



Happy Hour

We search for happiness in eager anticipation and joyful memories, but we're better off paying attention to each moment as it passes.

By Carlin Flora Photograph by Michael Elins



We never learn to predict what will make us happy, or how to anticipate the impact of major life experiences.



ASON CARPENTER was one of *those* Red Sox fans—determined, passionate and absolutely convinced that a World Series win would be a life-changing event. The baseball team famously botched an easy win during the 1986 championships, and Carpenter, 13 at the time, broke down in sobs. Yet he never gave up on his dream: that the Red Sox would one day prove they deserved his unwavering devotion. “I imagined crying with happiness,” he says. Last fall, Carpenter, now 31 and living in New York City, saw his dream come true when his team beat the Yankees—their blood rivals—in the league championships, after the biggest comeback in baseball history. Carpenter was over the moon. “I went nuts with 200 of my closest ‘strangers,’ all displaced Boston fans, partying in the streets deep in the heart of enemy territory until 4 A.M.”

With the next morning, though, came the darker side of triumph. Carpenter’s elation had worn off. “I was wondering what to do with myself. I was depressed.” Years of longing for a win had boiled down to a fleeting moment of bliss. What Carpenter had believed his whole life would make him happy actually happened—and then he faced...nothingness.

The things we expect will bring us lasting joy rarely do. Whether it’s losing 25 pounds, getting a major promotion or watching a troupe of perennial losers finally win the big one, long-anticipated events give us a swell of glee...and then we settle back into being just about as happy as we’ve always been. Most of us have a happiness “set point,” fixed by temperament and early life experience, which is very difficult to shift. Whether you win the lottery or wind up in a wheelchair, within a year or two you generally end up just about as happy (or unhappy) as you started out.

Yet the quest for happiness isn’t futile. Psychologists now believe that many of us

can turn the well-being thermostat up or down a few notches by changing how we think about anticipation, memory and the present moment. Our sense of well-being is intimately tied into our perception of time. The problem is that we usually get it wrong. Memory tricks us—we don’t remember our experiences properly, and that leaves us unable to accurately imagine the way we’ll feel in the future. At the same time, expectations mislead us: We never learn to predict what will make us happy, or how to anticipate the impact of major life experiences.

Focusing on the moment may help us understand how to be happy. Besides, we have a built-in tendency to grow more cheerful as we get older: Aging helps us ignore the negative and shift our attention toward the positive. Finding happiness isn’t hopeless—it seems to be just a question of time.

YOUTH IS A DOWNER, it turns out. Young people naturally pay more attention to the negative. Older people are faster than younger people to orient to smiling faces rather than scowling ones in advertisements, finds Linda Carstensen, a professor of psychology at Stanford who studies how age influences time perception and goals. Similarly, young people are quicker to pick up on negative stimuli. This youthful attention to the bad may be a necessary part of growing up—a cognitive mechanism that helps with survival. Since the young are focused on new (and therefore possibly dangerous) experiences and acquaintances, they may be more likely to put themselves in harm’s way. “Young people need to take risks, and as such, they need to pay attention to the potentially negative, to recognize the lion or bear that is going to jump out at them,” Carstensen explains. As we grow older, though, we are increasingly drawn to the familiar, like close friends and relatives. If given a chance to

meet either their favorite author or a close friend for lunch, younger people chose the former, while older people preferred the latter.

Carstensen's findings shatter the stereotype of seniors as a crabby bunch. When she spent one week frequently monitoring the moods of 184 adults, aged 18 to 94, she saw that older people experienced highly positive emotional experiences for longer periods of time than younger people, and their highly negative emotional experiences subsided more quickly. In other research, she showed that their memories were in general more positive. The sunny habit of revising history may explain why seniors tend not to wallow in bad moods: Pleasant memories are always invading their thoughts, and these fond recollections may "wash away" anger or sadness. "There is no empirical evidence that older people are grouchy," she says, although personality studies have revealed that they do tend to care less about what other people think of them.

Carstensen thinks this shift toward the positive occurs because as we age, we become aware, consciously or not, that time is running out. The awareness of life's fragility turns our attention to the present moment, so we worry less. The potential missteps and possible catastrophes that cloud a young person's vision of the future fade away. "If you think about the things you worry about—getting a job, finding a mate or an apartment—they are almost always concerns about the future," she says. The gap between ambition and achievement, a major source of stress and unhappiness for young people, also narrows with age. As we get older, we either achieve our goals or replace them with more reachable aims.

Older people's positivity bias can even boost their memories. The elderly generally

Our perceptions of happiness are as varied as our life stories. *PT* talks fulfillment with five people: a dot-com millionaire who lost his riches, a Nobel laureate who thinks that time is happiness, an autistic who believes she experiences joy as do animals, a tribal leader who went from a humble childhood to a Harvard Ph.D. and an organ donor for whom generosity is the height of bliss. Interviews by Carlin Flora, Hara Estroff Marano and Kathleen McGowan.



THE COMPULSIVE PHILANTHROPIST

Real estate investor Zell Kravinsky gave more than \$40 million to charity—and then donated one of his kidneys to a stranger. He would have given away more organs and the rest of his fortune, had his family not stopped him.

[Giving my kidney away] did give me joy. I anticipated that it would, and it was not a letdown. That joy still comes back from time to time. It was unselfish, and that can't be taken away by subsequent events. It gives me a security. In theory, I can't get too depressed because I did this one good thing.

My claim is that my aim in life is not happiness but goodness. I can't conceive of any purpose in life, if not moral advancement.

When I see my daughter in a dance recital, for example, that's fantastic—that is a joy. So I don't think life is joyless, but I don't think people are happy.

If you could wake up completely concerned with others' well-being, if you were relieved of the burden of thinking of yourself—that would be happiness.

I would rather my kids be good than happy. For me, the worst parental anxiety is that I would have a child who would hurt others. Nothing they could do would diminish my love for them, but if one of them had no conscience it would be hard to be happy. And it would remind me of my own flaws. But they are sweet kids.

There's no happiness in greed. Getting the thing that you desire never brings happiness.



THE REAL-LIFE DR. DOOLITTLE

Animal behaviorist Temple Grandin believes that being autistic helps her understand what animals feel—what scares them and what makes them happy. In *Animals in Translation*, her latest book, she says that both autistics and animals think in pictures, not words. Her animal handling systems, which keep livestock calm, are widely used in slaughterhouses and feedlots.

As an autistic person, I do have emotions. But I don't feel mixed emotions. I can be angry, get over it and everything's fine. That's the way a dog is; he can be snarling one moment and get over it the next.

I think [animal happiness] is like a young child having a really good time playing. They chase each other around, climb over stuff—they're so happy they want to kick up their heels.

I've been a pretty happy person. I'm also very much a realist. I get satisfaction when I go to a plant now and it works so well, the cattle aren't scared. I get happy from seeing concrete improvements.

[I used to have] extreme anxiety attacks. It was like constant stage fright, as if I were in a room with a lion. That's the way I used to feel all the time. I controlled it with antidepressants. They don't make me happy—they relieve the anxiety.

do poorly on tests of short-term memory. But when Joseph Mikels, a post-doctoral fellow in psychology at Stanford and researcher in Carstensen's lab, showed them joyful scenes of babies and puppies, older adults demonstrated better visual memory than their younger counterparts. He theorizes that they are able to overcome their cognitive handicaps because they are highly motivated to remember images that match up with their personal goals of fostering warm relationships.

These cheerful habits of mind can also be adopted by young people, especially when a chapter of life is coming to a close. Think of getting ready to move to a new city. Annoyances or grudges toward local friends recede; memories of good times flood your mind. Your awareness that your time with them is finite pushes the things you'll miss about them to the foreground, and the present

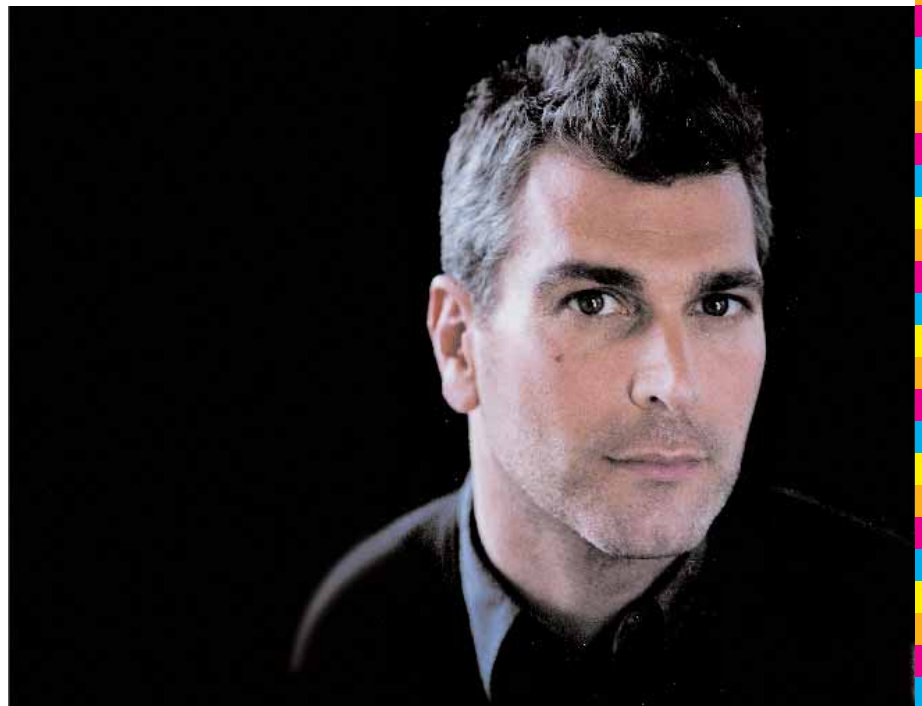
Our aging brains undergo a cognitive shift, urging us to pay more attention to good things and to focus more on the moment.

moment comes more clearly into focus. Mikels says that conjuring this state of mind, simply by appreciating life's brevity, could help young people find the contentment that comes more naturally to their elders.

Carstensen and her team are now studying Buddhist meditators, to see how their practice alters their perception of time. Her theory is that meditation may cultivate a mind-set similar to an old person's, since it shuts out thoughts of the past and the future in favor of the present. "The religion is centered around the fact that we could die at any moment," she says.

Related research by psychologist Richard Davidson at the University of Wisconsin has in fact shown that meditation may change how the brain works. He measured brain activity in people who had finished eight weeks of meditation training and found significantly more activity in the left prefrontal cortex, a region associated with positive feelings and pursuit of goals. More recently, Davidson traveled to India to measure the brain activity of Buddhist monks who had each spent at least 10,000 hours in meditation. The activity in their left prefrontal cortex far exceeded that in their right prefrontal cortex, which is the brain's home for negative emotions and anxiety. Most of us don't have 10,000 free hours to devote to brain resculpturing. But the finding suggests that if we train ourselves to become more mindful and slow down our sense of passing time, we can learn to monitor our moods and thoughts before they spiral downward. We can, in other words, make ourselves happier.

IN THE QUEST for happiness, most of us try to guess what the future might bring, then project our current selves—with all of our hopes, quirks and predilections—into that unknown. We use a fuzzy image of the future to make all kinds of decisions, whether it's what to make for dinner or whom to marry. Those predictions are essential to happiness—and



THE VIRTUAL MILLIONAIRE

Writer James Marcus joined Amazon.com as a book reviewer in the fall of 1996, grateful to earn a paltry salary. Within three years his stock options were worth \$9 million. Then, as Marcus details in his recent memoir, *Amazonia*, the bubble burst and the money vanished.

[When I started at Amazon], I was just a naïve freelance writer who knew nothing about stock options. I had this vague idea that people at Microsoft get rich, but I didn't know how.

My personal life was in terrible shape during that entire five-year period. There was a chronic illness in my family, and then my marriage of 13 years fell apart. It put what was happening in the professional world in perspective. I was a really unhappy, anxious person a lot of that time.

Because the money never quite seemed real to me, it made it somewhat less painful to see it go. It's a totally different situation from, say, if I'd spent 20 years building a steel refinery and it went out of business. This was more akin to winning the lottery. Except everyone had won the lottery.

I think it's a terrible habit to postpone your happiness. I did that a lot. I [felt] I shouldn't blow money, because it could all disappear tomorrow.

Everybody who publishes a book discovers that once your book goes out into the world, it doesn't change the conditions of your life very much. I was prepared for that. I didn't think I'd be parading around New York City in a gold lamé suit signing autographs.



THE FIRST LADY

The oldest of eight brothers and sisters, Erma Vizenor has had plenty of “firsts”: first in her family to graduate from high school, the first to get a Harvard Ph.D., and now, the first female leader of the White Earth Ojibwe, the largest Native American group in Minnesota. Vizenor, 60, was recently elected chairwoman—defeating a political rival who served prison time for misapplying federal funds. Her goal: to reform local government.

We grew up very, very poor. My dad was a seasonal worker, so we followed the seasons from the potato fields to the [wood] pulp camps to the wild rice harvest. I would change schools many times a year, but I loved to learn.

To lead a nation of people where unemployment is 65 percent, where mental depression is the number one health issue, diabetes is rampant, high blood pressure, cancer...is very, very challenging.

To accomplish the things I want to accomplish, I'd need to live three lives. I still want to become a priest, I want to start a school, a little one-room schoolhouse. [But] if I lived my life over, I'd do exactly the same thing.

In 1998, my husband passed away. He was my best friend and my greatest supporter. We spent most of our lives together. There was an adjustment time, and still is. I no longer have someone to come home to. I don't think that has changed my life. It has probably made me stronger—I'm a single parent now for my two daughters and four grandchildren.

they are almost always wrong, finds Daniel Gilbert, professor of psychology at Harvard. As a result, our efforts to improve our lives often fall flat.

Working with Tim Wilson, professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, Gilbert has shown that we are remarkably bad at “affective forecasting,” or predicting how we'll feel in the future. The good things are never as good as we imagine they'll be; the bad things are never as bad. We think of ourselves as both more fragile and more easily satisfied than we really are. We overestimate the impact of a good turn of event: We think that a fresh career or a new relationship will permanently change us, when all it does is provide a short-term mood boost. On the other hand, we are also much more resilient than we give ourselves credit for. Most of us do recover emotionally from life's traumas, whether it's the death of a close friend or a bitter divorce.

“Memory is a flawed partner to anticipation,” explains Gilbert. “If I ask you to remember a terrorist attack, you will instantly think of Sept. 11, not because it's a prototypical act of terrorism but because it's so unrepresentative.” But if your memory provides you with the example of Sept. 11 as a representative for all terrorist attacks, you're very likely to mispredict how you'll feel in response to future attacks. You expect that you will feel the way you did after Sept. 11, yet because the vast majority of terrorist attacks are very small and involve the loss of relatively few lives, you would probably be a lot less upset and recover more quickly. The bright side to forecasting errors like this is that they expose our built-in psychological immune system, as Gilbert calls it, which ensures we will survive future horrors we can't predict.

There are many other reasons why we have such trouble imagining how we'll feel in the future: We don't account for our own internal spin-room, the rationalization techniques we use to explain away bad situations. (“She wasn't right for me anyway.”) We also tend to anticipate the most dramatic symbol of a future event. If it's a promotion, for example, we fantasize about the moment the boss breaks the news. What we forget is that life goes on after the congratulatory handshake—there will still be a job to do, a commute to endure and a family to raise.

Even simple choices between concrete alternatives are plagued by forecasting errors, shows Christopher Hsee, an economist from the University of Chicago. As a result, we have

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THE SCHOLAR OF DELIGHT

Although he never took a course in economics, Princeton research psychologist Daniel Kahneman won the Nobel Prize in economics in 2002 for demonstrating that people make nonrational decisions when facing financial risk. Kahneman has recently extended his research into the daily choices that influence our sense of well-being.

One thing I learned when my children were small was that trying to read when I was in their presence was really not worth it, because I wasn't enjoying the reading and I wasn't enjoying them. The issue is attention, distinguishing focal experiences from peripheral experiences. When they're in the background, they're preventing you from attending to what you would like to attend to, and that is intensely frustrating. On the other hand, they're intensely satisfying when you're focusing on them.

I didn't forecast the major source of the high in winning the Nobel Prize, which was the pleasure of other people. That was a big surprise. People take intense vicarious pleasure in the success of somebody else if they're not competing with that person. And people enjoy having that emotion because it's a very clean and pure emotion. So the warmth it generated was not only unexpected but the most enjoyable part of it.

Winning the Nobel prize does change your life to some extent. It opens more opportunities. But the really significant thing this has done for me, and this is a pleasure for which I'm grateful every day, is it got me a parking spot. And it's right next to the dean's.

a hard time picking the job, the house or the car that will make us happiest. That's because there is a big difference between the criteria we use to choose something and the criteria we use to evaluate it later. If, for example, you're hemming and hawing over whether to buy a top-of-the-line camera that is bulky and heavy or a second-best model that's easier to carry, the comparative difference in picture quality may steer you toward the unwieldy model. Once you get the fancy camera home, though, you no longer have the lesser-quality photo to compare it with. All you notice is that it's a hassle to lug around—and as a result you barely use it. A better strategy is to try to get a holistic impression of each experience or product you're contemplating, Hsee says. Just consider the first camera and imagine how it would be to use it, without immediately comparing it with the second.

Gilbert has another solution to the prediction problem: asking other people for advice. "Grandmothers, rabbis and philosophers have been telling us for years that we shouldn't want shiny new things, but it's impossible not to," he says. "The important lesson is to learn how to predict more accurately what will give us lasting pleasure versus short-term pleasure, because there are things from the mundane to the transcendental that really do bring pleasure and happiness." His remedy is surrogation, or quite simply, asking people who have already done what you're considering doing how they liked it. "Most of the futures you're contemplating are someone else's memory," he says. While it helps to have a lot in common with a "surrogate," even a randomly chosen person can probably give you a better estimate of how much you would enjoy an experience than would your own impulses.

Yet few people are willing to use this technique. To his dismay, Gilbert's research shows that people would rather close their eyes and imagine a vacation spot, or a new job, than ask someone what that holiday or that career was like for them. This is because although we are remarkably similar in our emotional reactions to events, we like to

People report being happier when they are with friends than when they're with a spouse or child.

think of ourselves as unique, Gilbert says. We can correct our forecasting errors, but at a high cost to our self-image—we would rather be original than happy.

PSYCHOLOGIST Daniel Kahneman grew up near the Bois de Bologne in Paris, and from time to time, his parents would take him on a trip to the woods. Young Danny, engrossed in some other activity, would scream bloody murder at the prospect of being interrupted. Yet once he got to the woods, he'd get so involved in his play that when it was time to go home, he'd cry again. For Kahneman, those fits of tears are proof that he was a happy child. "When you don't want to stop what you're doing, that's a happy condition," he says. "There is something sad about people who live their lives wanting to be elsewhere."

Kahneman won the Nobel Prize in economics in 2002 for his insights in irrationality and decision-making, but has since turned his attention to well-being. That has led him to study the value of time, "the ultimate finite resource." He's examining the difference between immediate and remembered experience and has zeroed in on the fact that our actual experience and our memories of life operate on separate tracks, and affect our happiness in completely distinct ways. Most psychologists who study happiness have focused on how we think of our lives in retrospect, but Kahneman believes that there's a lot to be learned from looking at "online" happiness—or how we feel in the moment.

Because our memories are all we keep of our experiences, we have a built-in bias that favors memory over immediate experience. Our experiencing self, the part of us that registers events as they happen without anticipation or reflection, doesn't have much of a voice in influencing how happy we are with our lives, he says. Instead, memory dominates. Imagine you've thrown a marvelous party. You've spent hours reveling, but just as the night is winding down, two

drunk guests get into a vicious argument. Even though your pleasure during the preceding hours was real, you will remember the event as a total disaster.

That spoiled night is a clear example of the "evaluating self" at work, explains Kahneman. To create a narrative out of life's thousands of disconnected moments, our evaluating self focuses on the most intense moments and the final moments of an experience. That's the way we're built, but our tendency to rely mostly on memory to judge our well-being can lead us to make counterproductive decisions that undermine our own happiness.

For instance, many parents believe they'd be happier if they spent more time with their children. But because spending more time together might not raise the intensity or change the concluding moments of the experience, it won't be reflected in rosier memories. "If you double the time that you spend with your children, it may have very little effect on what you will remember about that time," Kahneman says. If memory is all that matters, spending additional time with your children accomplishes nothing. Another example: You had a great time on summer vacation in Italy last year, so you consider going back. But since returning to the same place wouldn't give you many new memories to savor, your evaluating self might decide against it—even though your experiencing self would clearly enjoy the trip.

"The point is that we shouldn't measure our lives on the quality of our memories alone," says Kahneman. He doesn't simply mean we should be more spontaneous—in fact, he points out that since time is our most valuable resource, we should pay careful attention to how we spend it. We need to vigilantly protect our time from the biases of our evaluating self by not relying on memory alone. Otherwise, we risk wasting it in ways that contradict our values and don't bring us happiness.

Well-being is also a product of "focal time," or how we direct our attention. This

is the key idea behind the different roles that *pleasures* and *comforts* have in creating happiness, a distinction originally posited by the late Stanford economist Tibor Scitovsky. Comforts are objects or experiences we tend to take for granted: a computer that doesn't crash, boots that don't leak or even a spouse who is supportive and warm. Pleasures, on the other hand, are stimuli that you focus your attention on: a good meal, a silky shirt, a boisterous evening with friends. The difference isn't intrinsic to the thing itself but rather lies in our attitude toward it: whether it captures our attention or recedes into the background.

Our evaluating self misleads us by giving more weight to comforts, those things that make life easier, but that we become accustomed to. Our experiencing self, meanwhile, prefers pleasures—absorbing events or interactions that hold us captive. If you ask someone with a Lexus if she likes it, she'll probably say yes, since its high quality really does bring happiness. But that's only while she's thinking about it—and she probably doesn't think about it very often. "Suppose you are driving in your car with your spouse and you are quarreling," Kahneman posits. "Are you better off if you're driving an Escort or a Lexus?" You're much too busy arguing to pay attention to the Lexus' smooth ride, so at that moment the quality of the car hardly matters. At the same time, something trivial that grabs your focus and interest, like getting flowers, will bring you happiness. If you got flowers every day, though, it would become routine, and neither garner your attention nor bring you much pleasure. Kahneman's point: Nothing is as important as it is when you're thinking about it.

As he's explored the role of attention and moment-by-moment experiences in happiness, Kahneman has identified factors that have a powerful effect in determining immediate mood. When asked how they feel "in the moment," he's found that people report being happier when they are with

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friends than when they're with a spouse or child. It sounds counterintuitive, but it makes sense: When we're with friends, we're intensely engaged, whereas we don't pay as much focused attention to family—they recede into the background, since we see them all the time. Similarly, getting enough sleep is crucial, probably because it is difficult to be engaged with the things you enjoy when you are tired. And people under time pressure at work don't report much happiness, as they are unable to pay attention to anything other than their impending deadlines.

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Kahneman acknowledges the power of the well-being “setpoint,” but he still thinks that we can influence our own happiness in small ways—by attending to the moment, and by choosing activities that engage rather than numb our minds. If we heed what does give us immediate pleasure, and if we are skeptical of our error-riddled memories and predictions, we can learn to spend our money, time and attention in ways that make us happier. If it's simply our nature to root for a cursed team or to chase a dream that, when realized, will never be as sweet as it is in our mind's eye, then we can try to appreciate the joy that comes in the striving. **PT**