

Designing a Life

We have made it through a winter! Recent sun and wildflowers are making us all a bit giddy, but it is easy to be happy when conditions are good—it is also possible to be happy when conditions are not so good. Illness in my family is causing me evaluate my own life, and my responses to life, more seriously these days. I am reminded once again that we should not waste the days we are given, and that we should not put our energy into sadness and other negative states. I'm writing this article about how we can design our lives and our best selves around four quotations from Eleanor Roosevelt

In the long run, we shape our lives, and we shape ourselves. The process never ends until we die. And the choices we make are ultimately our own responsibility.

Consider how many times a month you hear the phrase, "I just want to be happy." It comes up constantly in therapy conversations, but I also hear it often from friends and acquaintances, and sometimes from myself as well. At times we may each forget our own responsibility in the matter of happiness.

Consider the rooms of your home. Most likely you have chosen the furnishings that make you comfortable, the decorative pieces that please your eye. You have a desire to have the furniture arranged in a certain way. Most men, in fact, think that most women move furniture too often! Consider clothing. We hold onto the pieces that we love, even when they are really old and worn, because they are comforting. Sometimes we keep too much, hoping things will come back into fashion, or that we will get smaller again, but the consequence of hanging onto things that no longer fit is that we eventually run out of space for anything new. This is true in life as well. We don't wear shoes when they become uncomfortable. We chose the colors that please or flatter us. As we plan, choose, and design our rooms and our wardrobe, we must remember to do the same with our lives—this brings me to the second quote.

It takes as much energy to wish as it does to plan. Wishing and hoping that our lives will get better can take up a lot of our time and energy, and generally do not produce the desired result. Planning and action are necessary to bring about the changes we say we want. We can plan to be happy and then take the necessary steps to make the plan work. Like baking a cake, we can assemble the necessary ingredients, mix them together, and enjoy the sweetness—if we plan carefully, we can indeed have our cake and eat it too!

Another factor in happiness is not being too caught up in ourselves. *Since you get more joy out of giving joy to others, you should put a good deal of thought into the happiness that you are able to give.* One of the effects of depression is isolation, and part of the treatment for depression involves getting the depressed person to reconnect with the world. Just as we need people in our lives, other people need us—and relationship is essential for happiness. Happiness is to some extent contagious! If I smile at someone, they are more likely to smile at someone else, so a rule of thumb might be: To get some happiness, give some away.

With the new day comes new strength and new thoughts. Obviously, life happens. Some days are more difficult than others; however, each day is new and offers another chance to set the intention to be happy. As we design our living spaces for comfort, we can design our life in a way that supports happiness. We can exclude things like bitterness, worry, and resentment that surely promote unhappiness, and decorate instead with gratitude, creativity, acceptance, charity, friendship, and community involvement. My prescription: Plan to be happy! Carol Whitescarver, LCSW, Director of Behavioral Health Services, Iliuliuk Family and Health Services, Inc. 581-1202. This program is partially funded by the citizens of the City of Unalaska.