have much in the way of social connections already, then make it a priority by joining local clubs, meetup groups, organisations, courses and expand your

social time. You may have to be courageous and patient before you have built up a sense of community, but it's important, so better to start sooner rather than later.

Focus on long term health not only short term gain

This is something that I personally feel very strongly about. In my mind, there's practically no point in having an awesome set of muscles and a slim body if you have created that outcome by eating and exercising in a unsustainable way which will lead to health issues when you're older.

The danger with overdoing any health effort is that you may cause damage to your body in the process – not providing the nutrition your body and brain needs, wearing down joints or solidifying postures and movements that will cause pain and issues for us down the road.

You don't have to agree with me on this one because I know that some people live by the saying "Live hard and fast" and aren't interested in living long and well. But if you do hope to be strong and healthy – physically and mentally in your older years, you may wish to reconsider how you are living now; checking that it supports your health later as well as now.

Develop supportive self talk

The one person who will be there for every event in your life is you. The way you think and 'talk' to yourself (that mindless chatter that we do), has a big impact on how you feel. It has the power to lift you up when you're down and give you encouragement when facing something new or challenging. Your self talk can be a source of self-soothing and love and via your internal chatter you can be your best friend. Is this the role of your self talk already? Or do you find yourself judging yourself, putting yourself down and demoralising yourself?

Having good self talk is a skill and it can be learned. One way to start is to take a sheet of paper and divide it into 5 columns. Carry it around with you and throughout the day, when you notice that you've had an unsupportive or downright negative thought about yourself, jot the exact thought down along with what the situation was, what the underlying emotions were, the factual information and then formulate a positive supportive thought you could give yourself in that moment instead.

Situation	Negative thought	Underlying emotion	Factual information	New positive thought option
Example: Late to work	I'm never going to be on time – or good as the rest of my colleagues	Fear of being fired, frustrated at my lack of organisation	I was 10 minutes late because I got distracted again this morning	It's ok. They're not going to fire me for being 10mins late. I do want to be punctual, so I will change my usual leave time for 10 minutes earlier

Practice going through this form and formulating alternative supportive thoughts. If you find it challenging, ask yourself what you'd tell a friend in that situation. The more often you practice this way of thinking, the more you will strengthen that mental pathway and ultimately reprogramme your thinking.

Learn from your emotions – all of them

Do you know and benefit from the positive messages in all of your emotions? Or do you fight against or run away from some, trying to push them down or numb them because they are too confronting or unpleasant or even painful?

Although some people long for non-stop happiness, we can't be happy all the time in life. It would actually be odd if you were. For example, it makes sense that losing someone you love would bring up emotions of grief and sadness, right? Similarly, it is perfectly normal for us to feel some nervousness when we try something new that is also important to us - like going on a first date with someone or having a job interview. Did you know that many professional musicians say that having some nervousness before a show actually helps them focus and perform their best?

Learning to accept our full range of emotions as human beings and soften our experience of them by connecting in with the positive message is a great way to benefit and learn. It helps us connect in with ourselves, connect with that which is important to us and doing so we can also get hints about how we want to live.

Clean up negative beliefs about self and the world

Sometimes people say "I'll believe it when I see it", whereas a truer statement is actually that we see what we believe. Does that make sense? For example, anyone who's started thinking about having a baby will attest to suddenly noticing all of the pregnant women around them who previously they didn't notice. Similarly if you have the negative or 'limiting' belief that all men are cheaters, or the world is a dangerous place, or that people are judging you in public, you will notice 'evidence' that supports your belief.

Take the example of believing that 'Getting fat is inevitable as we age'. It is true that many people have experienced weight gain as they age and that our metabolism shifts over time. The idea however that getting fat is inevitable is actually not a fact but a belief. If it were a fact, literally everyone over a certain age would be fat in every country around the world. By realising that thoughts such as this are actually beliefs, we free ourselves up to choose an alternative. In this case we could shift the belief to 'It is possible to maintain a healthy weight as I age'. Making this change opens the mind up to noticing older people who were maintaining a healthy weight or improving their fitness as they age and to learn from their strategies.

Note: Sometimes limiting beliefs can stem from negative or traumatic experiences in our past and it may be important to reprogramme the way that we are storing the memory and identify what we want to learn from it in order to free up the possibility to reassess and come up with new supportive beliefs.

Spend time in nature

We know instinctively that we feel better after spending time in nature and research increasingly supports this knowledge with scientific evidence that it is good for us. Don't get too caught up in whether you have easy access to the beach or forest - a local park or backyard can be just as good and definitely better than staying indoors all day. Even a view of the outdoors or a picture of nature is beneficial.

Walking among trees (sometimes called Forest Bathing) has been shown to improve memory, decrease the heart rate, reduce inflammation in the body, increase our ability to focus, soothe mental illness and lower cortisol levels – one of the hormonal markers for stress. The Journal of Environmental Public Health highlighted the importance of direct physical contact with the earth – skin to earth – to connect with the electrons on the surface of the earth for wellness; better sleep, reduced pain and help in neutralising free radicals.

If you work long hours in an office, live in a city and don't spend as much time as you would like in nature there is evidence to show that looking at a nature scene even if it is just a picture can give us a boost when feeling 'mental fatigue' and that having a view of nature out of your office window is associated with lower stress and higher job satisfaction.

Don't blindly follow others "shoulds"

There are a lot of messages that we get from others throughout life about how we 'should' behave, how we 'should' respond, how we 'should' think and feel. As a 5 year old, you probably reacted to people telling you that you should do something by saying "But why?" While it's not always appropriate (or useful) as an adult to have that 5 year old response out loud, we encourage you to continue – at least to yourself – asking "Why?" "Why should I?" "According to whom?"

The reason why this can be such a useful question to ask ourselves as we consider others' advice is that it helps us reflect on the message and whether it makes sense to us. Over the years, we've both worked with people who have struggled in life because they've been blindly following a path that someone else told them they "should" follow. Only once they questioned the "should", realised that there are many more options, and gave themselves permission to explore for themselves what felt right for them personally and the life they wanted to lead, were they able to start living a more free and satisfying life.

Learn communication skills – I messages, reflective listening, problem ownership

To boost satisfaction in your job, relationships and with the way you are presenting yourself in the world, we encourage you to become familiar with and use effective communication skills. Knowing how to help someone you love feel that you are really listening to them and that you care for them is at the heart of any successful relationship.

Learn how to listen reflectively, how to give an effective 'I-statement' and understand the problem ownership model as well as how to respond to maximise connection and working together and you will find it easier to work through conflicts and challenges in all areas of life.

Be yourself – not a facade you put up

Who are you? Do you show your true self to the world? The risk in playing a character of who you would like to be rather than who you really are is that you are likely to end up making friends with people who like you not for who you are, but for who they think you are. This can feel lonely – as if they aren't really your friends and can make revealing yourself harder as time passes.

What happens if people don't like the real you? There's a saying floating around the web about finding your tribe. We're all wacky in our own unique ways and by embracing yourself fully and expressing that to the world, you give 'your tribe' a great chance to recognise you for someone they connect with and truly want to hang out with. Over time, that will give you a strong sense of belonging which has shown to be important for health and well-being.

Indulge in moments of mindfulness daily – even if it's just for a few minutes at a time!

If you're living in the modern world, chances are you're really busy and have the feeling that there isn't enough time in the day. That can feel pretty stressful and tiring and can lead to us forgetting to pay attention to all the wonderful moments in our lives. A good long term approach is to look at how you can make tiny tweaks to your lifestyle to give yourself more balance but in the meantime, how about practising mindfulness?

When was the last time you really enjoyed a shower and felt the water as it washed down your body? When your child wants to show you something they find funny, do you give yourself the moment to pause to laugh with them? Do you scoff down your dinner, or enjoy the unique textures and tastes? If your partner gives you a hug, do you literally embrace the body contact or give a quick press back as you rush out the door? Learning to focus our attention however and find a sense of being in the now has the benefit of being able to take a break even during the busiest of days and find joy and serenity for one moment at a time.

Happiness can be a choice. A choice of what we focus on and whether we give ourselves the time to be happy and content in any given moment because of what we choose to notice and to feel in ourselves.

Try this: At any time during your day, just pause for a minute or two. Tune into your senses and notice what you are seeing around you, hear the sounds, feel your breath and any other body sensations and perhaps take a deep breath or two. And then get back into it. Notice the difference?

A final note:

Of course there are many more ways in which you can increase feelings of happiness and contentment in life. Depending on what's important in life for you personally, there will be additional actions that you can take on a regular basis to put a smile on your face. We encourage you to try out the ideas above and keep exploring and experimenting to find even more to add to your toolbox.

Warm regards,
Maree Stachel-Williamson
nWow! Counselling & Coaching
www.nwow.co.nz