



How to Be Happy

Dear Aunt Bossy,

There are so many angry and unhappy people around. I don't remember it ever being this bad. What do you think has caused this and what can we do about it?

Curious Cathy

Dear Cathy,

Oy, talk about a tough question! I have no definitive answer, but here is my take on the situation and a possible step in the right direction to slow the negative swell down. The most important step to nip unhappiness and anger in the bud is to stop blaming another. I know, hard to believe.

I have noticed that unhappy people (I'm not talking about people who become unhappy temporarily because of circumstances in their own lives) fail to do a couple of things. First, they don't have a deep sense of who they are. If you don't know who you are, at your complicated core, you can't possibly make the best use of your life.

Figuring out who you are is really difficult. Why? Because most of us depend on what other people tell us or let us know to determine what is good and/or bad about us. Or, should I say

strong and weak about us? To get a sense of your identity, you must question yourself constantly, asking, “What am I doing/thinking?” “Why?” “Really?” Honesty with yourself will pay off as surely as kidding yourself will doom you to stagnation.

Second, unhappy people don’t pay enough attention to happy people. Many miserable souls find it comforting to hang out with people who are miserable for many of the same reasons. It doesn’t matter why they are unhappy – politics, love, poverty, illness – they find comfort in those in the same position. This is a good way to paralyze a move toward happiness, especially if you don’t know who you are.

Third, unhappy people don’t pay in-depth attention to other people. The best way to figure out what makes humans happy or unhappy is to pay close attention to others and figure out what they are thinking or doing to produce their states of mind.

I was an international tour director early in my career. The company for which I worked took affinity groups – alumni associations, garden clubs, Masonic lodge members, and on and on—all over the world. I was young, mostly terrified of everything. However, I put one foot in front of the other and did my job, interacting with the tour members, finding lost luggage, getting rooms changed, boarding buses, explaining everything, and eagerly waiting to see if I would get tipped at the end of the trip.

It did not take me long to develop the instinct about who was going to have a great time, no matter what, and who was going to be miserable, no matter what. First, I learned to recognize it, and, later I learned to pinpoint exactly what the drivers were. Kindness, curiosity, generosity, gratitude, good manners, humor, and respect led to a great vacation. Selfishness, greediness, rudeness, and lack of respect for others, produced an unhappy client.

I have spent the rest of my life trying to incorporate those good things into my approach to life and other people. Paying very close attention to others is what taught me.

Fourth is what I call “hugging the thorns.” For some reason many people feel more important when they cling to negativity. For example, take something like our outstandingly low unemployment rate, highly reflected in minority and female populations. You would think everyone would be happy about that. Unfortunately, many are furious when they hear this

because they loathe the guy in the White House. That attitude rears its ugly head no matter who is in charge. Many were attacking Obamacare way before they knew what was in it.

Fifth, refusing to acknowledge human nature is another pathway to misery. Once you accept that we all want the same thing – to be valued, physically comfortable, healthy, and engaged in interesting pursuits of any level, you are on the way. Add on the very human trait of wanting more, and you are there. I've yet to meet a person who didn't, at some level, want to have more currency, time, luxury, love, beauty. Every single one of us wants a version of those things, and to deny it is to denigrate humans. (Before you attack dogs unleash yourselves, please know that a hermit who lives in the woods can easily have all those traits. It isn't dependent on one factor, and certainly not money or the generic definition of success, wealth, or beauty.)

Sixth: Think for yourself. If you assume you always do this, you are most probably wrong. Doing a rigorous assessment of who you are will probably enlighten you.

And, then, there is social media. I'll leave that to historians, but it does allow people to magnify their unhappiness and anger with little result. It can also make everyone feel important since they get flooded with affirmation, no matter how hideous the thinking.

And, ironically, as bad as things like Twitter and Facebook are for giving encouragement to haters, I also find that people who disparage social media are not very interested in others, much less sharing themselves. I'm not suggesting we all post daily narcissistic, carefully curated selfies, featuring our best side, but I've seen wonderful friendships and sharing of love and intelligence on Facebook. Twitter is a mystery to me, so I can't give an opinion there.

Social media and the pervasive nature of today's media, make me think all this furor isn't a new thing, but is exacerbated by giving everyone a platform, and easy access to a knee jerk opinion. Combine that with the dumbing down of our educational system in which children are not taught to read in depth or to think for themselves, and you've got anger.

Lastly, the byproduct of desperately searching for happiness has come to involve assigning evil to anyone who disagrees with you or stands in your way. I can't even...

Bottom line: Figure out who you are and reassess on a regular basis. Seek out happy people. Pay close attention to others and adopt and adapt their best qualities. Avoid negativity. Accept human nature while working on refining your own version of that. And, please , please, think for yourself.

When my clients complain that something I am asking them to do does not feel natural, I remind them that the natural way to swim is the dog paddle. When it comes to human nature, we are obligated to rise above it if we want to be successful humans.

Aunt Bossy