



Vol. 99, No. 195

Tuesday, August 14, 2012

Published for 27,182 consecutive weekdays

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Your Ultimate Currency

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08/13/2012

by The JBA Board of Governors member Giselle Carson

Phone calls, emails, client meetings, reports, case preparation, fitness and family obligations; how can we effectively manage all of our goals and obligations without added stress and anxiety? What is your most important currency? Is it your time, health, relationships, money, attitude or knowledge?

As an immigration and business attorney, marathoner, triathlete and community trustee, I am always looking for ways to effectively maximize my health, happiness, work/life balance and my overall quality of life.

In this article, I share my latest discoveries in the hope that they may be useful to you in maximizing your ultimate currency. If you want to learn how "thank you's" changed an attorney's life, how where you park your car can affect your happiness and how sharing your flaws and imperfections can lead to happiness, I invite you to read on.

In "Happier, Learn the Secrets to Daily Joy and Lasting Fulfillment," Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar, professor of one of Harvard University's most popular and life-changing courses, shares insightful and scientifically proven principles that we can incorporate in our daily lives to feel more fulfilled, more connected, and yes, happier.

In his book, he suggests to:

Build happiness boosters into your life

We all go through happiness draughts. Not all we do in our everyday lives is pleasurable and satisfying, but we can plan for and engage in "transformative experiences" that are meaningful, pleasurable and rejuvenating. Planning and engaging in these experiences can spill over in other aspects of our lives and contribute to a happier life all around, and if you can involve others, the happiness effect can be even greater. Here are some of mine: watching the sunset or sunrise, running with friends, hiking with my husband, celebrating an immigration petition approval and many others. Do you have a happiness boosters list? If not, it is time to start one.

Take time to meditate

No humming or burning of incense is required. Simply take a few minutes or more if time allows, and sit quietly. Listen to the thoughts racing through your mind and begin focusing on your breathing. Quietly pay attention to the present moment. Everything – thoughts, emotions, sensory experiences – is accepted without judgment. Meditation has proven to increase activity in the left frontal brain which lowers anxiety, produces a positive emotional state, and promotes better immune function. Have you tried yoga or meditation lately? If not, I encourage you to!

Create positive rituals

Athletes value performance and create rituals around their training. If you value your happiness — and you want to become happier — you need to form rituals around obtaining your goal. Ben-Shahar suggests that an important ritual is to keep a gratitude journal. If the idea of a gratitude journal does not excite you, make a ritual of: thinking about something for which you are grateful each day; celebrating the milestones that help you achieve your larger goal; and creating fun and a little weirdness in your business and life (this is also a core value of Zappos as described in "Delivering Happiness" by Tony Hsieh). These rituals help us carry the lessons forward and improve future results. More about an inspiring gratitude experience later on.

Develop deep social relationships

Research of self-proclaimed, "very happy people" shows that they share a similar denominator; they have rich and satisfying relationships. These relationships include connections with co-workers, colleagues, friends and/or a romantic partner. These connections are not automatic and must be cultivated. They are cultivated over time with shared experiences, which include ups and downs, working through conflicts, and happiness. Too little conflict can be a sign of indifference in a relationship. When was the last time you were vulnerable with your friend?

Engage in regular exercise

Are you sitting down while reading this article? How far away from your destination did you park your car today? Did you take the stairs? Have you taken a short walk after dinner lately? If you want to be happier, consider including opportunities to exercise in your daily life. Studies show we must take around 10,000 steps a day for minimal health. On a typical day, just living and working, we take only 1,000 to 3,000 steps a day and not much more.

Create and maintain an attitude of gratitude

In "A Simple Act of Gratitude," by John Kralik, an attorney and now judge of the Los Angeles Superior Court, reveals his inspiring journey from "the lowest day" to a "full and rich life" by writing thank-you notes. Kralik was in the midst of a divorce, his law firm was in trouble, his savings were gone and he was 40 pounds overweight. He was then inspired to "be grateful for the things he had" and decided to write thank-you notes to others to express his gratitude.



Carson

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He wrote notes to his co-workers, business associates, college friends, doctors, store clerks, neighbors, and anyone who had done him a good deed. To his Starbucks barista, he wrote: "Scott, thank you for taking the time each morning to greet me in a friendly way. It is also so wonderful to me that you took the time and trouble to remember my name. In this day and age, few people make this effort, and fewer still do it in a way that feels sincere. You do both. It really makes a difference to me every day."

Gradually, by sending kindness and gratitude, Kralik's life turned around. He developed new meaningful friendships, lost weight and gained inner peace and financial stability.

Those who feel and express gratitude are happier, more optimistic and successful. Moreover, research has shown that being grateful strengthens our immune system. Have you ever written a thank-you note to a colleague or a family member expressing the gratitude you feel about them? Why not try it?

Gretchen Rubin, an attorney, former clerk to Justice Sandra Day O'Connor and influential happiness writer, devoted a year to researching and engaging in a "Happiness Project." She writes about how "she spent a year trying to sing in the morning, clean her closet, fight right, read Aristotle and generally have more fun!" She suggests:

Focus on boosting your energy

To do this, we should go to sleep early; exercise better; toss, restore, organize; and act more energetic. In our fast-paced society with tight schedules, we are often exhausted, particularly if you have children or work very long hours.

Sleep better and more

It is during our sleep that we repair, recover and enhance our systems. Suggestions for improving sleep include: set a specific time for going to bed; get ready to sleep before bedtime (for example, take out your lenses, brush your teeth); make your bedroom dark (turn clocks, computers or mobile phone lights off or hide them); and make a list of the things you need to do the next day and stop thinking about them. Before bed time, I often sprinkle lavender oil on my pillow, take magnesium and drink chamomile tea. This ritual works wonders for me to have a great night's sleep!

Dealing with a 'really lousy' day

Gretchen suggests to: resist the urge to "treat" yourself (it is only a temporary high). Instead do a nice deed for someone else. She also encourages us to remind ourselves of the positive things we did that day (walked the dog, played with the kids, recycled); and go to bed early and start the next day anew.

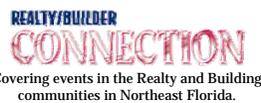
Finally, Dr. Ben-Shahar says that "happiness, not money or prestige, should be regarded as the ultimate currency - the currency by which we take measures of our lives." To lead a happier life requires awareness of what brings us pleasure and provides meaning. Always ask yourself, what are you trading for happiness?



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10 North Newnan Street · Jacksonville, FL 32202 · (904) 356-2466 · Fax (904) 353-2628

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