

Session 3

Flourishing in the 2nd Half of Life

Making Peace with Our Past

Happiness is found in the present, but many of us continually step out of the present and into the past with anger or remorse and/or into the future with fear and trepidation. In sports stepping out of the present is called “choking;” in life it’s called “unhappiness.” **This session is designed to help us find serenity about the past and confidence in the future.**

“For most of us the past is never dead and buried, it’s not even past.” William Faulkner

Let’s start with the past. The past, like the future, is a concept only. It doesn’t really exist. Our only access to it is how we choose to remember it. Peace with the past comes from learning from the past and then letting it go, and not carrying around a lot of remorse, guilt or anger. There are two key happiness skills that enable this.

1. Forgiveness

Forgiveness may be the most difficult of the skills. There are only four things we can do with negative events in our past. We can forget them. Great if it happens, but difficult to force. We can repress them, but they always come back in insidious ways that hurt us even more. We can hold on to them (the strategy we probably choose most often). Finally, **we can forgive.** Forgiveness is the only voluntary choice you have which removes negatives. Forgiveness is two separate skills: *forgiveness of self*, which is about self-esteem (“I’m worthy of forgiveness”) and *forgiveness of others*, which is about releasing the desire for vengeance or revenge.

It helps to realize that forgiveness is not a gift we give to others, but to ourselves, and it is an act independent of justice or apology. We do ourselves a disservice by withholding forgiveness until an apology is made or justice is done.

One way to increase the level of forgiveness between you and your spouse is to commit to deal with any hurts you have caused one another within 48 hours. After that it is not fair game for an argument. Surely somethings take a lot longer than 48 hours to forgive, but I know I am amazed at how many hurts I carry around far longer than I should.

2. Gratitude

Gratitude is the second key skill of happiness concerning the past and probably the easiest to practice. Just as forgiveness releases negative things, gratitude enables us to hang on to positive things in our past. We miss a thousand opportunities a day to be grateful. Those who are happiest among us find a myriad of things for which they are grateful and it has less to do with how privileged they are and more to do with how they choose to perceive it.

Research has shown that if people will write down three things at the end of everyday that they are thankful for and why, within 3 weeks they are measurably happier and if they keep this up they continue to elevate their happiness level.

Forgiveness and gratitude are two mega strategies of happiness. Together they synergistically can boost our level of happiness, perhaps more than any of the other qualities we will cover.

Having Confidence in the Future

In looking to the future, the happiest among us look forward with excitement and with confidence. Since the future is unknown and brings the unexpected, they tend to accept and even to “marry the surprise” it holds. There are four skills that enable them to achieve this.

1. Faith

In his play Othello, Shakespeare said it well, “Imagination without faith is a cruel master.” Having faith that we can handle things, no matter what life brings, is essential to self-esteem and, therefore, to happiness. Without faith our imaginations can and will conjure up all manners of disasters and heartaches. Faith is a conviction that stands on its own, without proof or evidence. Many of us equate it with religion, but we can develop it through other sources as well.

Faith offers an alternative to imagination. The happiest among us view themselves as part of a “benevolent universe,” such that if we do our part, it will bring us what we need – not necessarily what we want, but always what we need. Faith is essential when life turns difficult.

2. Optimism

A close cousin of faith is optimism, the ability to believe that things will work in your favor. We tend to understand this quality in sports, but in life we tend to think being a little pessimistic is a virtue. It isn't.

“I never met a pessimistic general who ever won a battle.” General Dwight Eisenhower

Imagine Sir Edmund Hillary thinking “I will never be able to climb Mt. Everest” or Roger Bannister thinking “I will never break the 4 minute mile. “

There is a high correlation with optimism and happiness and like happiness, optimism is a skill. (Martin Seligman has a new book out titled *Learned Optimism*.)

3. Flexibility

While we can continually plan and shape the future, we don't control it. This is tough to accept for most of us, especially those of us who are the most proactive. Trying to control the future leads to frustration and unhappiness.

Those who deal most successfully with the future figure out what they want to occur, work to bring it about and then adjust to whatever the outcome is. If it is very different than what they had hoped, they spend little time in anger or denial, but rather move forward with flexibility.

4. Openness

The final trait that the happiest among us share is an openness to new directions, new pathways forward.

They are open to new pathways as they keep moving with the punches life invariably throws their way.

Happy people have the openness to not fall into the trap to which Helen Keller was referring when she said: “When one door to happiness closes another opens. However we are often so fixed on the closed door, we fail to see the open door.”

If we can look to our past and feel serenity through the skills of forgiveness and gratitude and if we can look to the future with confidence through the skills of faith, optimism, flexibility and openness (“FOFO”), then we are free to experience the place where happiness is abundantly found – in the present.