



# Follow your heart

*Do you make choices based on what you know in your heart is right for you, or on what other people might think is right or wrong? Maybe it's time to do what you want to do*

There are many ways to live a life. The modern world is full of choices, and you can do pretty much anything you want to. Yet, despite these freedoms, many people still try to conform to a prescribed way of being. It's almost ingrained that to be happy you need to look good, be in a relationship, have a busy social life, and a successful career.

But by trying to follow a set "happiness blueprint," you are actually more likely to undermine your happiness. When you make decisions based on what you think others expect from you, you ignore what is best for your true self. If you're constantly looking elsewhere for justification and appreciation—be this from social media or other people—it can be difficult to work out what you truly want.

Bronwen Sciortino is the author of *Keep It Super Simple*. She describes herself as a "recovering perfectionist." Having spent many years devoting herself to work and achieving success, she became stressed, exhausted, and burned out. After her breakdown, she figured out what was important to her in life, and now focuses on helping others do the same. "I was too afraid of failure and of change to go after the things in my life that I needed," she says. "I want everyone to know that challenging the status quo and stepping away from stress and exhaustion is easy, and that taking control of your own life is not only achievable, but can actually be loads of fun! It's all about asking yourself the question, 'What makes me happy?'"

People-pleasing can become a way of life, and one that isn't conducive to happiness.

Kate Tompsett, owner of gift business Happy & Glorious, knows what it feels like to do things that do not make you happy—and the importance of doing what does. When she was a student she worked in independent retail and loved it. But other people didn't. "It was a hugely formative experience for me; I loved the buzz and vibrancy, and the fact that every day was different suited my attention span. But I felt enormous pressure to do something 'proper' with my life, and there were some acquaintances who made me

feel I was wasting my education by being just a sales clerk."

She started working in an office, but it wasn't for her. Trying to juggle being creative with full-time work left her feeling exhausted, and she knew something had to change.

"I felt stuck, uninspired, as if life was passing me by. In 2012, I made the New Year resolution to say yes more, and to do more. I bought pet goldfish (and learned how to teach them tricks) I did some extra work for television. I encouraged my friends to dress up as pirates to go out, started at a new dance class, and did some charity walks. I think of 2012 as a year of challenges, and doing this really kick-started my heart. In July of that year, I had the idea for a store of beautiful gifts, and by August, I had the online store open."

As well as the online store, Happy & Glorious is now a brick and mortar store in her local town. As well as selling unique gifts, it hosts resident artists and craft workshops.

Kate said yes to her dream, and changed her life.

But focusing on yourself doesn't mean that you ignore others. Frederika Roberts is a positive psychology expert and co-founder of Resilience Well-being Success. She says that the key is the importance of learning and practicing assertiveness, which is different to being selfish. "Research has shown that having positive relationships is a crucial element to happiness, and that individual happiness isn't really possible taken outside of the context of striving toward societal happiness. This does not mean, however, that in order to be happy we need to make others happy. You cannot be responsible for the happiness of others, as they need to make their own choices in how to live their lives, as do you." It's about having clear boundaries, and knowing what works for you.

People have their own ways of achieving happiness. It's usually marketed as someone with a big grin skipping through a meadow, and you're told there is only one way to achieve it. But happiness exists in many different forms.

"Happiness can come from different positive emotions—

joy, gratitude, serenity, interest, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration, awe, and love," says Paul Krismer, Chief Happiness Officer at Happiness Experts in Canada, quoting the work of Barbara Frederickson. "Different people access different qualities of happiness more readily than others. We therefore need to pursue happiness paths for ourselves, and find happiness from the things that bring us flow."

Flow was a concept coined by positive psychology co-founder and psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. It describes the state when you're absorbed by an activity—in the zone. His studies led him to conclude that happiness is an internal state of being, not an external one, and that happiness levels can be shifted through the introduction of more flow. "A joyful life is an individual creation that cannot be copied from a recipe," he says in his book, *Flow: The Psychology Of Optimal Experience*.

Colleen Ward of Lifestyle Counseling Services sees the pursuit of happiness every day in her practice. She says the common misconception is that people think happiness is a destination, and is obtained through grand accomplishments.

"Overall happiness comes not from buying a car, losing weight, or getting a promotion, although these wins can certainly contribute. It is a culmination of positive behavior and self-talk over time that makes someone genuinely happy, even underpinning temporary sadness or stress. Happiness is achieved by understanding and being true to who you are."

What makes you happy doesn't have to be anything big, but can be as simple as choosing to wear what is comfortable rather than what's on trend, or making the decision to spend your evening doing the crossword instead of going out with friends.

There is no need to look to others to find out how to live your life. For a start, they won't know. Everyone is different, and no one knows better than you what your needs are. Sometimes it will take a bit of effort to tune in and figure out what makes you happy and what feels right, but it's worth it. Taking small actions that make you happy helps to bring you everyday joy, and it's in the increments of this joy that a happy life is created. The more you are aware of what happiness is to you, the better you will be able to achieve it.

Go ahead—be happy for you, no one else.

## DO WHAT MAKES YOU HAPPY

Why not give yourself permission to do what you actually want to do, rather than what you're supposed to? Take a week off and stay at home, sing karaoke, go backpacking. Here are some tips to help you get started...

Sometimes it's fun to be around other people, but don't underestimate how much you can enjoy certain activities without any company. Researchers have found that people expect to enjoy activities less when they're alone, but they actually tended to have just as good a time whether they had company or not. So next time there's a movie you want to see but none of your friends are interested, go anyway. Read about an exhibition at a gallery you think you'd love? Go alone. There are also plenty of companies offering trips for solo travelers—nearly a quarter of people go on vacation alone these days. There's a lot to be said for enjoying life at your own pace.

If you want to change career, try dabbling in it at first. You can take up an evening course in the area of interest, or try volunteering in a similar field. This will give you experience and skills before you take the main jump, and help you to discover whether the grass really is greener.

Extroverts get their energy from being with other people, whereas introverts are re-energized when alone. Knowing your type and what works best for you will help you to make choices that are aligned with what supports you in the long run, as well as the immediate moment.

WORDS: FRANCESCA BAKER. ILLUSTRATION: SAMANTHA NICKERSON