

POCKETS OF HAPPINESS

Proven ways to build mental
strength, harness happiness,
and cope with stress

Katie Britcliffe

First Edition 2024, *POCKETS OF HAPPINESS*
Published by Happier Coach Publishing
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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.
ISBN: 978-1-0687871-4-0

Cover designed by: Melissa Sterry at b:creative
Printed and bound by: Trio Offset Ltd.

This book is dedicated to:

The Past

To my mum; my inspiration

The Present

To my darling Andy; always finding the best of now, together

The Future

*To Sienna, Esme, and Tommy; I hope these pockets help
guide you through your life*

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Chapter 3

Understanding Emotions – Why we need to savour negative emotions

This chapter tackles the complex relationship between negative emotions and happiness. I will show you how acknowledging and facing your difficult emotions can ultimately lead you to happiness – or a new perspective of happiness – by guiding you through the various processes involved. You’ll also see how those negativities can be used to strengthen your mental resilience.

Embracing rather than avoiding difficult emotions

There is extensive literature on stress, burnout, and negative emotions, with endless self-help books offering advice on how to manage our feelings. Unfortunately, much of this literature tends to create confusion and focuses on eliminating negative feelings rather than understanding them. Avoiding negative emotions often results in only temporary relief and ultimately ends up being a short-term fix.

Ways in which we tend to hide away from negativity is by staying continually busy with work, home life, or both. It is so easy to do as there always seems to be something else to do, to achieve, to fix, or to expand. But catching up on laundry is like saying you have caught up with breathing: it won’t ever stop, like so much else in the modern world. Distracting ourselves with digital entertainment or any other passive activity will also conveniently fill the time we should be spending thinking about or addressing any issues. This distraction technique works: it is a dopamine hit, which is why it’s so easy to continually fall back to, but all this does is push those thoughts to another time. Consequently, if we are then flung into a really difficult time, it leaves us less equipped to handle unexpected challenges as, mentally and emotionally, we are already right up to

our max from hiding and pushing other negativity down.

The research I carried out into stress and how pockets of happiness can support our mental strength highlighted that it isn’t our actual stress or negative mood that is the biggest issue but our *perceived* stress levels and mood. What we *think* we are feeling and dealing with, rather than the truth of the emotions. The trouble is, we have been conditioned to brush things off with a quick comment about ‘being busy’ or ‘being stressed’ as if it is normal and OK. Our society has normalised these as necessary. And so we continue to hide under these guises, meaning those negative emotions or stressful times we need to address often get pushed away or covered with clever short-term strategies or excuses.

The triple win with pockets is that if we can regularly listen to what makes us happy we are: first, more able to notice the things that make us happy which, second, highlights the elements that are not serving our wellbeing or issues that we know need attention. It is here, in the second win, where we see and make acknowledgement of happiness that allows us to see the more negative feelings. When we see the negative we are much more able to attend to what it is that is troubling us or the things that are out of our control but directly affect how we feel. Herein lies the third win: building the mental strength to actually tackle the root of any problems we face.

The triple win for pockets of happiness

1. Helps you notice happiness
2. Highlights negative feelings
3. Builds mental strength

The reason the first two elements allow us to build our mental strength and gain that third win is that – aside from the fact that it is draining to always be pushing negative feelings away – the happiness we feel will also support a shift in mindset and boost our self-compassion. The more supportive our inner voice is to ourselves, the more confident we are at dealing with tougher

elements. (As discussed in *Fierce Self-Compassion: How Women Can Harness Kindness to Speak Up, Claim Their Power, and Thrive* by Dr Kristin Neff.)

Talking about these feelings is an excellent first step, but only if it is followed by some sort of action. Understanding why we are feeling any emotion is key to our wellbeing, but so too is making sure we do not rid ourselves of the negative ones. Instead, it's vital we concede that negative emotions will come and go as we deal with experiences in our life in an ongoing cyclical process. It doesn't mean we can *solve* such difficulties, it means we learn to *cope* better: a subtle but important difference.

Studies have proved that the influence on our emotions is our *reaction* to the feeling, not the experience or events itself. It is our reaction that leads to the feelings that come afterwards. Let's take an unemotional topic of traffic. We have all been stuck in traffic and felt our stress levels instantly rise; however, our stress reaction comes not from the traffic itself but the knock-on effect it brings. It is the consequence of being late somewhere that brings out the stress or the anger to the traffic. Are we annoyed for not leaving earlier to account for additional traffic? Do we learn from it in terms of the journey or during the time it takes on the journey? The truth is we cannot control traffic in any way: once we are in it we are usually stuck with it and also stuck with the consequences that follow. Of course, when translating that to more emotive situations, it is much harder to rationalise it when something is so close to our hearts and yet there is a similar response to traffic that we can adopt to cope in the moment:

- Can I control this?
- If I just accept this can I cope better?
- What do I choose to respond to?
- Can I learn from this for another occasion?

Some of this might not seem as if it links to pockets of happiness but it is all about the *emotions and feelings within the moment*.

Learning to appreciate *all* momentary responses, both good and bad, becomes a really useful skill. If you can understand the negativity and respond in a way that supports your wellbeing, you will then also open yourself up to a reduction in stress.

Leaning into what it is about our worries that is feeling so difficult is the first step; splitting it into more specific reasons is the next. Let's take the word 'worry'. If I said to a friend 'I am worried about my daughter', the best question they could answer my statement with would be 'Can you describe that worry in more detail?', rather than just responding with 'Why?'.

Breaking down emotions into more detailed words or subcategories helps us to identify how to respond and take action, as opposed to just sitting with the worry, which will probably not budge until something else more worrying takes over – or perhaps the worry remains indefinitely, which is certainly not conducive for wellbeing.

Contrasting emotions

It is possible to have two contrasting emotions at the same time.

- Happy and sad
- Worried and cheerful
- Confident and scared
- Hopeful and grief-stricken
- Confused and successful

Emotions are generally all mashed up together all of the time, we just notice them more when they feel stronger or more extreme, but elements of multiple emotions at the same time is perfectly normal. For some reason we feel the need to just label one emotion. I've often felt guilty for feeling joy during a sad time and similarly it feels strange to notice both extremes, or even just parts of multiple emotions. Coming to terms with the fact that happiness isn't a constant state once achieved, and recognising that it flows fluidly among various emotions, is essential.

It can be useful to see emotions as a flowing river: when we are

sitting in the middle we can go with it or sit with it with others. Either way, we won't stick with the same water: it changes and flows past. Seeing a branch floating past and holding it could be happiness but it will go and another will come. Clinging for dear life to one positive emotion or shoving a negative emotion away won't make either change only our response to it.

“Coming to terms with the fact that happiness isn't a constant state once achieved, and recognising that it flows fluidly among various emotions.”

When we understand and accept the emotions we are feeling, that is how we can then address any issues they are creating. But to address these we need to link back to what is important to us, which inevitably links back to our values and noticing the small things that make us happy. This is the greatest advantage of pockets of happiness: it ends up guiding us towards living the life we want by helping us identify both what is important and how to deal with all our emotions. No longer pushing or hiding them away means we can be emotionally flexible as opposed to being rigid. Developing this flexibility allows us to make deliberate actions that can shape our worlds into a more positive facing angle, thus creating space for happiness to reach the deepest, most hidden parts of our thoughts and feelings.

Striving to have a meaningful and purposeful life ultimately implies such a life will not come easily, and there's no getting around the fact that the emotions and work involved in finding a life with purpose will not make it straightforward, though the achievement

will be worth it. Finding purpose in the short term is not how it works, unfortunately.

- What feelings are strongest at the moment?
- How are these feelings affecting me?
- How should I deal with these feelings?
- How do these connect to my values?
- Overwhelmed?

There is beauty in being able to give ourselves more than just the permission to be happy even when things around us are sad but to *lean into it*. It's OK to allow feelings of joy while simultaneously being adversely affected by the news and heartbreak around the world. A pocket mindset can be quite a powerful tool in this instance. While at the beach I thought, 'If every rock, pebble, shell, and sand grain thought it was insignificant and therefore was removed, what would be left?' Our positive impact on the world can be enough if we put even the smallest action into place and our influence can be effective when we join together. The point here is that pockets, as a concept, can be more than happiness. It can help us explain or rationalise wider concepts that sometimes we can't smooth out in our head or collectively with friends. It can feel as if the small things do not matter, yet insignificance is only true by doing absolutely nothing.

It is also a skill to stay happy or hold on to positivity when people around you whom you love or care for are sad. It relates to the emotional connection we have with others; it pulls us into feeling their emotions with them, and the empathy level we have will direct how strongly we feel these emotions. You don't, however, have to pretend to be sad with them to be able to support them – I guess you wouldn't want to be laughing in their face or obviously joyful, but you don't have to say you're sad if you are not. You will feel a level of their emotions if you care for them, but by noticing how you feel in the moment you can adapt your response and become more of a supporting voice; this will allow you to feel like you don't need

to ‘fix’ anything, but just be the help the friend or loved one needs.

This opens us up to be able to think about noticing negative emotions like sadness. Not in the context of embracing them, savouring them, or creating them, but more about understanding them. Acknowledging these emotions gives us the space and ability to deal with them. We’ve already covered how not pushing emotions away when they are gloomier enables us to cope better, and how making it more of a habit to confront negative feelings means that they don’t build up. Dealing with unfavourable moments when they arise is a much easier way to handle situations, rather than letting them accumulate. A little like me writing this book: there is no way I could write it in one sitting, but working on it day after day after day (week, month, year!) makes a difference in the end. And it’s the same for our achievements, our happiness, and our resilience: we have a potential in anything we want to do, and small things do add up.

Key Points:

- Negative emotions can coexist with happiness.
- Understanding our negative emotions can support our happiness and develop resilience.
- Challenging emotions or events can be supported by and highlight the importance of ‘pockets of happiness’.
- Emotional flexibility is powerful when trying to balance happiness and adversity.
- Small things add up.

Questions and journal prompts

1. Keep a ‘pockets of happiness’ diary for a week and note if you notice any changes in your emotions.

2. What type of pocket of happiness do you notice most frequently? Is there a pattern?

3. Can you list any ways they have impacted your overall wellbeing?