

The Misery to Happiness Exercise

(To Feel Better, Change an Attitude or Behavior Pattern)

In thirty minutes you can identify and begin to remove one of the greatest sources of unhappiness that you have control over! While depression and certain addictions and destructive patterns require expert help, the following four steps will help you identify and remove many everyday sources of unhappiness.

1. Write down the negative feelings and experiences you've had in the past week, and any others you can think of from the recent past. If you can't remember them in detail, then start making a record each night of the major negative feelings and experiences of the day. It's important to go by actual events and not impressions, or else you may fool yourself into thinking one source of misery is the greatest, when another one actually is. It also helps to list the duration and intensity of your negative feelings. The list below in step '2' may jog your memory.

2. Adding any other sources to the following list, select your three or four greatest sources of misery or unhappiness. For example, my top three in order might be: greed, judging others, and making false assumptions.

___ Having unrealistic expectations of others and yourself. (Common feelings are disappointment, frustration and sometimes anger.)

___ Being greedy for things or experiences. (Feelings: restlessness, impatience, anxiety emptiness.) Greed can take many forms: hurrying; overspending and getting into debt; always wanting to be the center of attention; getting angry when you don't get what you want; cutting corners that later get you in trouble, such as not taking care of your home or car, or buying a cheap, poorly made alternative to a quality product. Greed can also contribute to clutter and disorganization if you're greedy for things or information.

___ Comparing yourself to others. (Telltale feelings include envy, shame and pride.)

___ Trying to live up to others' expectations. Trying to please others. Playing a role. Being fake. (Can cause disappointment, self-hatred, and low self-esteem.)

___ Overindulging yourself on food, sex, drugs, entertainment. (Can lead to self-hatred, low self-esteem, boredom, or feeling washed-out.)

- ___ Procrastinating on things you have to do, sometimes to the point where you end up having to pay additional penalties in money or lost time. This can include not doing your taxes or homework on time, not paying bills, not doing housework, and not taking care of certain chronic health problems. (It can lead to self-hatred, guilt, and physical distress such as back pain.)
- ___ Getting into relationships with people who are trouble, or who just can't meet your needs. (This can produce a long list of miseries and ill-feelings.)
- ___ Choosing a career or doing a job that just isn't right for you. (Like a bad relationship, this can also produce a variety of miseries.)
- ___ Worrying about things. (Causes stress and subtly keeps the focus on you.)
- ___ Making false assumptions. Jumping to conclusions. Engaging in logical thinking. (Clues: making a lot of mistakes and having to pay for them in time and money.)
- ___ Negative thinking. (This includes thoughts like: "I'm a loser." "Bad things always happen to me." "I'm dumb." "I'm ugly." "I'm too old." "I'm a lousy person." "I'll never be popular." "Nobody will ever really love me." "I can't change.")
- ___ Recurring fears or anxiety. (Causes stress, loss of joy, and burdens relationships.)
- ___ Not keeping promises and commitments, or lying to others. (Although this makes others unhappy, it ultimately comes back to you when others avoid you, refuse to help you, or become negative toward you. It can lead to loneliness, loss of a job, or low self-esteem.) Making excuses can also be part of the pattern.
- ___ Being selfish. (For consequences, see above.)
- ___ Daydreaming. Living in the past, the future, or in fantasies. (Weakens or prevents relationships, and can cause accidents and lost opportunities when you're not paying attention.)
- ___ Trying to control everything. (Signs: boredom, restlessness, over-analysis, and stress. Doing everything yourself. Not delegating to others.)
- ___ Judging others. (Causes feelings of anger, bitterness, disdain, contempt and isolation.)
- ___ Playing "games" with others. (This often involves replaying "scripts" in which you play a role such as "victim," "attacker" or "rescuer.")
- ___ Not accepting loss. (Can cause anger or depression.)
- ___ Unassertiveness. Not expressing your feelings to others. Keeping them bottled up. (Can lead to explosive anger and stress.)
- ___ Perfectionism. Not accepting your own and others' flaws. (Can lead to self-hatred, impatience, intolerance, inertia, hatred of others, or carrying a grudge.)

3. Starting with the biggest source of misery, explore all the connections and consequences. Write them down, beginning with a description of the negative feelings and then the situation or pattern and what you think are the causes. Following the example below, fill out a copy of the [Misery to Happiness Worksheet](#). Sometimes you'll be able to get to the root of the problem yourself, and other times you'll need to talk to a friend or counselor. Here's an example:

What are your negative feelings? Envy, self-pity and regret.

How do you feel about having these feelings? I feel ashamed that I'm envious.

Inappropriate behavior(s)? Comparing myself to others, and daydreaming.

What's the frequency and duration of the negative feelings? Almost every other day I spend fifteen minutes or more wallowing.

What was a recent external trigger event? My friend recently found a good job.

What are some other examples? My other friend got engaged to this wonderful girl. My brother got his photo in the newspaper for his outstanding volunteer service.

What's the general pattern? When others get things, I'm envious, then I get into negative thinking about myself, then I fantasize about me getting what they have. Or I become secretly pleased when they fail at something. Sometimes my feelings swing to regret when I kick myself about missing some past opportunities.

Are there any secret payoffs for the pattern? The fantasizing allows me feelings of superiority. Wallowing in self-pity prevents me from having to exert myself with meaningful action. The whole process keeps the focus centered on me.

What thoughts and attitudes support the pattern? "I'm better than they are; why are they so lucky?" "They had advantages I didn't—a supportive family, good things and a good education. I deserve that too!"

What were the consequences and costs of the pattern? Being cold to friends and losing one. Lost time spent in self-pity, and fantasies of how my life could have been better.

What are the sources or root causes? Lack of support from parents while growing up. Lack of job skills. Lack of social skills. Lack of present support. Procrastination.

What you can change (from the above list)? Job and social skill level. Amount of personal support.

What alternative, new thoughts and attitudes can you have? “I deserve something only if I earn it.” “Just because they got ahead, it doesn’t mean that I’m worth any less.” “Even though I’m envious, I’m glad they still consider me their friend.” “We each have unique gifts and strengths, and I don’t need to compare myself to others.”

What alternate behaviors would help? Studying what they did as a model. Complimenting my friends on their successes. Listing my strengths and appreciating them.

What other things can you do? Join a support group. Take a class to improve my communication skills. Practice the alternative thinking, perhaps with a buddy.

What will be the payoffs for the new behaviors? Better relationships with friends. Ongoing support. A better paying, more satisfying job. Less negative thinking.

4. Create a plan to integrate the new thinking and behaviors into your life. For example:
 - Schedule the new behaviors and actions on your calendar.
 - Schedule a time for daily review.
 - Write written reminders so you’ll practice the new thinking.

Let me offer one final caution as you do this exercise: Realize that your bad patterns might actually interfere with their removal. If you procrastinate or blame others, for example, these tendencies may prevent you from using this tool to your advantage. So if you’re not willing to do this, that’s all the more reason to act passionately to break the pattern. While it takes a little time to work through this for one issue, isn’t it worth it to reduce or eliminate a source of misery from your life? Why not call a friend for personal support or sit down with a piece of paper right now and see what you can do?

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Misery to Joy Worksheet

Note: This worksheet assumes you've done Steps One and Two, in which you take an inventory of all your recent negative feelings and then choose one of the major negative situations to work on, (since you can only work on one pattern at a time.)

What negative feelings do you have that seem to be related to the same issue?

How do you feel about having these feelings?

What inappropriate behavior(s) do you do?

What's the frequency and duration of the negative feelings and destructive behaviors?

What was a recent external trigger event or situation?

Are there other examples of this pattern?

What seems to be the general pattern?

Are there secret payoffs for the pattern? What do you think they are?

What thoughts and attitudes support the pattern?

What are the consequences and costs of this pattern to you? What are the costs to others?

What are the sources or root causes?

What you can change (from the above list)?

What alternative, new thoughts can you think?

What alternate behaviors would help?

Are there other things you can do to help?

What would be the payoffs for the new behaviors?