



Happiness@ TheSpeedofLife

Happiness@TheSpeedofLife Newsletter Edition 45: Listen To Your Body

2,112 words of content -- approximate reading time required: 8.45 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. LISTEN TO YOUR BODY, NOT JUST YOUR HEAD

I often speak and write about the mind-heart-body connection – how our thoughts, emotions, and physical actions/reactions are intertwined. All three domains can ‘speak’ to us.

In our heads, we tell stories, come up with reasons, analyze, and choose the words we speak. Our emotions send signals about loss, fear, joy, excitement, love, and dozens of other feelings regarding people and events. Our bodies often reflect what goes on in the head and heart – our breathing shifts; adrenaline pumps and perspiration increases – or not; blood flows increase or slow down; we smile, frown, purse our lips, fold our arms, tense or relax our shoulders, and on and on.

In our culture, we’ve been trained to pay most attention to the head; so many people have actually lost the ability to hear what their body is telling them. Or worse, they notice, but then don’t pay attention, instead intentionally over-riding their physical signs with in-the-head rationalization. After a while, the head is so in charge that the body gives up trying to communicate, and just internalizes all stressors until... well, until things start to break down.

This month I share client story – let’s call her Pat. Pat expressed a desire to reduce stress (and increase happiness) in her life and in her role as administrator for a large services firm. From our first conversation, I picked up on a lot of fear and anxiety in Pat’s language; all of her stories about work revolved around pressure and stress -- some of it inspired by her boss or staff, and the rest of it self-imposed.

She was a self-described Perfectionist (other people on her team, she feared, had names for her that were not as polite ☺). She found herself constantly micro-managing every detail of every situation, and living in constant fear that the one detail she missed would cause her boss to ‘go ballistic.’ She constantly lived in her head. Oh, and did I mention the killer migraines she frequently suffered?

Well, I was not hired to coach Pat's boss – only her. So we began with the agreement that we would be coaching her to change her reaction TO her boss, not to change her boss.

Shift the Body, Shift the Thinking, Changes the Outcomes

(Note: When I help a coaching client learn to have “different conversations” at work, it's easy to help them select different words to use. But just changing the script does nothing if there's not an accompanying shift in their non-verbal communication – and the non-verbal does not change until we address the underlying feelings. So we often work with different body postures as a means of helping the client shift their mood, increase their confidence, and align their body language with their words.)

After observing herself in several encounters, she came back to the coaching session with a clear description of her non-verbal behavior and her internal thinking/feeling. She was living in fear. Anytime her boss approached her, her predisposition was to completely withdraw – physically and emotionally – from the conversation. She focused entirely on making her boss happy, and so would agree to just about any request, reasonable or not. Then she'd get incredibly stressed.

Her non-verbals involved protecting herself and making herself a smaller target -- all the biological reactions our bodies have when we are afraid. She'd sit down, cross her arms/legs, shrink in to her chair, nod in agreement, and say very little. “Consider this,” I offered. “When a predator senses fear in their prey, what do they do?” Go in for the kill? “Yep. So if you truly believe your manager is out to get you, and then you behave like a trapped animal, you and she are playing a game that YOU can never win!”

From Fear to Calm

So we worked on helping her shift from a fear reaction to a more calm and confident body. For several weeks she practiced standing in a solid, grounded stance, and breathing deeply to help her remain calm and in control of her faculties. She practiced at home, in the grocery store, and at work. She started to notice the conversations with her manager shifting. Her boss no longer seemed as angry. The headaches started to taper off in frequency.

Still, Pat would come to conversations and say, “I'm having a hard time with this ‘calm body’ thing, Jim. I know it's working, but it feels so fake to me.”

Then one day she had an insight that was brilliant. Here's what she wrote me in an email:

Pat's Story

Jim, I finally realized why "calm" confused me so much and caused me to think, "fake!"

I have strong childhood memories of church Sunday mornings. My parents would be fighting with each other or yelling at one of us kids the entire way to church. My stomach would be churning.

But the minute we got out of the car we had to put our "normal happy family" faces on (or else!).

So I learned early to cram down whatever painful emotion I was feeling (scared of my parents fighting, furious that I was being yelled at for nothing, scared of having done something 'wrong' without knowing it, sad that there was so much anger, etc.) and act normal.



"Hey Pat! How are you doing today?"

"Great! How are you?" (Big smile, happy face)

So what does this have to do with why "calm" confused me so much?

Asking myself to move from whatever upset (sad, angry, scared, whatever) state I was in to a calm body posture originally felt like what I had to do at church growing up. It felt the same as cramming down the negative emotion and pretending to feel something I didn't feel.

It's Not About What's Going On in my Head!

I know that's not what it is at all. It's actually choosing to move from an emotion that does not serve me to one that is....well... calm. And from calm (as you've repeatedly said) all emotions are available.

Moving – by my own choice -- to a calm body posture is a COMPLETELY different experience than growing up. I'm acknowledging, "yes, pain/anger/fear I see you there. I'm choosing to move to something different now. Buh-bye." It's amazing how different this feels. And what an awesome tool it is!

You wanna know the coolest thing about this realization? It didn't come from thinking or analyzing why the calm posture had felt odd for a while. I just accepted that it had felt odd and now it felt normal -- and moved on.

So, I learned something WITHOUT analyzing or actively thinking about it. My body figured it out!

Thanks, Pat, for this powerful insight and for sharing your story!

What's YOUR Body Telling You?

My wife, Cheryl, read the above story and said, "That's how I was last year when I got so sick. My body was sending me big signals – flashing neon lights. I could not take a deep breath, but I kept ignoring that fact, and coming up with stories: 'Oh, that's normal for me;' or 'I'm too busy to worry about that today – I'll deal with it later.' And while I was listening to my head and ignoring my body, my entire system broke down!"

Those who've read [Cheryl's story](#) might be happy to know that she is fully recovered and quite happy at a new job – and MUCH more attentive to the signals her body sends her about rest and stress and worry. When we pay attention, we can take action to pull back from the edge... before it's too late!

Here are some things you might shift when your body sends you negative signals:

- Does your chest feel tight? Are you breathing only in your upper chest? Try taking two-three deep breaths, pulling them all the way down into your belly. This triggers your relaxation response.
- Are you sitting all curled up around your chair as you hunch over your keyboard? Take a moment to sit up and straighten your spine. Uncurl your legs and place your feet flat on the floor shoulder-width apart. Think about your feet – and take a deep breath. This



exercise helps to ground you, helping create a tiny bit of distance between you and what was stressing you.

- Are you sitting with your arms crossed and your back stiff, like you're shutting out the world? Open up your chest, drop your shoulders, and place your hands – palms up-- on your thighs or on the table. Relax your spine so your lower back is against the chair back. This 'receiving' posture open up your emotions and your thinking and improves your listening in the conversation.

Your body carries much wisdom that can help you – but only if you listen to it!

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The 13 Principles of Happiness inform much of my work. If you'd like to download a 1-page summary of all 13 as a reference, you can do so here:

<http://www.theexecutivehappinesscoach.com/happiness/philosophies.cfm>

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## II. IN THE WORKPLACE: GROUP MIND

The Catholic church uses a metaphor that We (the people) are the Body and God is the Head of the church. This works for congregations, but it's not really a great metaphor for the workplace. Yet there are many managers who think they are the Head and who believe that they can think for the entire team, department, or organization.

Well, sometimes the head does have the best ideas, but the head needs to pay attention to the body – the team members, the people affected by decisions. The head needs to pay attention to what the body feels (it's called morale!) and the signals the body sends (feedback, reaction to plans, resistance to change, etc).

Just as the physical body often knows what's best, so too the group mind often knows better than the individual head. So try checking in, having conversation, taking the "pulse" of the group... these are all solid practices for a good leader to stay positively connected to their team.

And what happens when the "body" gets stressed and the "head" doesn't pay attention?

Group migraine, of course! Disconnection and pain that takes the team out of commission for a time. And you don't want to go there...

**Remember: Leadership is not about a title.** Anyone can be a leader who pays attention to their own body and uses what they notice to shift to a calmer and more confident posture. From calm, all emotions are available, and positive choices more likely.

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## III. HAPPINESS: THE BLOG

Well, I'm finally diving head first in to [Web 2.0](#), the internet world where everything is collaborative, content is created by the users, and where absolutely anything can – and often does -- happen.



# Happiness@ TheSpeedofLife

A middle-of-the-pack Baby Boomer, I've sat on the sidelines and watched while the Internet became a more interactive and social space. Clearly, web-based collaboration is here to stay, and I have lately attended a number of marketing programs that helped me understand how web-based connections and conversation can help my business and help me stay more connected with the world.

A tech-savvy colleague put it this way: Baby Boomers are 'technology immigrants' – tech will always be a second language for us, and many of us will never become proficient. If we don't at least try, however, we'll gradually lose connection with younger generations. Millennials are 'technology natives' – they've grown up with cell phones in their hands, laptops on their bedstands, and thousands of "friends" on social networking sites.

I've had a profile on business-focused [LinkedIn](#) for a long time, and that's been useful for reconnecting with people I've worked with in the past, or for making contacts in new companies. I've recently set up profiles on Plaxo and [Facebook](#)\*\* . Next, I'm launching a Blog.

For those unfamiliar with the term: [a web log \('blog' for short\)](#) is an online journal. Subscribers can post comments, others respond, and the end result is a virtual conversation. Those interested in that ongoing conversation can subscribe to a 'feed' that will let them know when new blog entries are posted.

## Join the Happiness Conversation!

In my blog, [Life With Happiness](#), I'll be sharing regular observations about happiness as I see it occurring in daily life – in books, movies, at the mall, in the news, and in my own backyard.

I invite you to join the conversation. You can subscribe or simply bookmark the site [www.lifewithhappiness.com](http://www.lifewithhappiness.com) and check in occasionally. I'd love to hear from you.

\*\*have a profile on Facebook? Search for 'The Executive Happiness Coach' and my picture will come up. Add me as a Friend. "See" you on the web!

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## IV. 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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