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You Can Feel Joy Even When the World Seems Bleak—but You Have to Try Harder

It can be tough to be happy now, and might even feel unseemly. Here are strategies that can help.

By [Andrea Petersen](#)
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Liz Horvath was feeling excited and optimistic last month. [Covid cases](#) were declining and life was returning to some sort of pre-pandemic normal. Then the [invasion of Ukraine](#) happened.

“It’s like a whole other type of crushing sadness,” says Ms. Horvath, 24, who works in education in the suburbs of Philadelphia. “There’s some guilt about even trying to take time to do things that I enjoy when there’s so much pain and suffering in the world.”

It can be tough to be happy—and might even feel unseemly to be so—when people are dying and fleeing for their lives. But psychologists say that it is exactly times like these that it’s most important to cultivate moments of joy and fulfillment. Positive emotions have many benefits for physical and mental health and help us get through the hard times, says Dacher Keltner, professor of psychology and faculty director of the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley.

There are strategies to help you create these moments of joy. Mental-health professionals recommend activities such as taking a walk [outside in nature](#), doing something helpful for someone else and scheduling time to do things that make you happy.

It isn't selfish or frivolous to seek happiness, says Lynn Bufka, a clinical psychologist and associate chief, practice transformation at the American Psychological Association.

"It doesn't diminish someone else's pain for us to feel happy or good about something," she says. Instead, feelings of joy and happiness make us feel more connected to other people and can give us the energy and perspective to help others, she says.

Americans are certainly [stressed out](#). A March 2022 survey commissioned by the American Psychological Association found that 87% of adults said [rising prices due to inflation](#) are a significant source of stress, and 80% cited the invasion of Ukraine. More people rated these as stressors than any other issue the poll has covered during its 15-year history. About three-quarters of survey participants said they are overwhelmed by the number of crises facing the world now, according to the poll, which involved more than 2,000 adults. Meanwhile, in a February poll, 58% said the pandemic is a daily stressor.

Positive emotions are directly linked to better health. In scientific studies, so-called positive affect is [associated with longer life](#), stronger immune function, lower blood pressure and lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol, among other benefits, according to a paper published in 2019 in the Annual Review of Psychology. The paper's authors define positive affect as "the experience of pleasurable emotions such as happiness, joy, excitement, enthusiasm, calm and contentment."

Regularly doing activities that you enjoy is important for mental health, too, says Natalie Christine Dattilo, a clinical psychologist at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston. She notes that scheduling pleasurable activities is a key component of behavioral activation, an effective treatment for depression.

"We have to practice feeling good in order to feel good in the future. It's kind of like a muscle," says Dr. Dattilo.

Dr. Dattilo advises people to be mindful of how much time they're spending exposing themselves to negative or stressful information and balance it with positive experiences.

For several weeks after the war in Ukraine started, Ms. Horvath says she and her boyfriend were consuming news and talking about it for hours every day. Now, Ms. Horvath has instituted a 45-minute daily time limit for discussions of the war. "I hit a wall. It was too much," she says. Ms. Horvath is making time to binge fun TV shows and movies and pet her cat instead.

When things are so gloomy, it can be tough to know where to start to create moments of joy. Think back to activities you used to do, or people you used to spend time with, that have previously been sources of happiness, suggests Dr. Bufka. If that seems too difficult,

she advises focusing on experiencing the senses in the smallest moments, such as the color of a flower or the sound of laughter.

Dr. Bufka also recommends getting outside. Scientific studies have found that spending time in nature is linked to decreased anxiety and greater feelings of well-being.

Berkeley's Dr. Keltner advises people to take an "[awe walk](#)," a walk where you focus your attention on the [trees](#) and sky around you.

"You stop thinking about all of your self-focused strivings and worries," he says. Or spend a few minutes thinking about what you're [grateful for](#), which research has linked to better [sleep](#) and greater happiness.

Plan an activity or experience that you think will bring you joy regularly; every day is ideal, says Dr. Dattilo. Schedule it for a specific time. Put it into your Google calendar, like you would an important meeting.

One of the most powerful ways to bring ourselves joy is to do something helpful for someone else, notes Dr. Dattilo.

When Cathy Dunsby was feeling sad and overwhelmed by the war in Ukraine, she bought a Ukrainian flag, attended a local vigil in support of Ukraine and donated to several GoFundMe efforts to bring money and supplies to refugees from the war.

"Every single story is heartbreaking. There's no way not to be impacted by it," says Ms. Dunsby, a 53-year-old mother of four children ages 14 to 23 in Easton, Conn. Ms. Dunsby is also making an effort to [connect with friends](#) and is busy planning a summer trip to Europe for her family. Finding joy in these activities, she says, makes her better able to meet the needs of her family.

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