

JOYSHIFT

The journey to primal happiness

John Ince

JOYGENIC MEDIA



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1 / Introduction

Thank you for finding your way to this page.

I invite you to join me on a happy journey. My aim is to help you revamp your mind, relationships, home, work, and play to develop a deeper and more profound sense of wellbeing than you have ever experienced. Our destination offers an abundance of pleasure, purpose, connection, and joy.

Before you begin this adventure, I will ask you to consider a new theory of happiness. I will present a fresh, science-based formula to attain the deep joy we all want. It is rooted in the stable wisdom of eons of human evolution when humans lived simply, humbly, and deeply connected to the earth.

We need a new approach to happiness because I contend that almost all of us suffer from a chronic *happiness deficit*. We fail to attain a level of happiness that is easily within reach. An analogy to our finances will make this point clearer. If we could convert our annual amount of happiness into dollars we would find that almost all of us have less than an average income, say \$20,000. But we all could be earning a much higher happiness income.

Yet most people imagine that they are very happy and say so when asked. They notice no serious happiness gap in their lives. The trouble is

that most of us have little ability to measure our happiness. Our emotional life gets little of our attention. We don't think that much about how we feel. So we have only a foggy notion of our happiness level, and even less understanding of the happiness we could attain.

Do a quick emotional survey of your life. How often are you really relaxed? When was the last time you were so at ease in your body that you actually noticed how good it felt? When did you last enjoy an activity that was really meaningful to you, such as at your work, with your children, or during a holiday? How often do you feel awe, that sense of witnessing something majestic and powerful? Do you feel passionate about something in your life right now? When was the last time you laughed out loud or noticed you had a big smile on your face?

Now let's look at the negative side of the ledger. How frequently do you feel stressed or overwhelmed? Does your social life consist mostly of superficial connections? Do you ever feel lonely? Are you bored much of the time? Do you overconsume food, alcohol or drugs? How often are you angry?

People to whom I ask those questions report some good feelings and some bad, which is understandable because our emotions fluctuate from hour to hour and from day to day. But if you are similar to most people I talk to, you will report that positive feelings like deep relaxation, passion, and awe, are much rarer than feelings of being overwhelmed, socially isolated, or bored. My sense is that on some level most people intuitively know that something is missing from their lives; that our culture, in spite of its extraordinary richness, is failing us on some basic level.

A great deal of objective evidence supports the idea that emotional deprivation is prevalent. Surveys show that more and more people are feeling depressed at younger and younger ages, physical robustness is declining rapidly, and increasing numbers of people feel socially disconnected and spiritually numb. Most people, likely you included, have some level of happiness deficit. We are failing to maximize our emotional wellbeing.

Growing happier systematically

The good news is that you do not have to settle for the level of happiness that you have right now. You can boost it substantially, experiencing more positive feelings every day, by following a scientifically based, step-by-step formula that I am excited to introduce to you.

I've been using this system myself for the last several years, and have much more joy in my life than ever before. This does not mean I'm the happiest person on earth. When you grow happier it is always relative to your own existing level of happiness. The object here is not to compare your level of happiness with anyone else's. It's about becoming happier yourself, wherever your starting point is.

The new approach to happiness is a guaranteed happiness booster because as you are about to learn, it aligns with our biological essence, the genes in every cell of our bodies. These deep roots in human nature give the new formula significance beyond our emotional lives. The prevailing happiness formula touted by powerful institutions in our consumer economy is that money and material things are key to emotional wellbeing. Not only does that approach not deliver much happiness, it threatens the very survival of the planet. In seeking fulfillment through consumerism and wealth, we are burning through the earth's resources. We harm the ecosystem on which all life depends without even getting a compensating happiness payoff.

Our future requires a happiness formula that can deliver the highest level of happiness with minimal impact on the environment. The one I propose does just that. Its harmony of happy emotions and healthy environment is no accident, because as I shall show, the formula flows from our emotional genes which evolved when we lived totally immersed in nature, long before the advent of cities.

If my formula makes sense to you, then I propose that you take the next step and start to apply it with the innovative program I call *joyshifting*. An abundance of scientific evidence shows that there is only one reliable way

to change your life: a systematic *practice*.¹ Athletes, musicians, yogis, and meditators show that a deliberate daily routine can create new abilities that can improve our lives. A joyshift is a daily *happiness practice*. It distills the discoveries of both the modern science of happiness and the joyful methods of venerable philosophies such as Buddhism.

No matter what your normal level of happiness is, joyshifting will raise it. If you live mostly down in the dumps, or cruise along on an even keel of humdrum, or even if you have many happy moments, a regular joyshift routine will elevate your emotional state. The happiness practice that I propose is a comprehensive program for the development of your whole person, your body, mind, relationships, and personal environment. Each of these dimensions of your life impacts your happiness, so joyshifting gives attention to each to enable you to maximize your joy. In this way, a joyshift practice is much more than yoga, meditation, diets, gym workouts, therapy, or any other single-dimension approach. It is an emotional fitness discipline that encompasses the 360 degrees of your life.

This presents a challenge that I should mention right at the beginning. The sad fact is that real change requires real commitment. A depressing discovery of the modern science of behavioral change, which is even overlooked by experts in the happiness field, is the extent to which we are slaves to our habits. From the moment we rise in the morning until we return to bed at night, the automatic pilot of habit largely governs our day. When we try to change, our existing habits restrain us. I guarantee that you will encounter this obstacle on your joy journey. My discovery of that block was a critical turning point on my own path and the development of joyshifting.

I learned that a critical minimum effort is essential to overpower habits. After years of experimenting on myself and many others, I realized that without a daily commitment of 30-60 minutes, only minor life changes are possible. Though less time than that can nudge you onto a new path, you just can't go very far down it. The effort doesn't produce a compensating reward. But when you increase your commitment to the daily half

hour minimum, you realize a whole new level of emotional payoff. Your daily joyshift practice will be the high point of your day. Devoting time to personal growth is fun when the outcome is happiness!

A 30-60 minute session every day might seem impossible. Your life may already be crazy-busy with kids, commutes, jobs, errands, home care, and all the other activities that fill your day. However, time surveys show that most people have significant discretionary time. And while a small number of folks may have schedules so crammed with responsibilities that they literally have no time to spend on growing happier, most of us regularly free up space for leisure.

The problem is that we spend our discretionary time in ways that fail to maximize our happiness. As I later discuss in detail, we are prone to get caught in what I call *happiness traps*. These are institutionally promoted activities that are gratifying in small doses but in larger amounts pay poor happiness returns. The five most important happiness traps are consumerism, media consumption, shallow social relating, overwork, and mood-altering substances. If we can extricate ourselves from these happiness dead-ends, we free up time for joyshifts. We substitute activities that deliver high happiness returns for those that deliver minimal joy. So I believe that most people have the time to grow happier; the core challenge is to overcome the habits that keep us in the happiness traps.

To liberate yourself from the traps, you have to know that your new path will actually deliver a happier life. You need to believe that joyshifting actually works. The main purpose of this book is to persuade you that the system I propose is highly effective for growing happier, and indeed, radically improving your life. In a moment I will give you a brief overview of the program, but before that I'll explain how I came to write this book.

My story

I've had an unusual 62 years. My life has been a series of unconventional projects, including spending a year in India on a spiritual quest, running an eco-tourism business, meditating daily, becoming a lawyer and fighting

court cases against unjust government policies, building a family home on a gorgeous rural island, exploring the rugged coastline of the Pacific Northwest in a kayak, writing a bestselling book about the adventure, starting an innovative political party, founding a thriving retail business, leading seminars on personal development, launching men's groups, and more. I had two insights when I was a young man that put me on this road less traveled. When I was 18 I had a terrifying and potentially fatal bout of cancer. With the feeling of death so strong that I could almost taste it, I sensed deep in my guts what had previously been an abstraction: the profound scarcity and extraordinary value of every moment. I decided then to dive into the juice of life and avoid the shallow, the humdrum, and the easy.

Second, I observed that most (but not all) of the people I knew who followed the conventional lifestyle – marriage, kids, a home in the suburbs, lots of consumption of media and material things, and working long hours to pay for all of it – did not seem very happy. While some folks definitely thrived in the mainstream, I saw more evidence of negativity than happiness: anger, depression, addiction, loneliness, and obesity. Following the beat of my own drum seemed a better bet.

A few years ago, my lifelong reflections on the nature of a happy life turned into a major research project. After the completion of my last book, I needed some intellectual meat to chew on. Human emotions had always interested me, not just as a visceral experience, but also as a subject worthy of study, which is why my previous book, *The Politics of Lust*, examined one of our most powerful passions, sexuality.² I was ready for a new sentiment to investigate, and happiness was the obvious candidate. Why were so many people leading humdrum or unhappy lives?

I spent four years researching the often arcane literature on happiness, the product of several disciplines. In my research on sexuality, I'd noticed that researchers tend to stay in the silo of their own field, and rarely venture into adjacent specialties. In contrast, my approach is to look for macro patterns in the human condition, and these tend to emerge only in cross-disciplinary research. For example, my book on sexuality showed a

striking relationship between two seemingly unrelated aspects of ourselves: our attitudes toward sex and our political orientation. That link surfaced in the data from diverse fields but because so few researchers take that macro perspective, my book was the first to discuss it at length.

I took the same generalist approach in my study of happiness and it yielded a major discovery: a happiness formula shaped by millions of years of human experience and for which every cell in our body is primed. I call it the *primal* happiness formula. Its core idea is that there are a relatively small number of human experiences that are crucial to a happy life. Think of them as the *emotional equivalent* of the essential dietary inputs that you need, such as vitamins, minerals, proteins, and fats. I call them the *primal nutrients* of happiness.

The primal nutrients

You don't need science to understand some of them, such as food or sex. These nutrients are so powerful in generating positive feelings that nobody can fail to notice that fact. But there are many other primal nutrients which you can easily miss in the modern world. Consider the following three examples.

The first is physical motion. When we get off our butts or backs and move through the world in all of the ways that humans can, we feel better. Science now reveals the many reasons for that. Yet most people in modern societies are intensely sedentary, and miss out on this vital nutrient of happiness.

The second is contact with nature. An abundance of evidence shows that humans are *biophilic*; we innately enjoy contact with the natural environment in all of its many forms. But as we become more and more urban, we lose our connection with oceans, forests, and animals. We become deficient in a basic happiness nutrient.

The third is close community. We are intensely social animals; we love to be surrounded by people we really care about and who really care about us. New evidence shows how important such social intimacy is

to our emotional wellbeing. Yet the modern economy requires constant relocation and that prevents deep connections. Our circle of intimates is way too small.

The mainstream happiness formula that most of us follow lacks awareness of many of our primal nutrients. Whether we get them is just a matter of chance. Some lucky folks happen upon those nutrients and experience high levels of happiness. (Interestingly, the root of the word “happy” derives from the Scandinavian word for “luck”). But many more of us are not so fortunate. Our defective happiness formula directs us away from, rather than toward, the happiest experiences in life.

To help grasp this sad situation, consider a historical analogy: dietary deficiencies in large communities. Prior to about one hundred years ago, science had not discovered the existence of vitamins. New foods would slowly become popular in local diets, changing the cuisine that had existed for generations, and gradually people would get sick. Tens of thousands of people could be ill at the same time and nobody knew why. This happened in North America regularly, just a few generations ago.

Consider pellagra, a disease caused by a deficiency of niacin (vitamin B3). In 1914 there were 50,000 cases of the condition in the southern U.S. states. Factory owners reported that their workers were too weak to work. The ultimate cause of the disease was industrialization: early in the century, to increase the shelf life of corn products, mills began to process corn by removing the germ, which reduced the niacin, creating a deficiency in the diet of millions of people, many of whom got sick with pellagra. Science would later identify the missing ingredient.³ Similar epidemics have resulted from deficiencies in Vitamin B1 and iodine. When researchers discovered what was missing, the afflicted could quickly recover by changing their diet or taking a supplement.

Now fast forward to today. While science has recently identified the specific set of inputs to maximize our happiness, few people are aware of that research. The information is so fresh that it has not received wide publicity. Most scientists are content to stay in their labs and do research,

and not popularize their findings. So we continue to follow the mainstream happiness formula and persist in lifestyles that emotionally deprive us. We suffer the emotional equivalent of early-stage pellagra or scurvy.

The first step in growing happier is to learn about these happiness nutrients. Science has discovered them mostly through sophisticated surveys of the responses of test subjects. Volunteers are asked to report how a specific behavior, such as giving away money or going into a forest or watching lots of television, affects their happiness. Consistent reports of an increase or decrease in happiness across significant populations reveal the behaviors that uplift or depress us.

Is there a reason why a relatively small set of experiences is so essential to our emotional wellbeing? This is a key question and it is answered by an important new field of science – evolutionary psychology. A key tenet of that discipline is that our emotions are a critical part of our biological survival system which helped our species persevere for eons. Over countless generations, the process of evolution created genes that would trigger positive emotions when we acted in a way that helped survival, such as to eat and have sex; and negative emotions when we endangered our survival, such as when we played with dangerous snakes or walked on burning embers. “Happiness is a reward for doing what we should be doing,” says Dr. James Watson, the Nobel laureate and co-discoverer of the design of our DNA.⁴

So the experiences that make us happy today are not random or accidental. The nutrients of happiness are defined by our genes, which in turn are the product of the specific physical and social environment in which humans lived for millennia. To attain the greatest joy today, we need to know about the nomadic hunter-gather lifestyle of our ancient ancestors. The secret to modern emotional richness is found in the primal environment where our genes came of age. Only when you grasp the primal nature of happiness, are you likely to invest in the journey ahead. The solid scientific evidence supporting the primal perspective has inspired

millions of people to try other primal programs such as the paleo diet and primal fitness. I hope it will stir you to take the path to greater joy.

Daily joyshifts

Joyshifting is the vehicle to bring the primal nutrients into your life. As you are about to see, many of the nutrients are easy to obtain. Like moving in more varied ways or getting to deep states of mental calm. Your 30-60 minute daily session includes a constantly changing set of 5-10 minute emotionally enriching *practice sets*, outlined in more detail in the next chapter. As you will learn, novelty is a critically important nutrient of happiness, so every daily joyshift practice is different. The time you spend on your joyshift will usually be the very best part of your day. That is what makes it different from most other training routines. The object here is not to grow muscles, lose weight, get smarter, or look sexier (although all of those outcomes are more likely when you joyshift), but simply to feel better instantly.

Your daily session will also include two *planning practices*: you sit with pen and paper for under 10 minutes and plan a) several one minute *micro-joyshifts* for later that same day and b) *macro-joyshifts* which deliver complex nutrients of happiness, such as a holiday immersed in nature, new love, or more fulfilling work. The preparation required in getting these complex nutrients can be so intimidating that we give up on them and miss out on huge happiness rewards. But when you devote a minor portion of every day to setting up these *macro-joyshifts*, the small steps accumulate, and in time you are poised to win your dream. This portion of the daily joyshift will teach you the extraordinary power of small steps.⁵

So each daily session is a mix of instant feel-good experiences and several minutes of planning your day and your broader life. Both combine to produce a special happiness nutrient: the sense of self mastery. As I later discuss, we are hardwired to enjoy the feeling of being in control of our lives. We sense that control when we commit to a daily practice of self-improvement and stick to it. Further, joyshifting will enhance your

willpower, and that feels good too. Researchers have discovered that our willpower is like a muscle. A regular practice improves it.⁶ So as you journey along the joyshift path, you will likely notice subtle improvements in your self-discipline. You will become more punctual or spend money more wisely.

Joyshifting also offers another vital nutrient: purpose. By nature we love to have a goal in life that feels rich and meaningful to us.⁷ We want to grow, to move forward, to not stand still in life. Many people lack any sense of purpose, and that diminishes their happiness level. Making joyshifting a central part of your life provides that purpose. When joyshifting moves beyond a few daily routines to become a constantly evolving lifestyle, that disciplined pursuit of happiness itself boosts your joy. It provides the very macro purpose in life that we all crave, but rarely find.

One of the *most* important findings of happiness research is that we tend to over-estimate the long term emotional impact of major events in our life such as graduation, marriage, having kids, divorce, job promotion, or residential relocation. Such turning points do affect us significantly, but not nearly as much as the cumulative impact of smaller day-to-day events, which we tend to ignore.⁸

Joyshifting changes that. It moves our focus away from the major events of our lives to our daily routine which is where we can earn our biggest happiness boosts. Imagine a continuous series of little lifts throughout your normal day. You wake up in the morning and feel rested. You catch yourself smiling while you are making breakfast. You savor your morning coffee, consciously taking pleasure in its rich flavors. You walk outside, and rejoice in the simple feel of the morning sun on your face. You may still feel blue at times, and not feel much of anything at other times, but you have a regular stream of emotional tonics from dawn to dusk. That is the way nature intended you to live.

Deliberate practical programs to increase happiness actually work. Research shows that by committing to and following an on-going science-based system for growing happier most people experience a measureable increase

in their life satisfaction.⁹ You never know where joyshifting will take you. The only thing certain is that you will be happier.

Key ideas introduced in this chapter
joyshift session
happiness traps
primal nutrients
micro-joyshifts
macro-joyshifts