

# MailOnline

## Yes, you can always be happy!

**Counting your blessings really does play a part in tackling mental illness, as ERICA CAMUS explains in this uplifting guide to her positive psychology techniques**



- Erica has paranoid schizophrenia and has spent time on psychiatric ward

- She says activities such as walking and gardening are highly therapeutic

- Makes her own 'happy book' recording all of the good things in her life

- Says best technique for happiness is to count 'three blessings' a day

Rummaging through charity shops, going for a walk through the forest, tending to my little potted garden, or enjoying every bite of a six-course meal at the 17th Century Weston Park with my partner – these are all things that make me feel happy. I do them as often as I can (well, the last one was a pretty special occasion, to be honest).

I list these things because, for me, moments to savour have been hard-won. I have paranoid schizophrenia and have even spent time on a psychiatric ward. I'll be on medication for the rest of my life.

Today, I am largely recovered (the psychiatric term is in remission). I'm committed to my care plan – things I do to maintain my stability, which I devised with my community psychiatric nurse.

Alongside tablets, I have weekly psychotherapy sessions, and considering the things that make me happy – in fact, I write them in a journal – is part of this.

It's a simple trick but highly effective, and both listing them and taking time out to actually do them is part of a type of therapy called compassion-focused therapy (CFT), which I have written about before in *The Mail on Sunday*.

Increasingly, research shows that counting our blessings can have a positive effect on a range of mental illnesses, including depression and anxiety, which affect millions of Britons.

### **MADE TO MEASURE**

Happiness is a buzzword. In 2010, David Cameron announced his plans to invest £2 million in creating a 'happiness index'. The scheme, run by the Office of National Statistics, is supposed to give another measure of how well we are doing as a nation, besides just looking at the economy.

Other countries do this, and when you suspend your cynicism for a moment, it does make good sense – after all, we know money doesn't buy happiness.

According to the latest results, 33 per cent of UK adults rated their happiness at a 'very high level' last year, which was an increase of two per cent on the previous year.

Research published earlier this year from the San Diego School of Medicine revealed that 37 per cent of schizophrenic patients were happy most or all of the time. That compared with 83 per cent of 'normal' respondents.

A worrying 15 per cent of the former group said they were never or rarely happy, while no one in the comparison group ticked that box.

On one hand, this shows that happiness and living with serious mental illness needn't be an oxymoron. But happiness is clearly more of a struggle for some of us.

And the pursuit of it has become something of an obsession. More than 50,000 books are listed on Amazon with the word 'happy' in the title. Many of them are self-help books, perhaps geared towards making us happy.

Making my own happy book, in which I record the good things in life – whether they are kind words from friends and family, or lovely memories – serves the same purpose. It's part of my own CFT, which I started earlier this year.

Having tried other so-called 'talking treatments' including cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and mindfulness, I have found the approach works really well. Of course, whether it suits you is highly personal, but for the past five years CFT has been offered on the NHS for people with a variety of mental health problems.

Like mindfulness, it's largely inspired by Buddhism but also has its roots in CBT, which helps patients change the way they think and therefore behave.

As Professor Paul Gilbert, one of the pioneers of the method, explains: *'It's similar to CBT, which works by helping patients to consider their negative thoughts and come to more realistic alternative views.'*

*'But while CBT focuses on changing behaviour in a neutral, practical way – such as using timesheets to plan the day more productively – in CFT the focus is more on being kind to yourself.'*

## **LIFTING THE GLOOM**

If this all sounds rather Polyanna-ish (and I'm not ashamed to say I'm a fan of the book and films), experts are quick to point out this isn't simply a matter of saying *'Think happy thoughts and you'll feel better'*.

As Dr Martin Seligman, the father of 'positive psychology', says: *'Psychotherapy traditionally is where you go to talk about your troubles, [but it can also be where you] go to talk about positive emotion, your strengths and virtues, and how to build more meaning into your life.'*

His methods have been shown in placebo-controlled trials to have an impact on symptoms of depression.

In one such trial, 500 healthy volunteers were recruited to take a range of online tests while undergoing a 'wellbeing evaluation' over a six-month period.

One of the exercises that proved most beneficial in terms of boosting mood was 'three blessings': each day, participants were asked to write down three things that went well that day, and say why.

This test was given to depressed patients. An astonishing 94 per cent of severely depressed people became less depressed, and 92 per cent said they became happier, with an average symptom relief of a whopping 50 per cent.

A control group, which was not given the exercise, did not have the same turnaround. One of the symptoms of my illness, which started in my teenage years (I'm now 34), is that I become consumed by the idea that I have done something dreadfully wrong, to the point where I won't leave the house.

I have found in the past that therapy that required me to focus on the negative things in my upbringing, for instance, was almost traumatic. So, given that I have a tendency to feel so bad about myself, it's no surprise CFT is a boon – and I believe it could well be for anyone whose mental illness might lead to similar feelings of causeless guilt or self-hate. It's worth chatting to your GP if you feel it might be right for you.

## **TRAIN THE BRAIN**

**Of course, being unhappy is not reserved for psychiatric patients such as myself.**

**Susanna Halonen, a Surrey-based coach, trainer and self-proclaimed**

**'Happyologist', says that happiness is a challenge for everyone.**

**She explains: *'Often people forget about happiness and think it's something they can delay until retirement. But in fact you can choose to be happy every day. It's a bit like a habit and you can train your brain, just like you work out muscles in the gym. Your brain can become stronger in its positivity, making optimism more natural.'***

Labour MP David Lammy, who is chairman of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Wellbeing Economics, agrees, saying: *'In Britain, public satisfaction with life has hardly*

*changed since 1970. Despite all the social, technological and medical advances we have made since then, we are still no happier or more fulfilled as a nation.*

*'That should be a real concern for our national leaders and can involve anything from campaigning for fair pay to promoting good planning in new houses and finding ways to tap into the potential benefits of things like positive psychotherapy.'*

As well as choosing to spend time doing things I enjoy and listing them, I keep a folder containing treasured letters and emails, which I have printed out, and mementos and greeting cards that have brought a smile to my face.

If a rain cloud of unhappiness does float along, I take refuge in this folder – something I work hard to keep up to date.

I force myself to read it cover to cover, and once I've finished, my mood always changes dramatically. It works a little like an umbrella giving me shelter when a cloud blackens my mental sphere.

But I'm sure everyone would benefit from spending some time working towards a happy state of mind. If I can do it, anyone can.

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## Three simple steps that can help banish negative thoughts

**THIS is the Three Good Things exercise, a simple practice that has been scientifically proven to increase happiness and a sense of wellbeing – in everyone. Created by psychologist Dr Martin Seligman, it works by redirecting attention towards positive thoughts and away from negative ones.**

**METHOD** Each night for a week before bed:

**1** Think of three positive things that happened that day. It can be anything – big, like a promotion; everyday, like a trip to the shops with the children; or small, like enjoying a meal. As long as it seems to you like a good, positive, happy thing.

**2** Write them down on a pad or a place where they can be stored.

**3** Reflect on each thing, and why they happened. This is the most important part, and the more detailed and specific the better. You were promoted as a reward for your

excellent work. The trip to the shops with the children was fun, and you feel lucky that they're in good health. The meal was great because you absolutely adore those ingredients. The reasons and detail are personal, and they need only make sense to you.

*Originally published in the Daily Mail: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-2835848/Yes-happy-Counting-blessings-really-does-play-tackling-mental-illness-ERICA-CAMUS-explains-uplifting-guide-positive-psychology-techniques.html>*