

My Dirty Little Secret: I'm Happy

You can't admit your life is awesome without getting plenty of side eye.

Why do we doubt our own joy?

By Abigail Libers



CUTE GIFT, NO? ShameOnJane custom 14-karat gold necklace (\$104, shameonjane.com)

So how are you?!" a friend asked me at brunch recently. I hadn't seen her in a while and thought for a moment. "Great!" I replied. "Things have been going really well for me."

Even I was surprised by my response; it's rare that I don't have a complaint at the ready. Apparently my friend was taken aback too. "Really?" she asked. "That's awesome. I'm happy for you." And there was an awkward pause. In the silence I realized I had violated an unspoken code. The answer to "How are you?" is supposed to be "I'm so busy and stressed!" And indeed, when I asked what was new with her, she stuck to the script, rattling off complaints: annoyed with her mom, drowning at work.

The exchange made me realize something else. I noticed, strangely, that I felt a little *guilty* that things were going well for me. That night, as I thought about our conversation, doubts began to creep in: Was I *really* happy? Or had all my yoga, meditation, and therapy sessions just momentarily tricked me into *thinking* that I was happy? I reassessed: I had a new job I loved, I'd been dating someone

exciting—dammit, I *was* satisfied. But the whole episode made me wonder, Why is there this happiness catch-22 in which all we want is to feel it, but the moment we do, we can't accept it? Experts have actually studied this phenomenon and have isolated some pretty good reasons:

1) It's human nature.

Those doubts I felt? Turns out they are a pretty standard reaction to life's feel-good moments. "Happiness makes us feel vulnerable, because we're scared it will be taken away from us," explains Andrea Bonior, Ph.D., a licensed clinical psychologist and adjunct professor of psychology at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. Our species is also hardwired to see the worst in things. "Evolutionarily speaking, human beings had to be vigilant and somewhat pessimistic to survive," says psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at the University of Califor-

nia, Riverside, and author of *The Myths of Happiness*. "If you were too confident, too happy, or too optimistic, you might miss threats in the environment."

2) Women especially doubt their happiness.

Even though I was certain I was enjoying my life, I couldn't help chalking it up to a lucky streak. *I'm sure this won't last*, I thought. Also a totally normal reaction, experts say. "It's uncomfortable for women to own their successes, and our society creates that discomfort," says Bonior. "Our culture still doesn't see women as being as competent as men, which undermines female accomplishments in general. That gets internalized." Objectively I know that crediting my success to luck is bullshit: I've worked hard for my happiness, surviving countless mundane dates, merciless bosses, and challenging therapy sessions to get to this good place. But the reflexive self-doubt is hard to kick, Bonior

“When everything is going right, women tend to question it or overthink it.”

acknowledges. (Notice yourself dismissing your accomplishments? She recommends listing what it took to make them happen.)

Our brains are trained to expect the worst. “We know how easily things can go wrong in the world,” Bonior says. Lyubomirsky agrees: “When everything is going right, women tend to question it or overthink it and decide it’s too good to be true.” Other women told me they, too, have a hard time relishing their happiness. “Sometimes when things are going really well for me, I don’t even let myself *feel* happy because I don’t want to jump the gun,” says Allison Rerecich, 29, an actress in New York City. “Or I’ll downplay my excitement because I’m convinced there’s a limit on how happy I can be.”

3) Negativity brings us together.

Another reason we hesitate to embrace our joy? As I saw at brunch, shared misery is a huge part of how women bond.

“Our perspectives are biased toward pessimism,” says Emma Seppälä, Ph.D., science director of Stanford University’s Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education. “We are more likely to pay attention to negative situations than positive ones,” which can mean that connections forged in complaining can feel stronger than positive ones. And breaking this pattern is not always easy.

4) We compartmentalize our happiness.

There actually *is* one place we feel we have permission to be downright giddy: social media. Your vacay shots, your meticulous brunch bowl, your cat—only on Instagram can you express joy and receive just positive feedback. “Likes” pour in, and even if you do have a few annoyed friends, you don’t have to deal with their eye rolls. And real-life conversations tend to fast-forward past the good

stuff, which your friends have already double-tapped. “If you just found out your boyfriend is cheating on you, pour a glass of wine, because we have something to talk about,” says Merritt Watts, 31, a writer in San Francisco. “But who wants to hear you drone on about your perfect trip or incredible hotel? Literally no one.”

So how can we finally own our joy?

Despite all this, there are powerful reasons to let yourself feel good, especially offline. “People who acknowledge their happiness are healthier and more creative than those who don’t,” says Lyubomirsky. “They’re more likely to find a partner, they tend to have better relationships, and they’re stronger leaders and negotiators.” So quiet that voice inside that’s telling you this is all about to disappear. And also know that it’s OK to admit it when you feel happy, even if the sensation feels a little bit like bragging. There’s no shame in that; in fact, your good vibes may be contagious to others. “Research shows that people who are happy influence three degrees of separation around them,” says Seppälä. “People think that pursuing happiness is a selfish act, but they couldn’t be more wrong.” We owe it to ourselves *and* one another to be happy—and to allow ourselves to unabashedly bask in that joy. **G**

Abigail Libers has written for New York and Details.

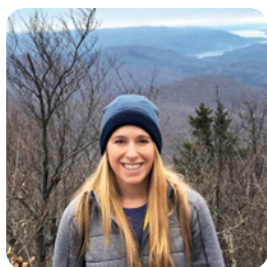
Embrace the Happy!

One place sharing joy is accepted? Social media. Four women explain their posts.



Honeymoon Bliss

“I always feel insecure posting ‘happy couple’ photos, but I couldn’t help myself with this one; this place was so beautiful! Putting this one up just extended our postwedding high.”
—Merritt Watts, 31



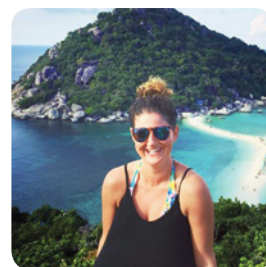
Hiking Reflections

“When I share moments of happiness, I look past insecurities: messed-up hair, weird leg position. It’s important to get over those things and focus on how beautiful the memory is.”
—Amy Schlinger, 28



Jumps of Joy

“I loved jumping around for [the passerby] who took this shot on a recent bike tour. It boosts my mood to look back at pictures from fun times—even if they were recent.”
—Yasmin Stitt, 30



A Perfect Moment

“I wanted to remember the joy I felt in Thailand with this photo. But I remind myself, if Instagram disappeared tomorrow, I’d still experience life the same way: not ignoring my low moments but celebrating the good ones.”
—Jennifer Weber, 30