

Happiness, Success and Self-Esteem

“Happiness is when what you think, what you say and what you do are in harmony.”

– Mahatma Gandhi

As with a lot of people, I’ve taken to watching TED Talks. If you’re not familiar with TED Talks, I encourage you to search for the talks on the Internet and watch the ones that intrigue you. In official terms, TED is “a global set of conferences run by the private non-profit Sapling Foundation under the motto, ideas worth spreading.” In general terms, TED Talks are insightful, inspiring speeches – typically no longer than 18 minutes – on every imaginable subject.

Recently, I watched a TED Talk entitled The Happy Secret to Better Work by Shawn Achor – American educator, author and advocate of positive psychology. As it turns out, Achor’s “Happy Secret” is among the 20 most viewed Talks of all time. To give you a little background, Achor spent 12 years at Harvard University studying what makes people happy. Later, he wrote the best-seller The Happiness Advantage and founded the Institute of Positive Research.

I was intrigued when Achor spoke about one of the most common myths of our modern culture: “If I work harder, I’ll be more successful. And if I’m more successful, then I’ll be happier.” According to Achor, the belief statement simply doesn’t work or, as he puts it, it’s “scientifically broken and backwards.” Apparently, there are two main reasons why this is the case.

“First, every time your brain has a success, you change the goalpost of what success looks like. You got good grades, now you have to get better grades. You got into a good school, now you have to get into a better school. You got a good job, now you have to get a better job. You hit your sales target, we’re going to change your sales target.”

Achor claims that “happiness is on the opposite side of success” so our brain never quite finds its way there. “We’ve pushed happiness over the cognitive horizon as a society.”

In essence, if we put off being happy until we are successful (whatever that might look like) it’s not going to happen. It appears (according to Achor) that our brains just don’t work that way. Achor claims that if we allow ourselves to experience happiness in the present, we’re going to enjoy a lot more success. By raising our “level of positivity in the present” we can actually

raise our intelligence, creativity and energy levels. That's a bold statement but Achor says his exhaustive research conducted over 12 years at Harvard University supports his assertion.

"Your brain at positive is 31 percent more productive than your brain at negative, neutral or stressed," declares Achor. "You're 37 percent better at sales. Doctors are 19 percent faster and more accurate at coming up with the correct diagnosis when positive instead of negative, neutral or stressed. If we can find a way of becoming positive in the present, then our brains work even more successfully, as we're able to work harder, faster and more intelligently."

"And," says Achor, "every single business outcome improves."

Achor's research is by no means the only source for such assertions. Countless studies have demonstrated that positive changes in physiology and psychology can be derived from a more positive outlook. Studies in neuroplasticity show that changes in neural pathways and synapses occur when changes are made in behaviour, environment, thinking, emotions and beliefs.

Often, in my self-esteem work, I talk about happiness being a choice. Some clients are quick to embrace the concept while others struggle with a victim mentality. I have kept a gratitude journal for many years and can attest to the power of positive expressions of gratitude. I recommend that everyone keep a journal and get into the habit of noting the positive. This needn't be an onerous task. Here's all you do to get started. Once a day, for 21 days, write down three new things in your life that you're grateful for. If Achor's claims are correct then your brain will begin scanning your environment not for the negative, but for the positive. As someone once told me, "We become (or experience) what we think about most of the time."

If this seems burdensome, you can add some fun to the equation by making a pact with a friend. Once a day, email a buddy describing something good that you experienced over the past 24 hours. Ask them to do the same. It's a fun way to retrain your brain. All it takes is an act of will. Sure, it'll seem a little odd at first but will soon become fun and inspirational. Involve a few people and take turns. Start your own gratitude group and see where it goes.

A few years ago, I tried an interesting experiment. I sent an email to a different person each day for a week telling them what I liked best about them, how they inspired me and the valuable life-lessons I had learned from them. Some people were confused by my emails while others wondered about my motivation. Most people, however, were grateful and gracious.

“Success is not the key to happiness,” wrote Albert Schweitzer, theologian, philosopher and physician. “Happiness is the key to success. If you love what you are doing, you will be successful.” Perhaps Schweitzer intuitively knew what Achor would assert many years later.

Even if Achor’s assertions are overly optimistic, there’s still great value in choosing to live a life of passion and purpose: a happy and grateful existence that’s anchored in the present.