



25 Resolutions for Happiness: What I've Learned...So Far



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At some stress-filled moment, have you had the experience of realizing you had forgotten what you learned in the past, the self-knowledge that healed and brought joy or just got you through a tough time? The anniversary theme of Life Lessons created an excuse to write down the lessons I have learned, but sometimes forget to use. I'm pledging to renew my commitment to living them, and offer them in the hopes they might help you, or they might inspire you to remember *your* greatest life lessons.

Even though I'm a psychologist, I've learned more of life's lessons through personal experience than through my formal education. Many of my lessons have come from hearing (or reading) the transformational moments of others — their own life lessons — which they were generous enough to share. And the most important lessons I've learned are those that have led me out of pain and into happiness.

And so, dear reader, may you find some message below which leads you to a new belief or understanding, releases you from some burden, or takes you to an even higher level of happiness. In keeping with this hopeful season, I've put the life lessons I've learned...so far...in the form of these New Year's resolutions to remind myself daily that I know how to be happy, despite the challenges life puts in my path. I will be even happier if some of them increase your happiness.

I will make happiness a worthy goal, for achieving it is entirely within my power. Our nation's founding fathers declared the pursuit of happiness to be an important and inalienable right. I choose to use it as a primary measure of my success in life. I believe I will die peacefully if I can say I have lived a happy life and helped others to do the same. Achieving both goals is well within my grasp because, as Abraham Lincoln noted, "Most people are about as happy as they make up their minds to be." So all I have to do is help people change their minds. It isn't what *happens* to us that determines how happy we are, it's what and how we *think* about what happens to us. Some people call it *attitude*. Whatever name you give it, it's the key to happiness.

I will use my feelings to tell me when things aren't working for me. When I'm angry, sad, upset, afraid, frustrated, or irritated, when any of those "unpleasant" feelings come over me, I will recognize them as signals that something needs to be changed, so I can regain my happy state. I will use them as cues to examine the situation at hand, particularly my thoughts and beliefs about what is happening to

me. I will look at how I am *interpreting* what is happening, what thoughts are leading to my hurt or anxious or angry feelings. Some have described the process as watching themselves experience the feeling, and then looking for the thoughts behind the emotion. I find that doing this lets me be a grownup, empowered to take responsibility for my feelings, rather than a child victimized by them.

I will let go of what I *cannot* change: other people, the past, the future. This resolution takes the constant reminder to stop being upset over what isn't in my control. Reinhold Niebuhr's serenity prayer helps me do that. "Grant me the serenity to accept what I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." I have to remember that I don't get to decide other people's feelings or behavior. I can't make them act the way I want them to act. I can't make them love me. I can't make them happy. What I *can* do is ask them what they're thinking or how they're feeling. I *can ask* them for what I'd like them to give me. I can control my *response* to their behavior, creating a reward or punishment for their choice. I can warn them what consequence I will provide for each of their choices.

When I find myself regretting something from the past, I will ask myself if it will help to talk to someone, to get a new perspective on the situation or to share mine, or decide whether I need to apologize for what I did to cause my regret. I will let go of my worries of the future by thinking about what I can do to prepare for the situation that is making me anxious. Then I will let go of pointless worrying about what I can't control. I can choose to stop investing my physical and emotional energy in the things I cannot change.

I will focus on what I *can* change--my thoughts, beliefs, expectations, and behavior, which will change how I feel. When I examine, for example, why I'm upset over other people's behavior in traffic, it's often because I'm afraid I'm going to be late for an appointment, which usually happens because I didn't leave enough time for lost or leisurely motorists and red lights. Rather than yell my frustration (with the windows rolled up, of course) at the "slow" driver in front of me, I can take responsibility for having brought my tardiness on myself and accept the fact that I *will* be late rather than shift the blame by focusing on other people and circumstances. I will then use my time constructively by phoning the person who's expecting me or thinking about how to apologize when I finally arrive, while resolving to allow myself more transit-time in the future. Caught in similar frustrating, unavoidable circumstances, rather than fume at other people's "selfishness" and inconsiderate behavior, I can remind myself I have no control over what others choose to think or do. Instead, I can refuse to turn into a whining child because of situations and events beyond my power to alter or fix. By keeping my attention on the things I *can* control — my thoughts, beliefs, expectations, feelings and behavior — I will remain an empowered, responsible adult. And I will have transformed my anger into calm.

I will appreciate the moment. I will notice the good things that are happening to me right *now*, whether it's a beautiful sky, a happy child, an efficient grocery store clerk, or hitting all the green lights for a change. I don't know how many years or days I'll live, so I want to live *this* moment fully. I will ask myself often, "If this turns out to be the last day of my life, have I enjoyed it to the fullest extent possible?" It's easy to lapse into worrying about the future, or dreaming of better things to come, or stewing in our regrets over the past while we miss the golden sunlight streaming in our window, or don't hear the lovely song playing on the radio. I will try not to miss *this* moment because I'm so focused on what I should be doing next. Even when I am working toward a future goal, I will try to

enjoy the process of getting there. I will ask myself constantly, “What can I do to wring the most joy from this moment, from this experience?” I will remind myself that taking out the garbage in the rain is a chance to smell the wet earth, to feel nature’s fresh raindrops on my skin, maybe even to stomp in a puddle. I will seize every opportunity to laugh and have fun and learn from every task, no matter how routine or boring. Housework becomes fun when I blast Motown and dance while drying the dishes or sing along with the Supremes while making the bed, so this is what I will do to make my life joyful.

I will focus on what I *have* so that I experience abundance, remembering that unhappy people focus on what they *want*, and they feel deprived. I accept that I won’t get everything I want. I will remind myself that if I base my happiness on getting what I want instead of enjoying what I have, lasting happiness will be unattainable as my wants will constantly expand to exceed my ability to attain them. I will try not to turn my *wants* into *needs*. I will embrace this healthy attitude: I will go after what I want, but I will detach my happiness from the outcome. In other words, not getting my way, even if I worked really hard for it, doesn’t have to make me unhappy.

Happy people choose to see the best in people and the world. Unhappy people choose to see the worst. People argue over which view of the world is “true” but very little is truly knowable. We tend to see only the “evidence” that confirms our beliefs, thereby convincing ourselves those beliefs are “facts.” I will challenge that tendency by being open to everyone’s convictions and viewpoints, and then choose the belief that makes me feel happiest.

I will be grateful. Taking stock of all the good things in my life and being grateful for them will keep me in the moment and make me happier. I will remind myself of all of the people who have less than I have, whether it be health, resources, family or friends. I know that if I choose to believe there is a gift in *everything* that happens to me, I will always find one.

I will believe that all people are equally valuable and worthy by virtue of being human, and that makes me valuable and worthy. I will accept that I don’t have to be perfect, I don’t have to meet anyone else’s expectations or needs to be a worthy and loveable person. And they don’t have to meet mine.

I will accept others as they are: valuable, loveable, unique and worthwhile. I know I am happier, and my husband is happier, when I accept that he has his own way of doing things. Being gruff in the morning and reading the newspaper over breakfast when I want to talk, is just the way he is, and that’s OK. Barry Neil Kaufman said “To love is to be happy with. No judgments. No conditions. No expectations.” So I will stop wanting other people to be different than they are.

I will stop assuming I know what others think and feel. I’ve discovered that I’m a poor mind reader. Studies comparing eyewitness accounts invariably reveal that no two people see things exactly the same way, and that each of us interprets what we perceive in a different way. We all have different beliefs, which weave into a complex web or system of beliefs. Therefore we see the world differently, behave differently, and show our love differently. I don’t expect others to behave as I would in a similar situation, so I’m aware that I can’t correctly infer what other people think or feel solely from their actions. I’ve discovered that when I share perceptions and interpretations with other people,

each of us turns out to have a different read or take on any given situation and its meaning. It makes me realize, again and again, how unique we all are — and how wonderful that is.

I will not judge others (or myself) because it is harsh and destructive. When I investigate why I am feeling angry or hurt, I often find that it's the result of a judgment I've made. We grow up learning to discern differences. When we attach value to those perceptions (better than/worse than) and rank our comparisons, we become judgmental. Even when I win the comparison contest, I find I've lost, just because I played. Once I enter the "who is better" competition, I can always think of people richer, thinner, faster, smarter, and more beautiful than I am. I don't like being judged by others, yet I can be my own harshest critic. I find that when I start measuring how "good" or "bad" others are, I devalue them or myself, and I wind up feeling smug or inadequate. I will give up feeling smug to avoid feeling "not as good as." Therefore, I will avoid playing the ranking game. I will try to remind myself to be content with simply being "*good enough*," and let others be good enough too. I've found that my judgments of "right" and "wrong" are based on my own experiences, my own biases, my own culture, beliefs, and values, and that not everyone uses the same yardstick. So I will try to let go of "right" and "wrong" and see other people's choices merely as "different." I will give up those judgments, so I can be happier.

I will let go of my *Shoulds*. Whenever I hear myself thinking or saying *I should* do something, I will stop myself. There's a saying I like: "Don't should on yourself." I hardly ever have fun doing what I *should*. So I will banish the *shoulds* (and the accompanying resentment) from my life by asking myself what will happen if I don't do what I should. And then I'll decide whether or not I *want* to do the thing to avoid the consequences of not doing it. If I decide I don't *want* to do it, then I won't, even if I *should*. If I decide I *want* to avoid the consequence, the resentment and procrastination lifts, and I find the task has become more enjoyable. When I think of what someone else *should* do, it's usually with judgment. I will not turn my desires in regard to other people's behavior into *shoulds*. I will not judge them for not meeting my expectations.

I will remember that other people's actions are almost always about them, not about me. I will remember that human beings take too many things personally. When I start to feel sad about my father not calling me, I realize it is because I am *assuming* he doesn't think about me, and I can make myself feel worse by interpreting this as evidence that he doesn't love me. When my husband's toothpaste remains in the sink, it isn't because he wants to offend me, or thinks I married him to clean up after him. When I think it is about me, I can test my hypothesis by asking about the person's actions, or I can look for other "evidence" to check out the validity of my thoughts. The reality is that my father dislikes making phone calls, not that he doesn't love me. So I choose to believe that he is thinking about me, which makes me happy.

I will communicate, ask questions and listen. When I start to be bothered by someone acting differently than I would in the same situation, I may ask her why she is doing it that way. Rather than guessing, or assuming her reasons, I'm curious about the beliefs she holds that led to her behaviors. It's very important to ask without judgment, so I don't trigger defensiveness and create an argument. When I am unhappy about the effect of the other person's behavior on me, I share what I am feeling and why. I tell him the consequence I am experiencing, how I interpret his behavior, along with what I hope he will do and why, and we talk about his thoughts and options, and mine. The ensuing

knowledge often leads me to change my interpretation, which then improves my feelings. When we understand each other's goals, feelings, and thoughts, I can accept his choices, and even if they aren't the ones I want, and our relationship is deepened. In short, when I listen, I learn.

I will be curious. I will try to be like a young child, seeing the world through new eyes, rather than making the world fit into my expectations, or taking this amazing life for granted. This helps me learn new things, lose my assumptions, and gain new perspectives. I will try to see the world from other people's vantage points so that I widen my universe, become more accepting, and enjoy wonder at our diversity.

I will lower my expectations. High expectations set us up for constant disappointment. I would much rather be surprised and delighted by things turning out better than I expected, instead of expecting more than I get, and being disappointed.

I will remember that "being human" means being imperfect and making mistakes. And that's all right. Rather than becoming critical and angry at myself, I try to be as gentle with myself as I would be with a beloved child who has made a mistake. It isn't the avoidance of mistakes that makes us mature, it's how we handle them when they happen. Accepting my mistakes, addressing them, learning from them, and moving on works for me.

I will take chances. I will be bold and take a stand. In interviews with nursing home residents, a study found that people's biggest regrets were not things they did, but things they didn't do. Susan Davis says, "Joy comes from taking risks around your deepest values." So I dared to write my Life Lessons for Soulful Living.

I will live my values. I will think about what is important to me, and the kind of person I want to be. Then I will make my everyday decisions based on which actions are most in alignment with who I want to be and what I value. I want to be loving and generous, so doing something that makes someone else feel good makes me feel great. I find that kind words, kind deeds, and generosity come back to me tenfold.

I will remind myself that "I don't know" is a good answer. Since I want to be honest, and I still have a lot to learn (hopefully, I'll have more life to do it), many times I don't know the "true" answer to something. When that happens, I'll remember it's better to say "I don't know, but I think..." than to misinform someone. I'll start more sentences with, "This is what I choose to believe about that." I remind myself that if I'd be embarrassed if my comments were quoted in the local newspaper, then it's better not to make them.

I will listen to my body. It tells me what it needs, and it's my job to pay attention. When I ignore my body's messages, I have discovered those messages get louder, usually in the form of pain, anxiety, depression or sickness. I will try to understand what it is telling me (Louise Hay's books can help) and find a way to change what isn't working. After all, my body is my vehicle for this lifetime. If I respond to what it tells me, I'll have a more comfortable ride.

I will remember to breathe. Really breathe. When I feel stressed, I take a few deep breaths. I focus on filling my belly with air, then expelling all the air from my body. When I feel totally empty of air, I take a new, full breath. This breathing exercise refreshes my mind and helps me get in touch with what I'm feeling. When I'm not sure how to respond to a question, or a situation, I will take a deep breath before responding.

I will get enough sleep. I will try to give myself the opportunity to get eight hours of sleep every night. Studies say we need at least seven, but my body asks for eight. When I'm sick, I will let myself sleep more, because it replenishes my body.

I will remember that *if I ask for what I want and accept what I receive, I will get what I need.* My mantra reminds me that it is my job to *ask* what I want because others can't read my mind. However, I will remember it's a mistake to expect to get everything I ask for. In fact, if I detach from the outcome, I often receive something even better than I expected, that I wouldn't have recognized if I was focused on my desire. This is especially true if I take the time to look for the gift in what I receive.

"Serenity is not freedom from the storm, but peace within the storm." I will live by this motto. Life is turbulent, which is fine by me because my happiness is a result of what is happening inside of me, not what is happening on the outside. As Barry Neil Kaufman says, "Though we might not determine all the events around us, we are omnipotent in determining our reaction to them." I will remember I get to choose how happy I am.

Molly Stranahan, Psy.D., uses a synthesis of life's teachings, including her training and personal and professional experiences, to help people make choices that lead to happier, healthier, more-fulfilling lives. She incorporates the influences of cognitive-behavioral psychology, Twelve Step programs, various religious traditions, and extensive research into stress management and happiness into her work. Molly creates and presents programs, including *The Path to Happiness* (www.pathtohappiness.com), works with individual clients and writes. She has been published in the *More Than Money* magazine and is currently working on a personal growth/spiritual/self help book with the working title of *The Path to Happiness*. She can be contacted at molly@mollystranahan.com.

Molly received a doctorate in psychology from Rutgers University Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology in 1996. She is a co-leader and program designer for the Summer Institute, a personal growth program for inheritors of financial wealth (www.summer-institute.org). She is also a member of the Board of Advisors of More Than Money Institute (www.morethanmoney.org), an educational organization which supports individuals in examining the impact of money in their lives and encourages them to act on their highest values. Besides speaking on happiness, relationships, values, money and life purpose, she has spoken at numerous conferences and forums related to philanthropy, values-congruent investing and family business issues.

Molly's life purpose is to leave the lives of those whose paths have crossed hers a little happier, whether by something they have learned, or a smile she has offered. Her goals are to be loving, nonjudgmental, generous, honest and open, both in person and in her work.