



Maryville Daily Times FROM THE HEART Column

The Pursuit of Joy

Joy Carroll Smith Ed.D. Licensed Psychologist, Licensed Professional Counselor

After a torrential downpour last spring I decided to let Victoria, my golden retriever outside to “take care of business”. Our yard is fenced so after letting her out, I went back in the house to do some office work. After a few minutes, I noticed in my peripheral vision a blurred figure racing back and forth past the French doors. Each time Victoria whizzed by, I noticed that her coat looked several shades darker. At that point it dawned on me that she was starting to look more like a chocolate lab than a retriever. I hurried to the door only to find that Victoria had discovered a huge puddle full of muddy water in the back yard. Each time she whizzed past the door like a bolt of lightning, she was preparing to become airborne as she anticipated her dive into the mud hole.

To say I was exasperated at that point is putting it mildly. I was already dressed for work and had to be there in ten minutes with a clean therapy dog. About the time I opened the door to stop the madness, Victoria rolled by again covered with mud, eyes wide with delight and totally focused on the joyous exhilaration of doing something she enjoyed. I’ll never forget that look and the realization that too few of us have it.

For some joy comes easily; for others the pursuit of joy is an elusive rabbit chase. Happiness is defined as a state of well-being, contentment and joy. The factors that contribute to it are complex and multi-faceted. Studies have shown that high concentrations of the neurotransmitter norepinephrine can lead to feelings of elation and euphoria. Conversely, low levels or imbalances of this and other neurotransmitters have been linked to depression. Our mood can be impacted by our biological state.

University of Minnesota research studying identical twins found that reported levels of happiness correlated 50% of the time among twin subjects even when they grew up in different households. These results have been replicated in subsequent studies, including those in other cultures. This suggests a possible genetic predisposition to levels of contentment and well-being.

So what does all this mean? Is our capacity to be joyful predetermined at birth or is it decisional as some would propose? Is joy reduced to a gene pool roll of the dice or does happiness consciously come from within regardless of heredity or other considerations? Certainly factors other than biological state and genetics can enhance our ability to experience joy. Persons with positive self-esteem, solid social networks and healthy relationships report greater levels of contentment and happiness. Healthy attachments with others can increase self-confidence and provide support for the pursuit and enjoyment of new, fulfilling experiences.

Our life circumstances and family history have powerful impact on our interpretation of events and capacity for joy. We are driven and triggered by the programming and scripts of the past. When

successful coping strategies and relational styles are developed in early childhood, they can enhance our ability to stay centered in the midst of difficulty. People who practice healthy coping strategies tend to report greater levels of contentment and happiness and are less likely for these feelings to be contingent on events, people or things. Interestingly, these learned activities typically increase the levels of norepinephrine and other neurotransmitters associated with a sense of well-being.

If circumstances such as trauma, conflicted family environment, lack of parental attachment or other factors prevented the acquisition of these healthy mechanisms, they can still be learned with practice. Those who are able to cognitively rewrite faulty messages that become negative continuous loop tapes are less likely to be defined by them.

Some people more easily experience joy because they have encountered supportive life experiences conducive to the development of a positive outlook. Others are biologically wired for greater access to feelings of contentment and have the constitution to transcend adversity regardless of their circumstances. Still others characterize the pursuit of happiness as a futile, perpetual race where the finish line is always just over the horizon. Those in this camp are more likely to be influenced by biological and genetic factors. They are often more easily overwhelmed by life's bumps in the road and less likely to believe they have personal control. Fortunately, there is help and hope regardless of the contributing elements or where one falls on the happiness continuum. And restoration of hope for those struggling to find joy is the eternal flame that lights the way.

According to Dr. Charlotte Kasl, author of *Finding Joy: 101 Ways to Free Your Spirit and Dance with Life*, when we are able to access joy “we become able to recapture the spontaneity of childhood before we were taught to stop our wild scribbling and start coloring within the lines.” Maybe it’s time to find a mud puddle or two and jump in with unrestrained, unbridled abandon.