



By

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Express Advice Columnist

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It was front and center in a slide show of other people's beautiful kitchen renovations: one of those artsy wooden "House Rules" signs. Rule Number 7, showcased in the biggest script of all and sandwiched between "Show compassion" and "Love each other" was this: "BE HAPPY."

Admittedly, seeing that made me anything but. As a psychologist, I can't help but wonder: Who in this world has ever gotten happy because someone else told them they have to be?

And worse, what if our culture's incessant demands to be happy are actually making our kids miserable?

It seems counterintuitive, of course, but to be happy in the long run, we should more fully embrace the times when we're not.

In a culture bent on being positive, teaching this mind-set is like swimming upstream.

Our kids absorb the "Happy feelings are the most acceptable feelings" message very early on. The smiley-face sticker is the ultimate praise, thinking happy thoughts and turning frowns upside-down make up too many children's songs to count, and the admonition "don't cry" (despite containing no instructions for how to pull this off) has become ubiquitous, whether in our attempts to comfort, or our sharp rebukes when our kids' emotional displays frustrate us.

But this approach to emotional development neglects the full, complicated range of unhappy feelings that are just as valid a part of human life as happiness is — from sadness to frustration, from anger to fear, from guilt to disappointment, boredom or disgust.

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Much research on well-being makes clear that Americans' typical approaches to the pursuit of happiness is far from helpful to our kids. Anxiety and mental health problems in children and teens have been steadily increasing, even before the massive disruptions of a year that has been the most difficult of many young lives.

In fact, the more we teach our kids to stay positive, at the expense of helping them accept occasional difficult feelings, the less we equip them with tools to manage such feelings when life inevitably gets hard. At worst, it teaches our kids that upsetting feelings are unacceptable and need to be numbed.

We tend to have a similar disdain for negative *thoughts*. Americans like to believe that our thoughts define us: that we need to control that running commentary, shape it and aggressively avoid the "bad" thoughts that supposedly doom us to unhappiness. But this gives far too much power to our thoughts. Research into mindfulness and acceptance and commitment therapy reveals that it's not negative thoughts that cause depression, anxiety, amotivation or any other mental rut we're afraid of. It is when negative thoughts become *sticky* that we are more prone to those problems. And here's the rub:

The more we fight with our thoughts, the more we give them the power to stick. Being fixated on having only the “right” kind of thoughts breeds the cognitive rigidity that creates tunnel vision, locks us into unhelpful patterns, increases our risk of rumination, obsessions and compulsions, and decreases our ability to adapt to setbacks.

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Moreover, distress intolerance — the fear of discomfort that creates a need to escape from bad moods rather than cope with them more actively — is associated not just with anxiety, but with a higher risk of substance abuse, binge-eating and self-harm.

Our kids are now coming up on a year of painfully disrupted day-to-day life, where everything from playdates to grandparent hugs, field trips, sports teams and birthday gatherings were sacrificed. If they didn’t have unhappy feelings about these losses, frankly, it would be unnatural. What better time to begin teaching our kids that unhappiness has a rightful place in a full and — yes — truly happy life? It is often the difficult emotions that have the most to teach us about ourselves, and that give us the opportunity to find meaning and connect with others.

I am not at all suggesting that happiness is bad, of course, or that joy shouldn’t be sought. But forced happiness, happiness as a sole goal without a deeper sense of meaning or purpose, or the pretense of happiness that stems from the expectation that anything less is toxic, can turn such “happiness” harmful in its own right.

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If you can help your child develop meta-cognition — the ability to think about their thoughts and keep from getting stuck within them — and mindfulness, which helps them become a gentle, nonjudgmental observer of their thoughts and feelings, attuned in the moment to their experience, then you are giving them psychological tools to help them for a lifetime.

Here are some ways to make the lessons more consistent.

**Teach your kids that their thoughts don’t define them.** Encourage your children to observe their thoughts with curiosity rather than fear, in a nonjudgmental way rather than with shame. Establish that not only is a thought not automatically true, but it’s also not automatically “you.” Encourage labeling distressing thoughts like “I’m having the thought no one likes me” rather than “No one likes me,” which helps your child separate from them.

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**Encourage turning anxious thought patterns into characters.** This can help your child gain even more distance from their negative voice, and helps destigmatize talking about anxiety. A kid with OCD could view their obsessive voice as “Mr. Bossy,” or a child with social anxiety may call their negative self-talk “The Stage-Fright Bully” and decide that it has nothing important to say — and that the show can go on.

**Take the stance that feelings, even big ones, are always okay.** Emphasize that it’s how we handle emotions that matters most, and we can choose those actions mindfully. Teach your children that upsetting moods often pass on their own, but if they don’t, we can grow a toolbox of ways to cope and to manage them. Emphasize that feelings on their own aren’t right or wrong.

**Commit to teaching and practicing the pause.** Praise your kids whenever they experience an upsetting feeling but then stop and notice the feeling without acting destructively on it. We often tell our kids “Don’t be so angry” because we equate their anger with hurtful actions. Instead, teach them that the anger is okay, but we must think

through our actions carefully, noticing our thoughts and bodily sensations without launching into autopilot. Every time they fully engage with a feeling and choose functional behavior, they strengthen their emotional intelligence and make it more likely that that feeling won't impel them toward unhealthy habits in the future.

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**Enlarge your vocabulary about emotions.** Encourage your kids to give voice to their feelings, and put that into practice yourself. From “I” statements (“I was sad when you said that to me” rather than “You are being mean!”) to encouraging your kids to write or draw their feelings in a journal, research shows that the mere act of labeling a feeling can help us feel more in control and allow it to pass more quickly.

**Observe and adjust your own habits of talking about feelings.** Pay particular attention to the times you invalidate your child's emotions or try to force a different internal reaction: “You're okay,” “Everything's fine,” “You have nothing to be afraid of.” Instead, choose empathy: “Sounds like that's really upsetting; let's think about how we can work through this.”

**Talk about true happiness as more than just pleasure or ease.** We all want our kids to be happy. But what they absorb about what that means is crucial. By opening them up to the idea of a sense of purpose, finding meaning in their life, or defining the values important to them, they will have a better understanding of how even challenging, difficult times can cultivate happiness. Be aware of the ways that you put external, superficial definitions of happiness — like acing a test or winning a championship — above the internal sense of pride that comes from working hard on something that matters to your child.

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Soon, they (and you) will be more open to the true experience of happiness — and whatever else life brings.

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