



# Happiness@ TheSpeedofLife

## Happiness@TheSpeedofLife Newsletter Edition 42: Daily Oxygen Practice

**1,705** words of content -- approximate reading time required: **6.82** minutes. And isn't your happiness worth it?

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Welcome to my e-newsletter, which focuses on defining and applying the Principles of Happiness and Positive Emotion in your life and work. Please forward to a friend who needs more happiness.

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### I. DAILY OXYGEN PRACTICE

My life has been really stressful over the past few months.

I decline to bore you with details, except for this one: I've had to spend an inordinate amount of time creating new program materials and establishing new client relationships in a non-stop series of events that culminated in three straight weeks of my being "on stage" every day, including several evenings and off-shifts and long travel days; and all of this on top of managing three long-term projects and the usual comings and goings in my personal life, including successive frenzied, no-time-to-sit-down weekends and numerous personal and family transitions (like children moving out and moving in, addressing some minor health issues, and putting in a new lawn!), and...

Hmm. I just realized I was writing a run-on sentence (108 words) and getting all tied up in knots just thinking about the wild spin I'd worked myself into.

Have you ever had a time like that in your life?

In the midst of the spinning, I began to feel vaguely disoriented, but kept telling myself, "Life is good! Business is good! I'm making lots of progress! Everything's under control!"

So, I showed up in a conversation with my coach, and I kept telling him about all the stuff I was doing, and how great things were, and he said something that stopped me dead in my tracks:

Jim, I think you're burning out.

What? No way! <pause> Uh. Well. Hmmm. <pause> You know what? That sounds... actually... <pause> That sounds right.



### **Awareness Shift**

I was a boiled frog. I was sitting in a pot of water about to boil, and I was so focused on BUSY that I'd stopped paying attention to taking care of myself. That "vague disorientation" I felt was my system about to collapse on itself.

My coach's observation shifted my awareness from what I was DOING to how I was BEING. And once I accepted the word 'burnout' as possibly true, I started to notice all the other things that were going on for me. I had not slept well for a couple weeks. My caffeine intake had spiked. My temper was on a short fuse. I was, when I stopped to notice, feeling physically phfff – if I stopped moving for more than a few minutes, I started to fall asleep.

Amazing, isn't it, how well we can ignore our body's signals when we are involved in something else?

The good news was that I did not have to start from scratch in creating actions to pull myself back into a lower stress mode. I did, however, have to pay attention to what was (not) happening with my daily oxygen practices.

### **Daily Oxygen Practices**

Many years ago I figured out that my visual self feels more motivated to exercise when I track my progress on a chart. Then about four years ago I expanded my tracking to include ALL the things I do to take care of myself, which includes cardio and/or resistance exercise, yoga, meditation, deep breathing, and journaling (I do not, despite rumor, track my dark chocolate consumption).

I call these my Daily Oxygen Practices.

The terminology comes from my Happiness foundation #1: Take Your Own Oxygen First, which itself derives from the pre-flight talk in which flight attendants show us how to exit the plane, connect our seat belt, and put on an oxygen mask, with the instruction, *"if you are traveling with someone who needs assistance, put on your own oxygen mask, first!"*

Oxygen is the fuel of life, and if I'm on empty, I'm not much good to anyone else, am I?

When I looked to my Oxygen tracking chart, I was shocked. Without conscious awareness, I'd dropped from my usual 6-7 days a week to just 2 per week over the prior month. I was taking in a small amount of oxygen, but I was also using it up faster than normal.

I was darn close to empty.

The fabulous thing about awareness is that it's the hardest part. Taking action is easy once we are aware of the need. I am often reminded of the mantra I learned in my early career: "a problem well-defined is 90% solved." In other words, problems are easy to solve, once the CORRECT problem gets identified.

We spend a lot of our time addressing symptoms. E.g. when we feel out of shape, we look for a quick diet to fix our waistline for vacation rather than changing our lifestyle to live differently. In this case, I was in anxiety, and could have gone to my doctor to get a sedative for the short term. But the core issue is lack of oxygen. This I can address on my own.



Since my awareness shifted, I've stopped letting myself "get away with" cheating on myself. I'm back to starting each day with a short meditation, I'm making sure I get my body moving for at least 30 minutes every day, and I am feeling SO MUCH BETTER!

The stressors still exist – yet they are not dragging me down. My oxygen levels are back to normal.

### Do This For Yourself

Create your own Daily Oxygen Practice list. You can do it in just a few minutes.

1. What feeds your soul? What are the activities that put oxygen back into your tank or help restore balance to your life?
2. Your oxygen-fueling activities might be daily or weekly (e.g. one of my weekly practices is attending Mass at my church).
3. You might consider these areas: Work, Personal/Health, Relationships/Family, and Creativity (optional)
4. List no more than 2-3 activities in each area. These are the activities that you know rejuvenate you and bring you back into balance.
5. Post the list where you'll see it or can access it regularly.
6. Whenever you feel yourself feeling stressed or like you're running out of oxygen, check the list. Notice if you've been ignoring one of your priorities, and then act on it to refuel yourself.

The very act of listing your own Daily Oxygen Practices can feel like an oxygen-infusing event. When you take care of you first, you build your capacity to show up for all the others in your life who depend on you. Best of all, you support your own Happiness!

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Happiness Principles 1 thru 3 are all about taking your own oxygen. If you'd like to download a 1-page summary of the 13 Principles of Happiness as a reference, you can do so right now: <http://www.theexecutivehappinesscoach.com/happiness/philosophies.cfm>

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## II. IN THE WORKPLACE: REFUELING FOR THE FUTURE

I came of age in the corporate world working for a company that lived according to a "work hard, play hard" philosophy. The company had a (well-deserved) reputation as a white-collar sweatshop; the pressure to perform was relentless, the standards impossibly high, and the competition intense. The company was filled with high-achievers who worked long hours to support growth that often exceeded 25% per year for a decade. It was brutal.

AND we knew how to party like crazy! Once a year the company virtually shut down for a Halloween competition that was absolutely insane, with complete sets built in the cubicle villages as a backdrop for costume creativity that was simply over the top. Project completion events were often blow-out affairs with music, dancing, and recognition ceremonies that resembled the Academy Awards. Even mundane "backlog parties" might involve every level of the department and require truckloads of pizza and a festive theme.



In other words, even as people were working incredibly hard, the backdrop was about enjoying the work, recognizing contribution, and encouraging people to have fun and express their creativity.

Every culture is different, of course. In many organizations the same outcomes can occur through quiet conversation and low-key recognition. What's key is that some form of renewal and recognition do occur on a regular basis.

When we take time to celebrate accomplishments, give recognition for jobs well done, provide flexibility for personal lives, and occasionally have (gasp!) FUN at work, we put fuel into the tanks of all employees. That fuel provides the energy for those individuals – and thus the team -- to keep moving fast into the future.

What are the oxygen-fueling practices in your organization?

OR, are you – or the culture -- “too busy” to take time for people? Be aware that if you do not deliberately take time every so often to attend to the (mental, emotional, and physical) health of your team members, you may find that stress and burnout spread quickly.

**Remember: Leadership is not about a title.** Anyone can be a leader who takes time to provide guidance to a coworker, say a kind word or offer appreciation for a job well done, or step outside of the “work” to connect to another person’s humanity.

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### III. GETTING DIRTY FOR HAPPINESS

I find happiness in the dirtiest places. Really!

I absolutely LOVE to work outside in the yard. I like to mow the lawn, weed flower beds, prune and trim and edge and fertilize. I get excited when I fill my compost bin in the fall and then open it weeks later to find the composting insects have reduced all that yard waste to healthy organic humus that, when added to a garden, makes things grow tall and strong.

Most of all, I love Springtime, when the world is awash in lush greens and brilliant splashes of yellow, purple, pink, white, and red after months of winter grey. I'm constantly rearranging the landscape in our yard, and in springtime I can yank things out of the ground, rip them apart, pop them back into a new home and then watch them grow beautifully. Nature is totally forgiving in the spring – it's all about life and birth and beginnings.

The past two weekends I've dug and clipped and rearranged things, erected new landscaping, and planted and mulched over 150 new perennials and flowering annuals in my yard, my mom's yard, and at my daughter's house.

My back aches, my one knee is still recovering from a nasty encounter with a large root, and I'll be digging dirt from under my fingernails for the rest of the week.

And it feels great!

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**IV. P.S. WHAT ARE YOU READING?**

Next month I will issue my NINTH ANNUAL Summer Reading List. Each year I ask my friends, colleagues, and clients what books they recommend. I research the list and make selections that I take on my two-week beach vacation. Creating my list from other people’s libraries means that I’m constantly learning of new authors, genres, and titles, and my reading list is delightfully eclectic.

Have a business, fiction, or non-fiction title you recommend this year? Please share!

Click here to send an email with Summer Reading List 2008 in the subject line.\*\* Please include Title, Author, a sentence of description, and a sentence or two about why you like it and recommend it. (deadline is May 31)

Next month I’ll include a link to the full edited list, just in time for your summer vacation reading!

\*\*If the above link does not work, try this:

[mailto:ReadingList@TheExecutiveHappinessCoach.com?subject=Summer\\_Reading\\_List\\_2008](mailto:ReadingList@TheExecutiveHappinessCoach.com?subject=Summer_Reading_List_2008)

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**V. INSTRUCTIONS AND CONTACT INFORMATION**

Jim Smith is The Executive Happiness Coach®. He is a recovering corporate executive whose passion is to help people discover and increase the amount of Happiness in their lives and work.

View past editions at <http://www.TheExecutiveHappinessCoach.com/newsletter/archives.cfm>

Drop me a line anytime with your feedback and queries! Jim

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**Happiness is a decision, not an event.  
How will YOU decide today?**

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