



Stuck in a Rut? 7 Ways to Live Life to the Fullest

By Carly Young, Special to LifeScript

Are you charting a course to fulfill your dreams? Or are you wandering around without a compass, hoping you'll somehow find your way? If you're stuck in a rut, let our happiness experts help you get back on track. Then take our quiz to see if you're living your life to the fullest...

1. Don't Try to Buy Happiness

Would you be happy if you had a hundred new pairs of Jimmy Choos or a brand new BMW? Maybe at first you would, but as time went on you'd "just want more, bigger, better and different in a never-ending fashion," explains Alan Gettis, Ph.D., author of *The Happiness Solution: Finding Joy and Meaning In An Upside Down World* (Trafford, 2006). The pleasure centers in your brain come alive when you score the perfect skirt or a great pair of jeans, but the feeling fades. After all, if you could really buy happiness, everyone would have bought it already!

If you still believe money is the secret to satisfaction, consider this: According to a University of Illinois study, the Forbes 400 (the wealthiest billionaires in America) and the Maasai tribes of East Africa (simple, pastoral herdsmen) exhibit the same levels of happiness, regardless of their monetary differences. In plain English: Money doesn't buy happiness.

2. Go for Girl's Night Out

Could seeing a movie with your pals save your life? Maybe so, when you consider that loneliness is a life-threatening condition that can raise your risk of heart disease and depression.

Connecting with friends counteracts stress and spurs the release of oxytocin, a neurotransmitter that soothes and calms. Maybe that's part of the reason women have been gathering in groups for centuries, grinding corn, knitting quilts or weaving baskets. "Instinctively, we know it's good for us," says Rebecca Radcliffe, motivational speaker and author of *Hot Flashes, Chocolate Sauce, & Rippled Thighs* (EASE, 2004).

It helps to have a close group of friends, but it's also important to interact with people outside that circle. Every kind of positive interaction, from smiling at the waitress to chatting with your neighbor, can boost your mood, says Radcliffe.

3. Answer the Call of the Wild

Claude Monet once said, "The richness I achieve comes from nature, the source of my inspiration." Take his advice and make a date with Mother Nature. It will lower your stress levels, strengthen your immune system and leave you feeling blissfully tranquil.

Can't spare time away for a weekend camping trip? You'll reap the same benefits from a quick stroll through the park or an afternoon spent gardening. Even a glance at a tree-lined street or blue sky through your office window will boost your mood and productivity.

4. Make the Little Things Count

So, your alarm woke you up on time for work this morning. If that thought doesn't make you jump for joy, ask yourself what would have happened if the alarm had failed? You would have woken up late, rushed out the door, forgotten your briefcase and arrived at the office disheveled. Worse, what if you hadn't woken up at all?

On a typical day, a million things go right, says Gettis. The shower has hot water, your favorite cereal is in the cupboard, your car starts and your computer turns on. "We're often on auto-pilot and don't appreciate the good things around us," he notes.

It's human nature to rubberneck at the accident on the freeway. But instead of seeking out the bad, focus on the good that's right in front of you.

5. Pursue Your Passions

“Passions ignite us and keep us going,” says Gettis. But some of us are so entrenched in our daily lives that we’ve lost sight of them. Radcliffe suggests asking yourself this question: “If God came to you and told you to go after your dreams right away, what would you do first?”

Stumped? It’s time for a blast from the past. What did you love to do as a child? Which clubs did you join in high school? When did you last feel truly happy, and what were you doing at the time? The answers can help you rediscover your passions. For more ideas, make a list of things you’ve always wanted to learn, and then learn them. Dance the tango, study German, take up rock-climbing, play the guitar, write a poem...anything goes as long as you’re doing it for you.

“Giving an outlet to our creative selves satisfies a hunger that cannot be filled in any other way,” explains Radcliffe.

6. Forgive Yourself

Airlines have a limit when it comes to carry-on luggage. Pity we can’t set limits on ourselves when it comes to emotional baggage. Dwelling on past mistakes only prevents us from being happy in the present.

“Focusing on the past is a trap,” says Gettis. The key to forgiving yourself is to understand and accept your own history and to learn from your mistakes. How have they made you stronger and wiser? Use the lessons of the past to make better decisions today.

Forgiveness is an ongoing process. It can take months, even years. But in the meantime, “focus on creating a fulfilling life in the present,” suggests Gettis.

7. Live in the Moment

Cocktail hours, social events or a day off work can be great fun. But what about the rest of your life? What about the time you spend at work or running errands? If we only have isolated moments on the calendar to live for, we’re in trouble.

Most of our lives are made up of seemingly mundane moments spent pumping gas or standing in line at the grocery store. Yet we often dismiss these moments. They don’t count, we say. They’re not a part of our *real* lives. With this attitude, you’ll waste 80% of your life, notes Gettis. “If there’s anything resembling a magic bullet or a key to the universe, it’s the ability to be fully present...here and now,” he explains.

What’s the secret to living in the moment? This story from Gettis’ book says it all: A Zen master lay dying. One of his disciples remembered the fondness his teacher had for a certain cake and set out to find it. He returned with the delicacy for his master, who smiled appreciatively and slowly nibbled it, all the while moving closer to death. His students asked him if he had any last words and he whispered “yes.” The students drew closer, so as not to miss a single word. He said, “My, this cake is delicious!”

Are You Living Your Life to the Fullest?

James Dean once said, “Dream as if you’ll live forever, live as if you’ll die today.” Do you take time to pursue your passions or are you a slave to the daily grind?