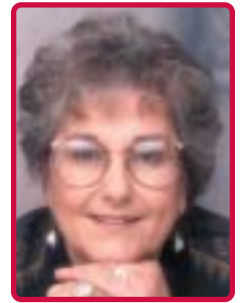


## IF YOU'RE HAPPY AND YOU KNOW IT...

by Leah Curtin RN PhD



Comedian Lorretta La Rouche loves to tell the stories about her airport experiences. In one, she talks about a flight delayed for 3 hours for 'mechanical' difficulties. By the time the disgruntled passengers finally were boarding, many of them were grouching and complaining and complaining loudly. So, to cheer them up, Loretta begins singing, "If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands..." And pretty soon all the passengers joined her. Singing and clapping - and glad to be on their way. Now that's putting a little quality in life!

What research is available on the subject of happiness, which admittedly isn't much (the depression, anxiety and general misery literature outnumbers the happiness literature by about 52 to 1), indicates that happiness has little to do with intelligence, ability, handicap or even pain. Happy people like their lives and themselves. They also tend to be optimistic and extroverted, are in supportive committed relationships, have several close friends, are other-oriented, and love the work they do. And lest you think such people are rare, researchers report that 90% of Americans describe themselves as "very or pretty happy" and 80% report that they are either "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with their lives.

Length of life has little to do with happiness, and it helps to note that the 'dying' have the lowest suicide rate of any population sub-group. Moreover, people who are ill or disabled report the same level of happiness as those who are not. Even those who have

experienced great tragedy, while they suffer intensely initially, recover their emotional equilibrium within 3 months - and with it their ability to be happy again. The most seriously unhappy people are the recently bereaved, those who have just entered therapy for depression, newly incarcerated prisoners and hospitalized alcoholics. None of whom, I might add, are the subject under discussion when we debate meaningful life!

Moreover, while stress and pain do not add to happiness, they are not the root cause of unhappiness! Perhaps what we ought to be discussing is the relative effectiveness of our proposed treatments for those facing beginning-and-end-of-life issues, and reserve the quality of life discussions to ourselves!

Happy people, we are told, differ from one another in just about every way imaginable except one: they all love what they do! All of which brings me to the point of this essay. One of the most pertinent moral obligations one has to oneself and to others is to do what you love to do for a living - or conversely, to team to love what you do.

In our line of work, being very good at what you do means that people get better care. Moreover, happy people are good at their work, create an atmosphere that actually is therapeutic. People who get better care in a harmonious atmosphere have fewer complications and go home sooner - or-get sick less often, at least if the research on depression's affect on illness and recovery has any validity! Loving what you do means that the hard work of caring for others motivates rather than discourages you - What has any or all of this to do with ethics? Getting a life really involves the quality of life - your own. Quality of life is measured in terms of happiness - and loving what you do for a living is the one common ingredient among happy people.

Moreover, loving what you do and being very good at what you do are closely linked. Being very good at what you do always engenders a passion for excellence that, in turn, is either encouraged or frustrated by the quality of the environment within which you practice. All of this has a direct and measurable impact on the quality of care given to patients. It affects every aspect of a patient's care and the outcomes of that care. It means someone might live who otherwise would die. It means fewer complications and shorter lengths of stay. It means higher productivity and greater cost savings.

It also means people - administrators and staff, patients and families - are happier. Not some mindless silliness, but genuinely in the flow, which Csikszentmihalyi describes as "a state of concentration when your activities are so spontaneous that they become almost automatic; when time stands still, energy abounds and action feels effortless." If that isn't the essence of true professionalism, I don't know what is... And if getting a life isn't the essence of all ethics, then what in the world is?



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