10 Steps to Savoring the Good Things in Life
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Browse the self-help shelf of your local bookstore and you’ll find plenty of advice for coping with life’s negative events, from divorce to illness to death.

But what about dealing with the good ones? Reaching the top of a magnificent waterfall. Hearing your child’s laugh. Seeing your favorite band perform your favorite song.

“It’s been presumed that when good things happen, people naturally feel joy for it,” says Fred Bryant, a social psychologist at Loyola University Chicago. His research, however, suggests that we don’t always respond to these “good things” in ways that maximize their positive effects on our lives.

Bryant is the father of research on “savoring,” or the concept that being mindfully engaged and aware of your feelings during positive events can increase happiness in the short and long run.

“It is like swishing the experience around ... in your mind,” says Bryant, author of the 2006 book, Savoring: A New Model of Positive Experience.

His research and the research of others—like Erica Chadwick, who recently completed a dissertation on savoring at Victoria University in New Zealand, and Jordi Quoidbach, a post-doctoral fellow at Harvard University—has identified myriad benefits to savoring, including stronger relationships, improved mental and physical health, and finding more creative solutions to problems.

Bryant is in the process of analyzing a wide range of studies on savoring to determine what works and what doesn’t. Already, he has distilled his research into 10 succinct ways for us to develop savoring as a skill.

1. Share your good feelings with others.

“What’s the first thing you do when you get good news?” Bryant says. “You go and tell someone that’s important to you, like a spouse or a friend.”

He suggests that we treat positive events just like positive news. Tell another person when you are feeling particularly appreciative of a certain moment, whether it be a laugh with friends or a scene in nature. Studies about the ways people react to positive events have shown that those who share positive feelings with others are happier overall than those who do not.

In fact, research shows that one only has to think about telling others good news in order to feel happier, says Chadwick.
“You fake it ‘til you make it,” she says. “If people are unhappy and put a smile on their face, within an hour or so they’ll be happier because they’re getting smiled at by other people. That interaction works.”

“Savoring is the glue that bonds people together, and it is essential to prolonging relationships,” Bryant says. “People who savor together stay together.”

2. Take a mental photograph.

Pause for a moment and consciously be aware of things you want to remember later, such as the sound of a loved one’s chuckle, or a touching moment between two family members.

In one study, participants who took a 20-minute walk every day for one week and consciously looked for good things reported feeling happier than those who were instructed to look for bad things.

“It’s about saying to yourself, ‘This is great. I’m loving it,’” says Bryant.

3. Congratulate yourself.

Don’t hesitate to pat yourself on the back and take credit for your hard work, Bryant says. Research shows that people who revel in their successes are more likely to enjoy the outcome.

Bryant notes that self-congratulation is not encouraged in all cultures, especially Eastern ones, where many individuals downplay their achievements or believe a good experience is likely to be followed by a bad one.

“They tend to tell themselves not to get carried away,” he says, “but in our culture, we say, ‘This is great and going to continue.’”

4. Sharpen your sensory perceptions.

Getting in touch with your senses—or taking the time to use them more consciously—also flexes savoring muscles.

With all the distractions we face today, this is particularly difficult, Bryant says. In one study, college students who focused on the chocolate they were eating reported feeling more pleasure than students who were distracted while eating.

Chadwick suggests slowing down during meals.

“Take the time to shut out your other senses and hone in on one,” she says. “Take the time to sniff the food, smell the food. Or close your eyes while you’re taking a sip of a really nice wine.”

5. Shout it from the rooftops.

Laugh out loud, jump up and down, and shout for joy when something good happens to you, Bryant says.
People who outwardly express their good feelings tend to feel extra good, because it provides the mind with evidence that something positive has occurred. Several experiments have found that people who expressed their feelings while watching a funny video enjoyed themselves more than those who suppressed their feelings.

Bryant notes that some forms of positive expression are based on cultural context. For example, jumping with joy is acceptable in American culture, whereas it is considered inappropriate in many Eastern cultures and therefore would be less likely to have a positive impact.

6. Compare the outcome to something worse.

Boost positive feelings by reminding yourself of how bad things could be, Bryant suggests. For example, if you are late to work, remind yourself of those who may not have a job at all.

Comparing good experiences with unpleasant ones gives us a reference point and makes our current situation seem better, he says.

7. Get absorbed in the moment.

Try to turn off your conscious thoughts and absorb positive feelings during a special moment, such as taking in a work of art. Studies of positive experiences indicate that people most enjoy themselves when they are totally absorbed in a task or moment, losing their sense of time and place—a state that psychologists call “flow.”

Children are particularly good at this, Bryant says, but it’s tougher for adults, who are easily distracted by technology and the temptation to multitask.

Chadwick recommends pausing and reflecting on positive experiences on the spot.

8. Count your blessings and give thanks.

Tell your loved ones how lucky you feel to have them, Bryant suggests, or take extra time to appreciate your food before a meal.

Research suggests that saying “thank you” out loud can make us happier by affirming our positive feelings. Bryant also suggests thinking of a new blessing for which you’ve never given thanks each night in bed. Recalling the experience through thanks will help you to savor it.

9. Avoid killjoy thinking.

Avoiding negative thinking is just as important as thinking positively, Bryant says.

After a rough day, try not to focus on the negative things that occurred. Studies show that the more negative thoughts people have after a personal achievement, the less likely they are to enjoy it.

“People who savor the positive sides to every situation are happier at the end of the day,” he says.
10. Remind yourself of how quickly time flies.

Remember that good moments pass quickly, and tell yourself to consciously relish the moment, Bryant says. Realizing how short-lived certain moments are and wishing they could last longer encourages you to enjoy them while they’re happening.

In fact, savoring can be used to connect you to the past or future, argues Bryant. This can be done by remembering a good time and recreating it, or imagining a time in the future when you will look back with good memories.

“If you’re working hard on a project, take the time to look at your accomplishment,” she says. “Look at your experience and tell yourself how you’re going to look into the future with this—tell yourself, ‘This is such a good day, and I know I’ll look back with good memories.’”