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Family Focus

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more, not to those who have less.

"Happiness is an inside job." ~William Arthur Ward

We all know people who seem to have it all, yet they are not completely happy. Sometimes the outward trappings - money, prestige, job, family - aren't enough to overcome deep-seated personal dissatisfactions. The following steps for achieving greater happiness are not meant to be spiritual advice, but rather they are based on therapeutic psychological principles:

1) Avoid comparing yourself to others.

It's human nature to compare and contrast ourselves with others. But some people do this to an extreme, many without even realizing it, and wind up sabotaging their ability to be happy and content.

If you feel deficient in some way and then see others who have what you think you lack, you will only make yourself feel worse by making comparisons. Even if you feel relatively good about yourself, focusing on what others have can undermine some of your own positive feelings. Comparisons can be about physical appearance, athletic ability, financial success, achievements, artistic ability, friendships, family or a host of other things. Most people compare themselves only to those who have

Many people, especially women, are self-conscious and self-critical about their bodies. One woman in her 30s, Nina, came in for therapy to work on eliminating binge eating. She had been alternately binging and restricting for over five years. Nina was tired of feeling like a fraud as she worked with her physical therapy patients, helping them take better care of their bodies.

One component of therapy for Nina was to rid herself of the habit of comparing herself to others. Her challenge was to notice a body not in as good shape as hers for each enviable body she saw. It was important for Nina to develop perspective and balance because her perceptions were skewed. She said she felt mean finding people who looked worse than she did. But since she wasn't hurting anyone by doing this, it was important for her to be fair and not always compare "up" if she even needed to compare at all. Nina needed much more emphasis on appreciating what she had.

Similarly, Evan was in the habit of looking at his old college classmates and comparing their successes to his self-perceived failures. Rebecca constantly looked around at the multitudes of married couples while she was lonely and divorced.

Making comparisons is a habit, and like any habit it takes effort over time to break. First, you must catch yourself in the act of doing it. Awareness is an essential tool in changing a behavior. Then it's important to focus on all that you have going for yourself. Try to appreciate everything, large and small. You may not have your ideal home, but there are probably aspects of your home or its location that you do enjoy. You may not like your thighs, but at least you have a body that works. And you probably have other features that you do like. You may not have as much money as you would like, but you're probably better off than most other people in the world. You can remind yourself that no one has it all; even those who seem like they do often have challenges that aren't apparent to others.

As you are practicing avoiding comparisons, you can concentrate on admiring the successes or beauty or personality of others. You can practice not allowing their good qualities or good fortune to detract from your own feelings of well-being.

You can then begin to use this admiration as positive motivation for yourself. Perhaps you would like to be more like your friend who is in good shape or has a good relationship with her husband or who has a thriving career. This is your cue to work on these things for yourself. It is much easier to improve ourselves when we come from a positive place rather than from a negative one.

2) Avoid Negative Self-Talk

We have all heard about the concept of seeing the glass as half full rather than half empty. But we can't just

automatically do this for ourselves. We need to first work on changing our internal dialogue by becoming aware of messages we tell ourselves.

I typically ask clients what they would say to a good friend who is talking disparagingly about himself or herself. Would they tell their friend, "Well, you did a good job, but you could have done better." Or, "You didn't do well on the math test, Bar exam, SAT . . . so you must be pretty stupid." Or, "You're so selfish . . . fat . . . ugly . . . boring . . ." No, instead too many people reserve these negative messages for themselves.

Of course if you suffer from moderate to severe depression, it will be very difficult to make a shift out of negative territory on your own. You will most likely benefit from therapy and possible medication.

But for many others, self-correction is possible with focus and motivation. It is important to catch yourself in the act of thinking negatively about yourself and then try to turn that message around. You don't need to make an extreme jump from "I'm so boring" to "I'm actually fascinating." Just trying to be neutral instead of negative will be a good start, perhaps telling yourself, "I 'm not boring when the conversation interests me," or "I rarely feel like I'm boring when I'm with certain people."

Ultimately, of course, the goal is self-acceptance. Those who can accept themselves, limitations and all, are the fortunate ones, for they have a key to greater happiness.

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