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Chris Johnstone thinks so. Here he describes seven strategies for cultivating good mood

START WITH 'WHY?'

Why grow flowers? It may be partly because you like them and partly because you recognise the valuable purposes they serve. It is similar with positive emotions; if you don't see their benefits, it is easy to dismiss a focus on happiness as happy-clappy and self-indulgent. The new science of positive psychology, which only emerged a decade or so ago, has generated a wealth of research showing the benefits of positive emotion to our physical and mental health, resilience, social functioning and problem-solving capacity.

Businesses are getting interested in happiness because it is linked with improved work performance. An understanding of how to grow a good mood can also play a crucial role in the transition towards a sustainable society. Here's how.

THE CONSUMERISM ILLUSION

Hundreds of billions are spent each year on promoting the idea that happiness comes from having things. The images in advertising, together with slogans like 'bigger, better, happier', aim to give us a reference point to catch up with. It is easy to feel left behind if we don't have the products presented as essential aids to life fulfilment. This well funded campaign to link happiness and having creates a powerful driver for consumerism. It also generates a perception that sustainability is a miserable process of giving up, or cutting down on, the things that bring us pleasure.

Yet the research on factors influencing mood gives a very different picture. Countries that spend more on advertising,

like the US and UK, have higher rates of depression than those spending less, like Denmark. Studies show mood improving when people walk in nature, while walking through shopping malls has the opposite effect. Research also links happiness much more with lifestyles of voluntary simplicity than with materialism. Green living is good for mood and sustainability becomes more attractive when people know this.



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Top and above: Studies show people's mood improves when exposed to nature, while shopping malls and high rates of advertising have the opposite effect.



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A NEW STORY

Buckminster Fuller, the visionary thinker, once remarked, “You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete”. For sustainable living to take root and flourish, we need to go further than just critiquing consumerism. We need a new story of what happiness is based on and how it can be grown. This is where attention to the inner landscape of zone zero zero is important, for it is here that we plant the insights and practices that help good feelings grow. Addressing the ‘why?’ is the first strategy, because when you recognise good reasons to cultivate positive emotion, it increases your interest in finding ways to achieve this.

VALUING BOTH POSITIVE & NEGATIVE

Seeing the value of good mood doesn’t mean we should aim to be happy all the time. Feelings like anxiety, sadness and anger draw our attention to threats, losses and unacceptable behaviour. Without these wake up calls to action, it is easy to become complacent and apathetic. The ideal of emotional intelligence is not to banish distress but to recognise its place and function.

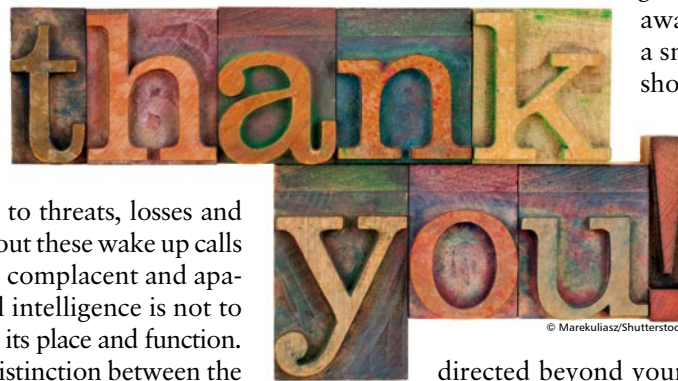
It is useful here to make a distinction between the weather of emotions, which may change from moment to moment, and the climate of mood, which persists over time. While a diversity of emotions contribute to inner fertility, wellbeing comes from finding a right balance of positive and negative. If the balance is wrong for you and, for example, you find yourself low, anxious or angry more than you’d like to be, you can change this in two main ways. The first approach involves directly cultivating positive emotions; these give emotional buoyancy that acts as a buffer in bumpy times. This second approach focuses on the negative and then transforms it; the next two strategies build the positive; and the last two involve transforming the negative.

Top: Positive emotions promote physical and mental health.
Centre: Gratitude is a powerful way to boost mood.

SAVOURING GOOD MOMENTS

Your emotional state is influenced by your focus of attention. When you’re looking at something you feel good about, you tend to feel better. You can apply this principle by looking out for, and giving more attention to the aspects of reality you appreciate. With practise, it is possible to get better at catching your best moments, stopping to take in the view of a sunset, the tastes that delight you or the sounds you enjoy. By savouring these moments, giving them your full attention, you allow them to nourish you.

Another approach is to ask yourself questions like, “what am I delighted about?” or “what are my favourite moments from the last 24 hours?” Questions direct your focus of gaze, and can be used to draw out awareness or memories that bring a smile to your face. Research has shown that keeping a diary of three things you appreciate each day has a measurable positive impact on mood.



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EXPRESS GRATITUDE

Gratitude is a social emotion: when you think of who you’re grateful to, your attention is directed beyond yourself and towards those you’ve received from. Gratitude can lead to a positive spiral of social cohesion, as the more grateful we feel, the more likely we are to give back, or to give forward. Reminding yourself of who you’re grateful to, and then taking steps to express your thanks, has also been shown to be a powerful way of boosting your mood.

ADDRESS AN ISSUE

When you’re angry, anxious or upset, savouring beauty or thanking friends can help switch your emotional channel. But if this seems a positivity stretch too far, an alternative is to think of your negative feelings as ‘calls to adventure’ that alert you to something being off course and that draw you into the story of doing something about this. Each time you rise to a challenge by addressing an issue that bothers you,

you add meaning and engagement to your life in a way that can make it more rewarding.

When the challenge you face is both important to you and difficult, you are more likely to go into one of those satisfying ‘flow states’ where time and self-consciousness disappear. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, in his classic book *Flow – The Psychology of Happiness*, writes: “The best moments usually occur when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile.”



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FIND YOUR POWER

While difficult challenges engage and draw out our strengths in ways that can be satisfying, when something is too difficult it can leave us feeling defeated. Powerlessness, where we experience a challenge as beyond our power to do much about, contributes to low mood and this feeling is common in people with depression. It is also common when facing global issues like climate change. The good news is that it is possible to turn powerlessness around and doing this is one of the most reliable long-term strategies for improving mood.

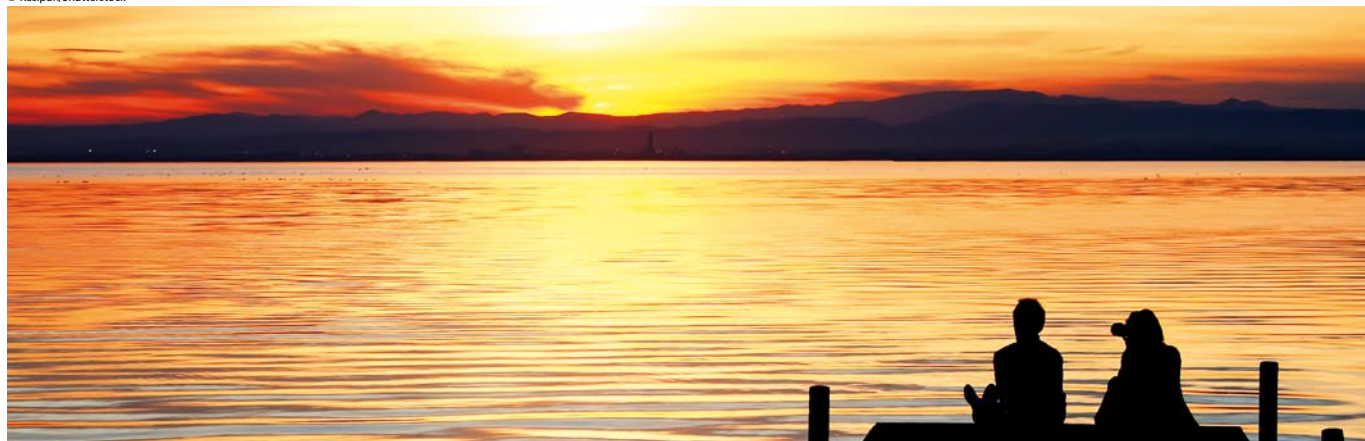
A useful parallel is found in adventure stories, which often start by introducing a threat far exceeding what the main characters believe they can deal with. Initially, it seems hopeless, but what makes the story is that they rise to the challenge anyway, starting a quest in search of tools and allies. We may also have stories from our own experience where we’ve faced a challenge we didn’t initially feel confident about, but where we later found a way through.

Early experiences of learning to cycle, swim or give up smoking are common examples. The principle here is that just because something seems impossible at the start, this doesn’t mean it will always be like that. It is possible to find our power and strengthen our ability to tackle the issues we find

Above: Embrace challenges and work on relationships.

Below: Take the time needed to savour the good moments.

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depressing or difficult. My book *Find Your Power – A Toolkit for Resilience and Positive Change* explores what helps us do this.

BUILD POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships can be among our greatest sources of joy, but when they’re not going well, they contribute to our misery too. Improving relationships is therefore a reliable way of improving mood. A useful first step here is just to think of the people that are significant in your life, and ask yourself “*What can I do to improve the relationship here?*” Like plants, relationships need feeding; when they grow well, they enrich and nourish our lives too.

ENDNOTE

Mood isn’t just something that happens to us, it is also influenced by choices we make and strategies we can learn. By recasting happiness as something linked to skills we develop, challenges we face and relationships we value, we contribute to a cultural recovery from over-consumption and help grow instead a model of sustainability that is attractive and deeply satisfying 🌱

Chris Johnstone is author of Find Your Power – A Toolkit for Resilience and Positive Change (Permanent Publications, 2010) and co-presenter of The Happiness Training Plan audio CD. He worked for many years as an addictions specialist in the UK health service.

To find out more, go to:

www.chrisjohnstone.info

Find Your Power – A Toolkit for Resilience and Positive Change is available to buy from The Green Shopping Catalogue, price £12.95 + p&cp, at www.green-shopping.co.uk or on 01730 823 311

