

Dear Wootton Courtenay,

I hope you are well and curious to know how tonight will unfold.

Brian (O'Hara) told me you were having a discussion about feeling good, and I thought I could supply you with some thoughts. First off, I would pause and take a moment to consider what 'feeling good' means to you.

Naturally, the mind associates feeling good with happiness; isn't that what everyone wants? When you ask what do you want out of life, how many people say "I just want to be happy". But I wonder if happiness is the wrong goal. Happiness is a response to something in our environment: the surprise and joy of a good joke, the accomplishment and relief of getting a job, seeing someone we love succeed. Happiness is an elevated state of being - is it really possible to be happy all the time? Aren't the significant moments in our lives often the challenging ones?

Forgive the formulaic nature of this one, but I think it is an interesting idea. I would posit that

Happiness = reality - expectations.

I am not advocating for resignation here. It's more about acceptance, allowing, letting be. With this framework in mind, let's consider another perspective.

Well being.

Well being is a construct, in the same way that weather is a construct. There is no actual thing called weather. It is a combination of temperature, wind speed, humidity, barometric pressure. Well being is similar in nature - it's made up of distinct components:

P – Positive Emotion

E – Engagement

R – Positive Relationships

M – Meaning

A – Accomplishments/Achievements

Reflecting on your own life, which of these do you have in abundance, which of these maybe you feel you are lacking, and how could you increase them?

A few practical tips:

1. From the world of CBT - Keep a record of everything you do for the week, this could be hour by hour, or split morning afternoon, evening. Then at the end of the week mark each activity as either nourishing, depleting or neutral. You can then use this to see what you might need to change. If your week is full of depleting activities, do you need to book in some time for you? Maybe the opposite is true and you need a new challenge. You can also add tasks that give you a sense of mastery,

something you do really well, where you stand back and say, nice, good job. Mowing the lawn, cleaning out that old drawer full of dead batteries and receipts.

2. This one is evidenced-based - Gratitude practice (note practice, this is a skill to develop). Pick something you do everyday e.g. brushing your teeth in the evening. Then think of one to three things you are grateful for and why. The "and why" is important. The research shows that this step is what brings the most benefits. You might even write them down and put them in a jar and whenever you are feeling low and can't think of any good things that are happening to you, you can pull one out.

3. Swap the word 'have to' for 'get to'. "I have to pick the kids up from school" vs "I get to pick the kids up from school." The way we talk to ourselves is important: "I get to pick my kids up from school" embeds the gratitude i.e. I have a car, there is such a thing as a school, that my kids go to.

4. Optimism - I won't go too much into the research here but you can find it in Martin Seligman's book "Flourishing". If two people get a cold and one has it worse than the other. The idea that some people have weak and some people have strong immune systems actually doesn't have that much science behind it. Interestingly optimism and colds are very robustly linked.

In fact, people who are optimistic are less likely to get colds, have less severe symptoms and are ill for less time. It is similar with cardiovascular disease. The research on cancer is more complicated, it's not going to cure cancer but there does seem to be an effect.

Top tip, if you are feeling down, help someone else. Volunteering is a brilliant way to hit all the wellbeing components. You get a good feeling helping someone, it is likely to connect you with other people, there is often a sense of meaning and purpose.

P.S. I have deliberately not gone into neurochemistry here. Mainly because there isn't much you can do about it unless you are on medication. Also brains are very complicated. Serotonin, the neurochemical associated with happiness, is part of our sleep-wake cycle. It's involved in converting melatonin into serotonin, which is partly why a sunny day can make us smile but it is also what makes roosters crow in the morning.

Similarly, dopamine is often talked about as the reward-neurochemical. Which is true, the reward pathway is part of our evolutionary history. Find some honey, have some dopamine so you remember where it was. However, it is not as simple as just increasing dopamine. To illustrate this complexity: if you take someone with Parkinson's and give them more dopamine, they can experience hallucinations. If you take someone with schizophrenia, and reduce the dopamine, they can develop Parkinson's-like symptoms.

So it's interesting stuff, but I am more interested in day to day what we can do to feel good.

So what can you do tomorrow, to help you feel good?

Best Wishes,  
David O'Hara