

Strategies To Living the Life You Want

You may have a profession at which you excel and a nice house in a good neighborhood. But it's time for some serious reevaluation if you still wonder when the fun starts or what you'll be when you grow up. "Success doesn't necessarily lead to fulfillment," says David A. Shapiro, coauthor of several books, including "Repacking Your Bags: Lighten Your Load for the Rest of Your Life." "Unless you take time to formulate your own definition of success, you can reap many rewards in life but still have a sense of hollowness associated with them."

Here are some suggestions on how you can develop your own vision of "the good life" and find ways to balance life's demands with your personal goals and interests.

Take a daily timeout

"It's easy to forget about yourself when you're busy each day concentrating on the business at hand," says Mr. Shapiro.

To learn more about yourself and develop a personal mission statement, take 15 minutes each day to write in a journal about things you care about. Among the questions you should ask and answer: Am I living in a place I belong? Am I doing the right work? Do I know why I do the work I do? Does all this make me happy?

"To develop a sense of who you really are, it's important you explore where you live, who you love, your work and your purpose," Mr. Shapiro says. You don't have to work on your whole life at the same time. "The important part is to start looking at your life in detail," Mr. Shapiro says.

Talk to others

While you're reevaluating your life's purpose, talk to your spouse, other family members, close friends and co-workers who can provide valuable insight. Ask them questions you're also asking yourself, such as: What do you think my purpose in life is? Where do you think is the right place for me?

"Use your friends and family as sounding boards and engage in courageous conversations," says Mr. Shapiro. "People tend not to recognize their own talents and liabilities."

Study the options

Of course, you probably have responsibilities that may prevent you from acting on the changes you want to make. But don't assume you don't have options.

"There may be the opportunity to do something different if you simply explore it with whoever else in your life is depending on you," Mr. Shapiro says.

Take your time

Don't make the mistake of making modifications immediately after you've gained a clearer sense of purpose. Mr. Shapiro doesn't recommend making drastic knee-jerk changes, such as moving to a new city.

Also, keep in mind that the changes you make don't have to be sizable. "Incremental changes can have a profound impact," Mr. Shapiro says.

So can the act of self-exploration. "When you know why you're doing what you're doing, you tend to be more effective, more energized and more excited to get up in the morning," Mr. Shapiro says.

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It's Time to Think Positive

Picture a rose bush in full bloom. What did you notice first: the roses or the thorns? A rose bush has plenty of both. But if you focused on the roses and overlooked the thorns, you were thinking positive.

There is a lesson here.

Thinking positive is a choice. It's a decision to appreciate the roses in your life (loved ones, favorite activities, and relaxing moments) while letting go of the thorns (stresses, disappointments, and losses).

This doesn't mean pretending to be happy when you're not. If you're upset, it's important to deal with and talk about your feelings. Thinking positive means choosing to fill your mind with positive thoughts. Your reward will be a calmer, more hopeful attitude.

The benefits of staying positive

"A positive outlook is necessary to prevent depression, to get along with others, and to feel better about yourself and your life," says psychologist Norman Abeles, Ph.D., past president of the American Psychological Association and an expert on mental health in seniors.

If you have health problems, it's important not to get stuck down in the dumps. "A negative attitude makes you feel worse physically. It increases your stress, which worsens your pain and drains your energy," says Dr. Abeles. On the other hand, "a positive attitude helps you relax and feel more competent" when dealing with everyday challenges.

Dolores Gallagher Thompson, Ph.D., director of the Older Adults and Family Center at the Veterans Affairs Hospital in Palo Alto, Calif., says older adults dealing with health problems become sad that they can't do everything they used to. At that point, some decide they can't ever be happy again.

"I call thinking that starts spiraling downward 'pre-depression,'" she says. "When you start to feel this way, it's time to change your thinking. If you don't, eventually you will become depressed."

How to change your mind

If you tend to count your worries instead of your blessings, it's time for a fresh approach. Here's how to start thinking more positively.

- Reason with facts, not feelings. Changes in your life can make you feel uncertain and anxious. You may then fear the worst. "Step back and get the facts," says Dr. Gallagher Thompson. "Talk to an expert, such as your doctor, and find out exactly what you can expect. Then ask yourself, 'If this was happening to somebody else, what advice would I give them?'"
- Stay connected. Keep in touch with friends and loved ones and be open to developing new friendships. Volunteering your time and keeping active in clubs or faith-based groups will help you focus on others more than yourself. "Spend time with positive people who are living active, fulfilled lives," says Dr. Abeles.
- Plan for your happiness. Schedule time for pleasant activities as often as possible. Having something to look forward to will keep your spirits up.
- Become a problem-solver. Don't just wish problems would go away. Take steps to solve them as quickly as possible, asking for support and help from others.
- Find the silver lining. Give yourself time to adjust to change or loss. Change can bring new opportunities: Be open to them. "Your life won't be the same, but it likely can be better than what you imagine," says Dr. Gallagher Thompson.

Challenge your fear about getting older

From the time we are young, many of us dread growing older.

This is partly because negative images of seniors — as grumpy, disabled, and forgetful — are everywhere, from greeting cards to TV commercials, says Becca Levy, Ph.D., a Yale University psychologist and researcher of stereotypes related to aging. If you accept these negative images as true — and apply them to yourself — you may start believing you're less capable than you really are.

To fight these stereotypes, Dr. Levy suggests asking, "Does this idea really apply to me — or are there examples of older people who are different?" She adds, "Think about positive role models for successful aging, if not in your immediate circle, then in books you've read or movies you've seen."

Likewise, if you make a mistake or forget something, don't dismiss it as "just old age," advises Dr. Levy. "These negative phrases stay with us. The real reason for what you are experiencing could be only temporary — such as tiredness, hunger, or having a lot on your mind."

The bottom line: "Question your deeply held beliefs about aging and screen out the negative." You are what you believe you are. Give yourself credit for the wisdom and maturity you've gained through the years.

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