

# The journey toward joy <sup>1</sup>

By Warren Wolfe

“There is no magic solution to moving to an outlook of happiness and contentment. And even if you are feeling OK but not joyful, there are steps you can take today to enhance your life...

**SMILE** – Even in stressful situations, smiling reduces your blood pressure and heart rate and improves your outlook. When you’re getting ticked off in an argument or frustrating situation, consciously smile. Even a fake smile can soften the negative experience and improve your whole day.

**EXERCISE** – At any age, exercise does wonders for your joints, muscle strength and brain. And just as important, even just a 20-minute brisk walk releases endorphins, dopamine, adrenaline and other brain chemicals that improve your mental health for up to 12 hours.

**BREATHE** – Deep breathing not only energizes the body, it also calms the mind. It’s one way to interrupt upset feelings, but slow, deep breathing also helps slow the mind and produce melatonin when you’re having trouble with wakefulness at night.

**BE GRATEFUL** – Whatever is happening in your life, there’s a lot that’s working well. Stop and take stock – sunshine, music, grocery stores, heartbeat, friendships, bird calls and so much more. My sister has MS and no longer can move her arms or legs, and she ends each day saying aloud five things for which she’s grateful. Now her evening aide joins in with her own list. Some people start daily gratitude journals to be mindful of the blessings in their lives.

**GIVE COMPLIMENTS** – Everyone deserves compliments – even those who seem difficult. Notice and comment on their smiles, attractive clothing choices, helpful actions, strength and perseverance, humor, activities, attitudes or other worthy attributes. When you help others feel happy, you feel happier too.

**DON’T DUCK UNHAPPY MOMENTS** – Those feelings are real, but take a few minutes to take stock. Acknowledge the feelings that arise. What’s the underlying issue? How can you move from feeling bad to feeling whole again? Is action needed? Do you need to let someone know how you feel – a friend, spouse, counselor, even the person that caused the upset?

**REFRAME** – See how you might take what feels like a negative situation and turn it around. One way is to see what lessons that situation might be teaching you. Another is to see another way of looking at the situation. Perhaps my brother really doesn’t dislike me; maybe he feels guilty about never helping me when Mom was dying and can’t talk about it—an opportunity for me to offer compassion.

**CHOOSE HEALTH** – Develop a realistic plan to enhance your body and mind. Consider your diet, physical activity, hobbies, volunteer opportunities, medical care, friendships, spiritual growth – activities that bring you happiness and build physical and mental health. And remember, you can “test drive” any of these approaches and see if they work for you.

**BLESS THE JOURNEY** – If you feel down, sad, depressed or forgotten, remember that didn’t happen overnight. Many of our attitudes were learned at an early age and you had little control then. But now you have choices you can make. Bless the journey – one we all take as we grow older – and welcome the opportunity before you now.

Warren Wolfe served as a reporter for the Star Tribune for more than 40 years. He and his wife are graduates of VAN’s Evolve program, and he is very involved in organizations focused on aging across our community. He lives in Roseville.”

<sup>1</sup> Edited, for full version go to: <https://vital-aging-network.org/the-journey-toward-joy/>, (accessed December 17, 2023).

Storytelling in a small group or personal reflection. One by one, each person shares their answer to the first prompt below. Then go to the next prompt and so forth. A person can pass.

- 1. Share a story of when you experienced joy in your life.** How has that experience impacted your life?
- 2. Who taught you about joy, or being joyful, in your life?** Share more.
- 3. Which of the nine steps above are things you are currently doing in your life?** (smile, exercise, breathe, be grateful, give compliments, don't duck unhappy moments, reframe, choose health, and bless the journey)
- 4. Share about one or two of the nine steps which caught your attention. A step you would like to do more often and fully to enhance your life.** What way of thinking and acting would you need to let go of to be able to incorporate the step(s) more fully in your life going forward?

More from “The journey toward joy” by Warren Wolfe:

“You probably already know the value of a positive approach to life –better health, longer life, stronger friendships, less depression and physical pain, resistance to cancer, heart disease, even flu and COVID. In addition to strengthened immune system, a positive approach often leads to better decision making.

OK, but how do you get there? It can't be as easy as flicking the on/off switch, can it – simply deciding to replace sadness with joy?

Well, it turns out that growing research findings indicate it may not be that difficult. There are things you can do that start replacing old negative idea –often learned in childhood–with new thoughts that open the door to a positive outlook...

There are other approaches to developing a more positive and healthier attitude – work at living in the present, practice forgiveness, clean out excess trash from your home and your surround yourself with positive people, cultivate deeper friendships.”

Check out and download more like this at <https://lifesjourney.us/storytelling-in-small-groups-menu/>

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