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Contentment

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How are you doing? "I'm content."

Hardly anybody answers this common question about personal well-being with such simplicity. And if they do, it is usually not a response delivered in a particularly delighted tone of voice. Worry lines might even start forming across the forehead of the person who posed the question. After all, "I'm content" is typically supplemented with a modifying "Well..." Or it is constructed as "Well, it's going." I'm getting by. To be content, to be satisfied with yourself, is typically interpreted as a capitulation to life's demands.

However, the state of contentment is the best that anyone can achieve, regardless of whether someone is doing well or poorly, as viewed from the outside. This external perspective is in actuality merely incidental, if a person is - honestly and truly - content with their own existence. How important are the benchmark data obtained against the gauges of professional and economic success and medical diagnoses, when you feel good inside your own skin, despite the negative things that might exist in your life? When you are comfortable with your life as it exists within its boundaries, which might be determined by things like limited income or chronic illness? What if you are in a position to recognize and value the positive aspects of your life, instead of regretting missed chances and longing for a more enjoyable life with more desirable opportunities?

Our daily lives are shaped by our desire to get the best out of life and out of ourselves. Products focused on self-optimization sell especially well these days. We constantly worry about how we can more optimally, effectively and efficiently work with our personal resources. Where we can get more for our money or find more happiness. Advice books on this topic have been booming for years. Mobile apps remind us of our plans in unanimous obtrusiveness, counteracting the risk we run of failing to strive for perfection in the midst of our workouts, caloric intake, and childraising. More and more employees are reaching for neuro-stimuli, keeping their minds fit not only via Sudoku or software programs, but also through chemical means.

Unfortunately, the end result is usually not as positive as one would wish. A chasm inevitably opens up between the ideal and reality. Your career grinds to a halt despite your painstaking plans and tireless efforts. Your weight stubbornly stays the same - or at least fails to sink to the lowest point you have picked as an ideal. Your sense of well-being refuses to increase even the slightest.

It is ironic that the striving for happiness can make you quite unhappy.

Thus, it is time to return to the essentials and to take joy in what life has to offer, instead of continuously trying to wring more and more out of it. To make plans that are attainable without destructive ambitions, ones that can actually produce feelings of success and strengthen your self-confidence. To stop dreaming only the very large dreams which eventually pop like bubbles, but to instead dream the ones that can actually be fulfilled, bringing with them an unburdened joy. Realistic plans, viable dreams - these bring contentment,



as well as strength. The strength to design and even implement new plans.

At first glance, contentment seems to be the less attractive, less glamorous stepsister of happiness, but she is reliable and fulfilling in the long term. Contrary to great happiness, contentment is a long-lasting feeling: less exuberant, less euphoric, but quiet and stable. Contentment lingers in the background, as opposed to the proud, constantly forward-pressing feeling of happiness. As a result, contentment is a wellspring for creativity. It is rooted in a positive prevailing mood and built upon a life-affirming foundation. It is not as susceptible to the heart or, in more scientific terms, by the part of the brain that guides the emotions. Rather, it is steered by reason. According to psychologist Philipp Mayring at the Alpen-Adria University in Klagenfurt, "Contentment is the outcome of thought processes." This brings with it an undeniable advantage: Each person has considerably more control over their contentment than over their fleeting happiness.

In general, the degree to which a person is content is determined by the extent to which her expectations of herself and her life are fulfilled. Therefore, contentment is an outcome of the act of comparison: We weigh our actual circumstances against our ideal conceptualizations of our lives. "The smaller the gulf is, the more content we are," claims Jochen Brandtstädter, professor emeritus for psychology at the University of Trier.

This also means that contentment can be attained by two differing paths. You can attempt to fulfill a greater number of your own expectations. Or you can lower your expectations and learn to more readily accept the realities of your life, which will enable you to be content in a positive sense and to end the ongoing hunt for the next better, higher, newer thing.

The first path is the offensive approach to contentment. We have to work for this kind of contentment and are inspired by the reward at the end of the endeavor. The second path is more defensive in nature. We cut back on things, letting life simply happen, and adjust our expectations to reality. Most people find this defensive path more difficult. As humans, we are programmed by our own biology to constantly focus on recognition and new achievements, and we are hardwired to strive after these things. Over the course of evolution, only those species survived that successfully struggled to find enough to eat and to raise their young in the face of adversity. Setting goals is part of our daily existence, which is why the defensive path often seems like a form of defeat.

In many life situations, the offensive course is undoubtedly the right one. It encourages us to reach our greatest potential, eventually experiencing success and the joy that brings. However, this joy is often short-lived, and we soon find ourselves pursuing the next project. We cannot achieve lasting happiness this way.

The continuous striving for more can even turn into a bad strategy, if we fail repeatedly to live up to our own expectations. In this case, the outcome is a torturous discontent in which self-worth becomes negatively affected by feelings of self-pity. Our optimization fantasies pull us into a whirlpool that swirls us into a downward spiral. Burnout and depression become real threats.

In ancient times, the philosophical school of Stoicism taught that possessions hold no real value. The ideal path to stoic wisdom exists in simply letting go of those things that are beyond your control. Serenity and tranquility - these are the most critical characteristics that a stoic can acquire. More than other faiths and practices, the eastern religions and schools of meditation pursue very similar goals, which aid in finding peace in a chaotic world.



This is also the case with contentment: practicing serenity, learning to let go, allowing wishes and dreams to simply come and go, forgiving yourself for mistakes and imperfection. These are key strategies, and regretting missed opportunities does not belong among them. Instead, you should accept that these are part of the past. At those moments in which they presented themselves, there were obvious reasons why these opportunities were not seen as viable chances or why they were not pursued despite their attractiveness. In the end, contentment involves making peace with yourself, with your personal failings, and even with the unpleasant people and situations which we all have to face over and over again in our lives, the ones we can never really escape.

On the other hand, contentment does not entail sticking your head in the sand, just making do, resigning yourself to a situation, or even simply drifting without motivation. You have to work proactively in order to achieve contentment. Furthermore, whoever strives for contentment is also in a position to engage in making the world a better place, helping people in need, and building a career. This is a question of your individual everyday reality, and it involves an attitude toward life that will contribute to your ability to deal with personal problems and to achieve greater health as a result.

The best part is that you can learn to be content. What it eventually comes down to is the distinguishing of the viable from the unviable. It is worthwhile to constantly and critically examine your plans and, when it is warranted, to give up a goal or to alter your current, very personal preferences. What is actually important to me right now? The following pages will show you how to figure that out and how to grow your level of contentment.

Other people's experiences can be quite helpful in recognizing the course you should take and following it. For this reason, nine true stories are scattered throughout this book. The case studies exemplify the destructive influence of continual discontent and the constant pursuit of happiness - whether this occurs in the context of professional success, financial optimization, the perfect partner, or everyday family life. These stories will also show how individuals who found themselves in similar grueling situations developed solutions, and how they became content without throwing overboard all of their perceptions and goals.

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Why Contentment is More Desirable than Happiness

The search for great happiness is doomed to failure, although the desire for the most fulfilling life possible never fades away. There is, however, an escape from this dilemma: the pursuit of a different kind of happiness. Of a state of being in which you accept the unpleasant sides of life in which a "good" is good enough and in which things do not always have to be striding toward being "great." Life is filled simultaneously with good and bad experiences. Happy moments are followed by disappointments and unexciting days, before something nice comes back around again. Yet every day contains incidents that you can indeed call delightful upon affectionate consideration. These include the little things, like a delicious cup of morning coffee, a nice encounter on the way to work, conversations with coworkers, and the sunbeam that shines occasionally through the window. If you savor these moments, it is alright if it sometimes rains, if the shopping bag rips on the way home, and if your boss is in a bad mood.



Contentment encompasses all of this. Whoever accepts the full spectrum of life, welcoming the bad moments as much as possible, will experience a mental state that is significantly more desirable, lasting and fundamental than fleeting happiness. Only in coordination can the nice and not-so-nice events of your daily life facilitate the powerful, fulfilling impression that you are truly alive. Only the person who knows all of it, the good as well as the bad, who has been on top of the world and in the depths of despair, who has stood in the midst of life itself, really experiences the full breadth of its intensity and fascination.

All you have to do is embark on this journey, but that is not all that difficult. The starting point lies far in the past. After all, we all know deep inside that it is impossible to have a life devoid of unhappiness. What is often even more unpleasant than unhappiness itself is the fear of it - the fear that something will not end up going as well as had been hoped. Anyone who is afraid of jeopardizing their own happiness ultimately denies themselves risks, adventures, experiments. Yet, happiness does not function according to a plan. At best, your mental expectations will be fulfilled, but no endorphins will be released. Only the person who accepts the challenges and the entire drama presented by life itself will be confronted by unanticipated, surprising moments.

We learn how to live with unhappiness. In any case, nobody can ever predict if something will turn out well or badly in the end. Something might start out quite promising, but circumstances might, nonetheless, result in a cascade of unpleasant outcomes. And vice versa, totally unexpected opportunities may arise from the most unfortunate events. This is why frustration and sadness are often unjustified feelings in just such moments, as the German saying "Happiness in unhappiness - Unhappiness in happiness" so convincingly indicates.

A little morality tale from the Taoist tradition tells the story of a righteous man, whose horse ran away one day. "What bad luck!" the people cried. "Who knows?" the man replied. His horse soon returned, along with several other very noble horses. "What good luck!" the people declared. "Who knows?" was the man's response. Several days later, his son fell off of one of the noble horses, breaking his leg as he did so. "What bad luck!" the people cried. "Who knows?" the man responded. And when the army drafted all the young men in the region to go off to war, they ignored the son with the broken leg. "What good luck!" the people declared. "Who knows?"

No one knows if one's luck will end up being good or bad. There is no particular harm in taking joy from lovely surprises, but in less pleasant situations, it can help to remember that what looks like bad luck can potentially take a nice turn for the better. "Who knows what it might be good for!" Grandmothers and grandfathers frequently say this to their grandchildren, because over the course of their lives, this is what experience has taught them. Anyone who is deeply hurt from being recently fired from their job, who finds their self-worth threatened because of a position being terminated by an employer, should if possible think forward five years and imagine that this is the best thing that could have happened. Why? Because you have found a significantly more appealing job, one in which you can achieve much more than you could have in your old position. This does not mean, though, that you should celebrate or simply dismiss every failure, or quickly suppress all negative feelings under the assumption that these are somehow inappropriate. Moments of sadness and melancholy have their place in a successful or even happy life. It is advisable to accept all of these emotions.

In today's world, everyone who finds themselves sad thinks that they are on the verge of depression. However, momentary discontent, unhappiness or sadness has nothing to do with true clinical depression,



through which the entire world turns gray and all hope seems to have vanished. On the contrary, temporary melancholy brings with it an array of very intense feelings that should not be spurned. If you are melancholy, you are sensitive to the world, encountering it in all of its sensory facets. You contemplate life itself and reflect on yourself as a person. You seek to expand the boundaries of your mind and your sensibilities. In contrast to true depression, there is absolutely nothing to heal when one is in a state of melancholy. It can even be quite beneficial to let yourself remain in this state, taking the time to actually feel sad.

The blues also have their advantages, and not only for the reason that you need to experience life in all of its rich variety. Under the sardonic motto “Don’t Worry, Be Sad,” the psychologist Joseph Forgas from the University of New South Wales in Sydney summarizes the current state of research into dejection as a mental state. In making his case for melancholy, the psychology professor writes: “At the present time, we are concentrating exclusively on the advantages of feeling good.” Within this context, the bad mood - “dysphoria” - does not have a place in people’s daily lives; however, it is a critically important element.

It is not for nothing that evolution has instilled us with displeasure as a mental state. Over the years, researchers have repeatedly determined that sullen individuals react to things with greater mental agility. If they end up in an unforeseen situation or are required to solve a problem, such people accomplish this quicker than a person in similar circumstances, who is in a more positive frame of mind. According to Forgas, “Many people carry around within themselves a script as to how they will react to a problem, but when they are in a lousy mood, they abandon their typical course and come up with something different.” Bad moods contribute to people losing trust in their own perceptions and stereotypes - not only those connected with other people, but those linked to themselves. “Tenets” is what psychologists call those deep-seated, often negative convictions we hold about ourselves. “I can’t parallel park anyway” is one widespread tenet. “I absolutely can’t sing” is another. We tell ourselves this much too often and refuse to even try to park or sing. Or we simply fail right away. But if we are in a bad mood, our stubbornness kicks in, and we suddenly find ourselves discarding our previous convictions. “We’re simply more open,” Joseph Forgas explains. “On the other hand, anyone who is in a good mood believes in clichés.”

This is clearly due to the fact that our bodies register bad moods as biological warning signs: Pay attention, the situation you’re in right now isn’t the best. You need to sit up and face the challenge. This is what our bad mood hormones might be trying to communicate to us. “When you are in a mood like this, you pay more attention to the signals coming from outside of yourself, which allow you to more easily adjust to the situation at hand,” claims psychologist Klaus Fiedler from the University of Heidelberg. “On the other hand, a person who is more cheerful and even-tempered does not need to pull as much information from what is happening around them.” This is why the sad, bad-tempered individual focuses more on external circumstances, while the cheerful person orients their senses more inward. Thus, dejection and melancholy actually generate creative power.

The biology of the blues has an additional, rather surprising implication. Grumblers and melancholy types are actually more socially minded than those who are always trying to spread good cheer. At least in analytical studies on generosity and justice, these are the people that you are more likely to be able to count on in hard times.

Furthermore, ill-tempered people are not harder to cope with. Rather they are more polite when needing to

ask for things, as Joseph Forgas proved back in 1999. Individuals in a good mood are more likely to snub others, because they occasionally have a harder time keeping themselves in check, as a result of their positive energy. In the context of his research, Forgas asked his students to make a case for a controversial position. Those students who were in a bad mood when writing up their arguments were more convincing when it came to things like higher tuition rates. They not only adopted a softer tone, but also crafted more effective arguments, because their ill humor got their creative juices flowing. Numerous important inventions and artistic achievements have had their roots in states of sadness or depression.

Even your memory can be improved by a melancholy state. Several studies have been done in which psychologists asked their study participants to watch sad films or to talk about situations that had not turned out well for them. After this, they were asked to walk through a shop, paying as much attention as possible to what they saw. The conclusions were clear: Those who were sad or angry noticed significantly more details. This could be due to the fact that an emotionally troubled mind is exposed to a higher concentration of stress hormones. According to the findings of neuroscientist Robert Malinow at the University of California in San Diego, these hormones seem to set in motion the brain's molecular processes, which result in stronger connections between the nerve cells and more intense memories.

Students in bad moods also noticed more discrepancies when they observed an argument between two individuals. Sourpusses are more critical of the external impressions they receive, tending to be more wary and open to exerting themselves. On the other hand, when in high spirits, people are inclined to believe almost anything that they hear and see. Psychologists have dubbed this phenomenon "cognitive simplicity." Things come easily to those who feel good. And "easily" signals to the brain that everything is going well.

For this reason, gloomy individuals are not so quickly distracted or deluded. In general, people think that tall individuals are especially assertive and eyeglass wearers are smarter than others, but people in bad moods are more critical. They examine things more carefully.

This is not an argument for a life of gloom. To the contrary. Even in light of the advantages of emotional downturns, it has been shown, over and over again, that it is important for our well-being for us to experience the full spectrum of life. Focused thought processes, skepticism, social-mindedness, error analysis - dejection can only have a good effect if it exists for a short span of time. An individual can grow numb to melancholy just as quickly as they do to the most exuberant feeling of elation.

Let us hear it for variety! However, this is not the only reason to keep these difficult moments as elements in our lives. Not just because we cannot completely exclude them from our lives anyway, or because they enrich our lives with important feelings, or because they occasionally make us more attentive and socially compatible. We should welcome difficult moments because we emerge from them as stronger individuals. "The art of this exists in accepting life's challenges, tasks and crises, and in understanding these as invitations to further personal development," psychologist Katja Schwab explains.

Even the mere overcoming of obstacles helps secure our feelings of self-worth. Whether we have coped with a crisis, reached a difficult goal or solved a problem, the good feeling we experience at the end of the process instills us with the strength to face the next challenge. Whenever we make it through a particularly bad time, we often discover that life is all the more worth living, valuable, rewarding.

Even the Austrian-Hungarian doctor Hans Selye, the inventor of the word “stress,” knew that strain and pressure could also be something positive. When he came up with the word “stress” in 1936 in order to describe a particular phenomenon he was increasingly diagnosing in his area and among his patients, he combined the word “eustress” - positive, beneficial stress - with the word for negative stress: “distress.” “In daily life, you have to distinguish between two kinds of stress: eustress (with the Greek prefix “eu-” meaning good - as in euphony, euphoria, eulogie) and distress (with the Latin prefix “dis-” meaning bad - as in dissonance, disease, dissatisfaction),” Hans Selye argues. “Depending on the existing conditions, stress is linked to desirable or undesirable outcomes.”

We do especially well when we are faced with tasks we feel up for but which require us to exert ourselves. Receiving presents or lying around lazily in a hammock is very pleasant. However, it is even better when we face something which demands that we apply the best of our abilities. And this not only relates to professional capabilities or technical skills, but to all of our physical and mental strengths: our motivations, our personality characteristics, our efficiency.

“Flow” is what the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, long-time professor at the University of Chicago, has dubbed the condition in which we focus so hard on something that we lose all sense of time. “As long as this phase lasts, the conscious mind operates smoothly, the activities flowing seamlessly one into the other.” In this immersed state, a pleasant feeling of obliviousness arises in which you can dedicate yourself completely to the matter at hand. Flow is not a state of euphoric happiness but one of the stablest positive feelings. A feeling of being one with yourself and the world. Pure contentment

People are at their happiest when they are not compelled to think about or to devote all their efforts to being happy. Over 2,500 years ago, long before anyone ever thought about psychological experiments like those created by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the Chinese philosopher Laotse supposedly said: “Perfect happiness is the absence of the striving for happiness.” Only when individuals stop searching for happiness will they actually truly be happy. Laotse’s happiness is, in essence, nothing other than contentment.

Of course, the issue is not to resign yourself to everything. The goal is rather to moderate your own expectations, adjusting them to the current situation and accepting that there are tempting things that cannot be attained, or if they can be, only through destructive efforts. At the same time, the problems of the world should not be lost from view, although clearly today’s world affairs are usually not conducive to contentment.

True contentment means that after you have reached your goal, you can relax and recharge your batteries, so that you will be in a position to experience and accomplish something new. Productive disquiet is a sensible part of life, but it also requires breaks. And at the end, there must be something to achieve, after which you can take a rest for a while.

Aspiring for contentment has undeniable advantages over pursuing great happiness - and not only because feelings of happiness cannot be sustained over the long term or because the pursuit of happiness hinders these feelings more than sustaining them. Happiness is almost always a reaction to an external stimulus, which makes it less predictable and more difficult to influence. You can even be “deliriously happy” simply because your hormones are running rampant.



On the other hand, contentment comes from within. It has much to do with your intellect, and thus, it is much easier to control than happiness, for which all you can ever do is hope. Contentment primarily manifests itself through the process of learning how to once again value the small, blissful moments in your life and how to comfortably observe the great visions from a distance, while focusing on trying to achieve the realistic dreams. It is always hard to just sit back and watch, but it is easier to sense contentment when the adventure takes a break.

Contentment can take root more strongly in a person's personality than happiness can. Feeling comfortable and well is a natural expression of contentment, the result of a basic approach to life. This is why contentment lingers much longer than happiness, which so easily fades away. Contentment is based on a more stable foundation and is more independent of external events. It is a form of inner peace, of peace of mind.

Contentment and happiness - these two feelings share a link similar to the one that connects love and passionate infatuation, the kind that catapults us to cloud nine. Infatuation is one of the greatest positive feelings there is, at least as good as winning the lottery, but like happiness, it is usually very short in duration. On the other hand, love that survives for years is built on a lasting affection, even if it is rarely moved by states of euphoria, similar to contentment.

In terms of love, the pursuit of the constant rush is just as doomed to failure as the search for lasting happiness in life. If a marriage is not to fail in its first crisis, it requires insight and understanding, which is not a piece of cake. Negative experiences are part and parcel of a shared happiness. These make the lovely moments seem all the more glorious and intense. It is always unpleasant to sit down at a richly set table with a full stomach. The continuous fulfillment of wishes also becomes quite stale with time. Just as the pursuit of contentment is the only way to attain a lasting state of well-being, love on "cloud four," as so eloquently sung about by singer-songwriter Philipp Dittberner in his 2015 hit, is the only chance for enduring love.

This is why you have to do more than simply say "Yes" once in front of the altar or in the more blissful moments of your life, those in which you enjoy in the greatest possible attention and savor the feeling of achieving your goal. Even in the hard times, you have to be able to say yes - to your partner, your marriage, to love or even to life, as it may be. Thus, your strategy should be to shape your life in such a way that you can keep affirming it and therefore be content with it. At the same time, a vast variety of things are significant to different people. If you listen carefully, you will hear a young mother say: Happiness is hearing my children laugh. A retiree is happy because she is needed. A child is happy to have the time to play with her father. An old man is content if he has enough to eat and his heating system works. A woman claims that she is at peace if there is nothing else for her to wish for right now. And a young man wants to be admired more than anything else.

In order to be content, each person has to ask herself what is personally important to her - and then keep her eyes on that. This has one particular advantage: If you know what you value the most, then you can more easily recognize the good moments in life, including those that do not overwhelm you with the hormonal flood of concentrated happiness. You can pause and let yourself be recharged by these quietly flowing moments. You can offer your shoulder to the passing butterfly as a place to rest. This is how contentment can be learned (see *Wie man Zufriedenheit lernen kann*, p. 147).



If you tap into this attitude towards life with increasing effectiveness - if you can stay in tune with yourself and the world, even in the painful, melancholy and desperate moments - you will find yourself answering the question about your well-being with a deeply convicted "I'm content." This will be uttered without a mental bridge to a "Well..." because you will know there is nothing better that could happen to you than this contentment. Happiness? It is completely overrated.