

**Commentary...**

# Conditions for happiness exist in your life

By Mitchell Luftig  
Columnist

In “The Happiness Advantage” Shawn Achor points out that it is a short-sighted individual who postpones their happiness until a particular marker of career success has been achieved, such as a big promotion.

Not only does this person miss out on a lot of happiness along the way, once they achieve their career goal, their brain, which has learned to associate happiness with a future event, simply moves the goalposts so that now they must reach a new goal in order to be happy.

A more effective strategy for employees is to find ways to be happy in their present circumstances. Achor points out that happy workers are usually more productive than unhappy employees and they approach tasks in a more creative manner, leading to better outcomes. Happy workers are just as likely to advance in their careers as employees who postpone happiness.

But it’s not just in employment that we condition our happiness on a future event. People also convince themselves that they can only be happy when they get married to the perfect partner; produce brilliant children; achieve wealth, status, and fame; write a best selling novel....

Once we have convinced ourselves that we can only be happy when we achieve a particular outcome, we have placed arbitrary limits on our happiness. Rather than postponing happiness, we would be better served by finding ways to be happy in our current circumstances.

Sufficient conditions for happiness already exist in our lives, but sometimes we need to employ a different lens to spot them, a lens that helps us to overcome our brain’s built-in negativity bias.

Ancient man worried about starvation, being eaten by a predator, or losing territory to a rival clan. In order to increase the odds

of surviving such harsh circumstances, evolution built into our ancestor’s brain a negativity bias, which automatically prioritized negative information relevant to detecting and responding to danger over positive information more relevant to living a happy life.

Rick Hanson tells us that our brains are (still) like Velcro for negative information and Teflon for positive information.

To discover the conditions for happiness that already exist in our lives we must retrain our brain to highlight our positive experience, using tools such as mindfulness.

Thich Nhat Hanh tells us that when our minds are caught up in our worries, our fears, our anger, and our regrets we are “forgetful” of the conditions for happiness that already exist in our lives.

However, when we practice mindful breathing, uniting our mind and body, we establish ourselves in the present moment. “Then you can recognize the many conditions of happiness that are in you and around you, and happiness just comes naturally.”

Thich Nhat Hanh tells us to follow the breath all the way in and out—“Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in. Breathing out, I know that I am breathing out.”

Under normal conditions we are unable to “pull back the curtain” to see how the “autopilot” presents us with a biased account of our life, highlighting negative information, while ignoring positive information, and making us susceptible to depression.

But when we practice mindful breathing, we dial up the brain’s direct experience network (DEN) and dial down the autopilot. The DEN brings us closer to reality, enabling us to view the events around us with great clarity, and gives us an opportunity to correct for the brain’s negativity bias. (Returning our attention to the breath when our mind wanders keeps the autopilot

offline).

Mindful individuals approach their experience with curiosity. (Curiosity is also a strength related to living a satisfied, meaningful, and engaged life). Over time difficult emotions lose their power to overwhelm the person who practices mindfulness — allowing positive experiences to rise to the surface.

Negative thoughts and harsh self-judgments can trigger fear, anger, guilt, and worry, making us “forgetful” of the conditions for happiness in our lives. Mindfulness helps us to view — in real time — how we put ourselves down. When we mindfully replace self-criticism with self-acceptance, we can grasp the many conditions for happiness inside of ourselves.

The brain’s negativity bias also sets us up to assume the worst about other’s intentions — that they will hurt us or take advantage. When we practice mindfulness we view the intentions of others more accurately, allowing us to grasp the conditions for happiness that exist in our relationships.

Sharpening our focus on the positive facts and experiences revealed through mindfulness does not cancel out the negative facts and experiences. But leading with the positive makes us feel happier, it increases our optimism, and it makes us more resilient so that we better manage negative events when they occur.



PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

Kathi Eisenbeis checks out a vintage 1955 Buick in Havana, Cuba, with one of the city’s historic forts in the background.

## CUBA: Relations with USA have been difficult

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U.S. relationship with Cuba seems like that of a bully, coupled with the maturity of a pouting toddler, simply because Cuba has a different way of life.

Our trip to Las Terrazas lasted all day, and we barely had enough time to reorganize for our evening excursion, which was strictly entertainment. The Tropicana is a famous nightclub founded in 1939. We’ve seen shows all over the world and everything Las Vegas has to offer; this was the most elaborate and spectacular show we’ve ever seen, with 50 singers and dancers performing on three levels of a gigantic set with a 30-piece orchestra.

The next day, we had to get up early for our morning “educational” excursion, which was largely a walking tour of old Havana. Cuba’s well-known vintage

cars are for real. We thought those cars would be mostly a tourist thing, but they were ubiquitous throughout the country and actually in general use; although many are used for tourist taxis or guided tours. Chevys are the most common, but we saw Desotos, Oldsmobiles, Dodges and many Fords. Perhaps the most unique sighting was a 1951 Studebaker with its bullet-nosed, battering-ram prow. The most common car years are ’51, ’55, and ’56, but we saw examples from the ’40s through about 1959. New cars are mostly Toyotas, Kias, and VWs; there are no new U.S. cars due to the embargo.

As our Cuban adventure came to an end, we left feeling somewhat ashamed of our country’s failure to be a good neighbor. Cuba became a U.S. “protectorate” after the Spanish-American War, a status that we lost primarily by being exploitative, rather than protective.

After 60 years, it’s time to do better.

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