

BRAIN MATTERS

Want to feel happier? Try snacking on joy.

Learning to find the joy in mundane experiences is a way to cultivate a more meaningful life.



By [Richard Sima](#)

November 17, 2022 at 6:00 a.m. EST

Here's an antidote to an ever-stressful, busy and uncertain world. Try finding and savoring little bites of joy in your day. I call them "joy" snacks.

By mindfully tuning into the pleasant, nice and sometimes routine experiences of every day, we can transform an otherwise mundane moment into something more meaningful and even joyful.

Lunch with a co-worker. Walking the dog. Texting with a friend. Watching a favorite show. Eating a favorite meal. Calling your mom. Just hanging out.

New research shows that finding and savoring these nuggets of joy can be a way of consistently cultivating a good, meaningful life.

"It's not these big things that we sort of create in our heads, but these smaller day-to-day experiences that bring us meaning," said [Joshua Hicks](#), psychologist at Texas A&M University's Existential Psychology Collaboratory.

You can also [read this story as a comic](#).

Understanding the science of joy

Surprisingly, joy has been relatively neglected by scholars.

But recent research suggests that joy is a distinct positive emotion for “when we feel connected, or reunited with something or someone that’s really important to us,” said [Philip Watkins](#), psychologist who studies joy, gratitude and happiness at Eastern Washington University.

Watkins’s research, perhaps unsurprisingly, finds that feeling joy is strongly associated with subjective well-being, which is essential for human flourishing.

Big events like weddings or reunions are well-known smorgasbords for joy. But smaller bites of joy in everyday life matter, too, and are easier to attain if we don’t overlook them.

Previous research has shown we derive meaning in life from [three key factors](#) — feeling like our life makes sense, having a purpose driven by goals we care about and feeling like our lives matter.

A February study published in [Nature Human Behavior](#) involving more than 3,000 participants across multiple experiments reported that valuing one’s life experiences, or experiential appreciation, is another potent way of making life feel more meaningful.

When asked by researchers to recount their most meaningful experience that occurred in the past week, for most people, it was not about their grand, overarching goals, but something simpler and more mundane that stood out, such as having an enjoyable conversation or being surrounded by nature.

“It’s not just about you creating meaning in your head,” said Hicks, who co-wrote the study. “It’s about detecting meaning that’s already out there.”

Snacking on joy can go beyond focusing on our own experiences. Sharing our joy snacks also helps foster even stronger bonds with those we care about most. Relationship research has found that couples [who celebrate small things](#) regularly — not just the anniversaries — had stronger and happier partnerships.

There is also joy to be had when you take the time to reconnect with the person that is always with you: yourself.

Small acts of self-care and setting aside time for simple pleasures and celebrations can be emotional nourishment you gift to yourself.

How to find more joy snacks

Joy is a mind-set and something we can orient toward by being on the lookout for it.

“You can’t produce joy, but you can prepare for it,” Watkins said.

Researchers are studying how people can become more receptive to joyful moments. Taking time each day to recount past episodes of joy may be one way to increase your predisposition for joy in the future, though more work is needed on how best to develop a “lifestyle of joy,” Watkins said.

Cultivating gratitude is another way of cultivating joy. In one study, Watkins and colleagues used questionnaire data to measure participants’ gratitude and joyfulness in the moment and over time. They found that the more grateful a person is, the more likely they were to feel joy in the future. The reverse was also true: The more predisposed to joy someone is, the more likely they would feel gratitude as well.

“Joy and gratitude kind of feed on each other,” Watkins said. “We call it a cycle of virtue.”

Gratitude interventions, such as writing down the things we felt grateful for during the day, have been found to improve mood and may foster more gratitude.

It is also important not to fall prey to what some psychologists have called “killjoy thinking,” which actively inhibits enjoyment by neutralizing positive moods. For example, watching a beautiful sunset with a loved one but only focusing on how cold it is about to get is tantamount to stealing a joy snack right out of your own mouth.

“If you’re not able to see the good in your life, you’re always overwhelmed by the bad in your life, you’re probably not going to prepare yourself for experiencing joy,” Watkins said.

One way to increase joy is to try savoring, which means mindfully paying attention, appreciating and accentuating the positive experiences we have.

That cup of coffee. The cuddliness of your pet. A joke whose punchline hits just right.

Focusing on the sensations and emotions you feel in these moments can make the joy snack all the richer.

It can take practice to get better at identifying and appreciating these experiences, but “once you learn to slow down and pay attention to those things, put more weight on those things, your life feels more fulfilled and more meaningful,” Hicks said.

Nature is one powerful source of joy snacks that many people can nosh on, in part because of its power of inducing awe.

Hicks and his colleagues found that just having participants watch the two-minute opener to the nature documentary “Planet Earth” produced appreciation for the experience and, in turn, a greater sense of meaning.

“Nature is all around us, but it’s very easy to ignore it and downplay it,” Hicks said.

Sometimes taking a walk in the park and smelling the roses — by yourself or with others — is simply all you need to do to find some everyday joy.

“No matter who you are, no matter where you are in life, there's something out there that can bring you joy and happiness,” Hicks said.

So, what is your joy snack this week?

Do you have a question about human behavior or neuroscience? Email BrainMatters@washpost.com and we may answer it in a future column.