How to Be Happier in Life & Work

Happiness is all the rage today. Books about happiness proliferate everywhere, it seems. The science of happiness has become big business, as well as the subject of scientific exploration. University studies seeking to discover, through clinical research, how happiness is engendered and maintained have become common at the University of Michigan. I have written extensively about happiness, as well as lectured on it around the globe. In spite of all this attention, we live in a world awash in books and lectures on happiness, but unhappiness is all around us.

Research shows that the happier we are in life, the more productive, successful, and engaged we are at work. But how do we find that illusive state of happiness? How do enrich our lives so that we bring that forth in our work?

It is my suggestion that there are five thieves that rob us of our happiness. A thief is someone who takes away something that is already yours. In the case of happiness, the thieves are thought patterns and internal filters through which we see the world in a distorted way. They cloud our view of what is true and natural.

In my new book The Five Thieves of Happiness I show how five mental mindsets rob most of us of the happiness that is naturally ours. The five thieves are control, conceit, coveting, consumption, and comfort.

Control

The first thief is control, the desire to control the outcomes of our life and for things to be different. Happiness is knowing what we can control and accepting what we cannot control. At the most basic level, happiness comes from understanding that we can control our actions and our responses to things external to us, but we cannot control the results of our actions. Focusing on our actions brings happiness; focusing on the result of our actions brings unhappiness. All suffering is resistance to whatever is at any moment.
How to stop the thief:
In each moment surrender to whatever is happening. Control and influence what you can while choosing to accept whatever is at that moment. Accept the hard truths about life. Go with the flow at work. Remember that it is the craving for things to be different, not the circumstance that robs you of happiness.

Conceit

Conceit is perhaps the single greatest barrier to true contentment and even societal well-being. Conceit if a focus on your small self, on trying to find happiness separate from all other people and things as opposed to in the experience of being one. Another word for this thief is ego. Happiness comes from serving and getting lost in something outside yourself.

How to stop the thief:
Whenever you find yourself obsessing about the story of your life, remind yourself that you are already a part of a larger story. At work, focus on the bigger purpose and embrace the team energy. The thief wants you sitting around, staring at your own reflection, but there is no happiness to be found there. Building an equitable world that works for all is part of this, if not for moral reasons than for practical ones. Only when all prosper can we all be truly safe and happy.

Coveting

Coveting is the thief and comes disguised as something harmless or even ambitious in some productive way. What could be wrong with wanting to have something you don’t yet possess? Is not desire for something the very source of moving forward in life? The opposite of coveting is to be in a place of gratitude. Coveting also keeps us from celebrating for others because life becomes a comparison.

How to stop the thief:
Whenever you find yourself asking the mirror on the wall of your subconscious how you compare with others, remember that it is the thief speaking to you. It is lying when it tells that you that life is a contest rather than a journey. Ask instead: Am I being my best self? Also, practice gratitude through daily journaling or simply taking a few minutes to identify three things that you are grateful in that day and one in your life. Each day choose another person in your personal life and at work, and write down three things you want to celebrate for them.
Consumption

Consumption tells us that there is something outside ourselves that we need to achieve happiness, and it tries to hide from us the truth that we can choose it at any moment. Intuitively, of course, we all know that happiness cannot come from consumption of something because we all know people who appear to “have it all” but are consistently discontent, as well as people who have “next to nothing” and appear to be quite happy. This thief is like a thirsty person with a large bottle of good fresh water but a hole in their throat.

How to stop the thief:
Whenever you find yourself saying, I will be happy when... or I will be happy if..., stop these thoughts and come back into the inner house where happiness is found. Focus on the choice to be happy now. Challenge the consumer in yourself. Whenever you are tempted to buy something, ask yourself if it will bring any real happiness. The thing itself is not a problem; the belief that it will bring happiness is the issue.

Comfort

The final thief—comfort—is an insidious one. In fact, at first glance it may even appear as a source of happiness rather than a barrier to it. This thief is like a lethargic person on the sofa, TV remote in hand. It wants us to stay on the same channel, in the same comfortable position, stuck in a routine that is not life giving. It does not care about the consequences of this routine, even if the channel we are on is no longer of interest to us or serving our higher needs.

How to stop the thief:
Make a commitment to try one or two new things every week. Vary your routines, from taking a new route on your daily walk to a different dating experience with your partner on a Friday night. Try new areas of learning—it is good for both your mental and physical health. Notice the core comfort patterns of your life. Stretch yourself at work—volunteer, take a course to increase your knowledge, or apply for a new position. What have you carried from your past that is no longer adaptive to your life today? Identify an important pattern, and take two months to work on noticing how it shows up, then choose to ride in another direction.

Take The Five Thieves of Happiness quiz to find out what thief is robbing your happiness.