

The Chemistry of Joy

“Surely joy is the condition of life.” Dr. Henry Emmons asked his audience to contemplate this quote from Henry David Thoreau as he began presenting the *Chemistry of Joy*. Dr. Emmons, a psychiatrist and expert on the holistic treatment of depression, believes that the idea of experiencing joy on a regular basis is out of alignment with many of our day to day experiences: that our society has forgotten the importance of joy.

Depression spans a very large spectrum but for the purposes of this forum, Dr. Emmons defined depression as losing the ability to enjoy things. Given this definition, it is safe to say that most people have encountered depression at some point in their life; either personally or through a loved one dealing with this illness. Research shows that depression is the number one cause for work disability in the U.S. and is predicted to become the number one cause worldwide within the next ten years. Depression and anxiety are on the rise in young people and college kids. Surveying middle-schoolers to ask why depression is more common among young people, they often answer that the weight of expectation they (young people) feel is simply too much.

It is not hard to produce a long list of causes for depression and anxiety affecting all age groups. Genetics, diet, lack of physical movement, lack of deep, human connections, insufficient sleep, too many choices, constant exposure to media and technology, substance abuse, lack of connection to our natural world or any combination thereof are just a few factors. Dr. Emmons explained that in the evolution of man, our bodies were not created to handle the kinds of on-going stresses we experience today.

Despite the daunting numbers, facts and statistics, Dr. Emmons brings us a message of hope and empowerment on how to reclaim the joy in our lives. He jokingly refers to it as “Advanced Common Sense.” The “Resilience Training Program” is a self-care program anyone can pursue. It is based on the principle of neuroplasticity, the brain’s amazing capacity for change no matter what our age. The training program looks at nutrition, fitness and mindfulness (the practice of being fully present in the now) and how making positive changes in these areas affects our worldview.

If genes can be turned on or off depending on the environment to which they are subjected and if our brains can replace dying cells with new neurons, then we must look at what kind of environment we create for ourselves. The three areas to examine are (not surprisingly) body, mind and soul. Dr. Emmons suggests evaluating the following:

Body

- What are you feeding your body?
- Is your body getting the right kind of nutrition?
- Is there a possible imbalance in brain chemistry?
- Are you getting enough vitamins? Do you possibly need supplements? (He suggests using these cautiously and consulting an expert for advice.)
- Do you get enough exercise?
- Do you spend time in nature?
- Do you get enough sleep?

Mind

- Do you give your brain a chance to calm down?
- Do you unplug from media and technology?
- Do you allow yourself to get bored?
- Do you allow yourself quiet time?
- Are you able to accept all emotions, even negative ones, allowing them to play out and pass?
- Do you practice quiet reflection, prayer or meditation?

Soul

- Are you cultivating a good heart?
- Do you have positive, connected relationships?
- What is the image you hold of yourself?
- Are you connected to your own self?
- Can you practice liking yourself?

Doing this mental-health check-up and making changes in any of these areas can significantly improve our lives. Modeling good mental-health practices is a gift that we give not only ourselves but our loved ones as well.

For more information, consult Dr. Emmons' book, [The Chemistry of Joy](#) or visit his website at www.henryemmonsmd.com .