

INTERVIEW



Mishenichnas Adar marbim besimchah! This is a time when we are to be especially happy. But in truth, we are supposed to be happy all the time. We have mitzvah to serve Hashem *besimcha* always, and at certain times, like on Purim and Yamim Tovim, even more so. There are times, however, when that mitzvah take a bit more effort. But *baruch Hashem*, our *mesorah* guides us in finding true happiness. The *mitzvos* of Purim, too, teach us about joy — when we give *mishloach manos* to our friends and *matanos le'evyonim*, we are grateful for what we have and feel the joy of giving and sharing with others.

Ivdu es Hashem besimchah implies that serving Hashem with joy is an *avodah* — the word we translate as serve can also mean work. It often will take some work on ourselves to be happy, but the more we work at it and grow, the happier we will be.

We are not the only ones who need to work and grow in happiness. Businesses and corporations that hire many different kinds of people and that want their workers to be happier hire consultants to help — people like Paul Krismer of the Happiness Experts Company in British Columbia, Canada.

Hi, Paul! Please tell us about what you do.

I teach people to be happy. I know that kind of sounds ridiculous, but that's what I do! I was always fascinated by the "science of happiness." So one day, I quit my job to start the Happiness Experts Company, just over two years ago, and I haven't looked back since.

I'm a motivational speaker for businesses. It's actually worth it for companies to teach their workers how to be happy because happy people are more successful, which make them happier, and leads them to even more success. It's a wonderful cycle!

People tend to think things like "When I have more money, then I'll be happy" or "When I lose ten pounds, then I'll be happy," but that doesn't work at all. A person has to find happiness inside themselves. So I teach some simple skills that people can learn to help increase their happiness.

Would you share some of these skills with us?

There are so many ways. One way is to write down the things you're grateful for. Every night, before you go to bed, write down something that went well for you that day and put the paper in a jar. This exercise isn't just about putting you in a happy mood right before you go to sleep, it's about training your brain to think about what's going well in your life and be grateful for them. People tend to focus on the bad things, but if we actively notice and keep track of the good things, it's paving the way for our brains to be happier.

[*Binyan*: As it says in Pirkei Avos, *mi ashir, hasame'ach behelko* — "Who is wealthy? The person who is happy with what he has.]

Another great tip is mindfulness, which is quite a trendy word these days. Kids are usually pretty good at mindfulness, while grown-ups are often terrible at it. Mindfulness is all about appreciating the moment, however mundane that moment might seem. For instance, when you're washing your hands, feel the sensation of the warm water running on your hands, the texture of the soap, and smell the scent of the soap. Focus on the sensation of drying your hands on the big fluffy towel. When you do that, you're grounding yourself in the reality of the moment and appreciating all the little things you might often not stop to notice.



Sometimes, people can't think about the present moment because they're stuck thinking about their problems. But if you think about it, many things people often worry about are more fiction than reality. By that, I mean that when someone's thinking about a problem, they're either future-oriented — "What's going to happen tomorrow?" — or past-oriented — "Oh, boy, why did I say that?" We're very often thinking about problems that are over or don't exist.

Do you have some happiness stories to share with us?

When my youngest son was born, almost right away we discovered that he was not a naturally very happy person. As a baby, he had colic and cried a lot. By the time he was 4 years old and able to express himself clearly, it was obvious that he saw the world as a very unfriendly place. He would say things like "My brother never plays with me," and "We never have dessert."

At the time, I had just read a book about "learned optimism" that claimed you can teach certain skills to even very young kids by asking them questions that will help them to overcome their negative thinking. My wife and I decided to try it. Whenever my son complained by saying, "We *never* get dessert," we squelched our desire to insist that sometimes we *did* get dessert. Instead, we asked him, "Do you really never get dessert?" He'd pause and say, "Sometimes." When he said, "My brother *never* plays with me!" we'd ask, "Did he play with you before?" And he'd pause and say, "Yes."

Within a few weeks, we saw a major improvement. Now he's older and is used to seeing things in a more positive way.

Here you are, teaching others to be happy. Are you always happy?

I try to be. I mean, I take my work seriously and need to practice what I preach! Sometimes, I have to tell people that the goal is not just to be happy but to grow in happiness. Ask yourself, "Am I happier today than I was yesterday? Last week? Last year? Am I moving in a positive direction?"

I mean, sure I have bad days, but I'm happy with the direction my life is going.

A bonus is that I've discovered that being in this line of work has given me many health benefits over the years, so that alone is something to be happy about!

What are some benefits of being happy?

Oh, *everything* is better when someone's happy. A happy person has better relationships with the people around them, better jobs, better sleep, better functioning brains, everything! Someone who's happy even has better vision. Think about it: Happier people are walking down the street with their head up, eyes everywhere, smiling at the world, while sad people are walking down the same street with their shoulders hunched, staring at the ground.

It should be unfair that happy people get so many benefits in addition to happiness, but anyone can choose to be happy and learn how! ■



THINGS THAT CAN AFFECT YOUR HAPPINESS

- **Weather.** Harsher weather can make you feel gloomy; sunny skies can make you feel sunny.
- **Stop and smell the roses** — literally! Some scents/perfumes/flowers affect our moods.
- **Listen to music.** Dancing along to the beat can make you feel upbeat!
- **Give to others.** You give of yourself, you get to feel good.
- **Hang out with happy people.** Happiness really is contagious!
- **Flip through photos** of the good old days. Feeling nostalgic can make you feel optimistic about the future.
- **Certain foods** make us feel calmer, like nuts and chicken. (So long as you're not allergic to them.)
- **Get a good night's sleep.** Everything looks rosier when you can keep your eyes open in the morning.
- **Cuddle your pet** — unless it's a goldfish.

