

FORGET THE *Wow* FACTOR AND FEEL *Happier* FOR *Longer*

Enjoying life's small pleasures and knowing when to settle for good enough are the secrets to enduring happiness

WORDS SALLY BROWN

Ever fretted over what to do for a friend's milestone birthday because nothing seems special enough? Have you spent hours cooking a dinner party menu that wouldn't be out of place in a Michelin-starred restaurant? Or nodded in sympathy as a house-hunting friend tells you they turned down a perfectly nice property because 'it didn't have the wow factor'?

Nearly half of us say we seek a 'wow' factor as part of an entertainment experience, according to a recent survey by trend analysts JST Intelligence. And more than a decade of social media is reshaping the way we see our lives so that they become a series of share-worthy events, says psychotherapist Rachel Shattock Dawson (therapyonthames.co.uk). 'Sites like Facebook and Instagram allow us to share edited highlights,' she says. And, while our logical mind is well aware it's not getting the full picture, and no-one's life is perfect, the suspicion that we're being short-changed when an event doesn't quite live up to our Instagram-able expectations has the power to turn a perfectly pleasant experience into something 'less than'.

A CULTURE OF EXPECTATION

'My family and I went to see the Tower of London poppies,' says Amanda Burney, a teacher from London, 'but it was so busy and stressful trying

to keep track of everyone in the crowd that I came away close to tears and annoyed with myself for suggesting it. But that evening all my niece and nephew could talk about was how exciting it was on the Tube and how much they'd liked the slide in the park next to the exhibition. It struck me it had been a perfectly nice day – just not in the way I'd planned it.'

The pursuit of the wow factor, be it connected to our home, holiday or a new pair of shoes, has allowed a culture of expectation to grow and pervade our lives as we witness the explosion of the happiness industry around us. The trouble is, we've lost sight of the fact it's not only 'wow' experiences that make us happy. You may feel miserable shaking a charity tin outside, doing a 10K race in the rain or ploughing through a work project, but the end result can still boost your levels of contentment as the experience gives you a sense of purpose and achievement.

JOY VS CONTENTMENT

Rather than hankering after 'wow' experiences, we should focus on becoming generally more content, says positive psychologist Miriam Akhtar. 'There are two types of happiness: hedonic and eudaimonic. The first is the high we feel when positive emotions peak. But what we should be aiming for is eudaimonic happiness, which is about flourishing because your life has meaning and purpose. It's less about bliss, joy or ecstasy, and more about deep satisfaction.'

It's also easy to forget we're still adjusting to the huge range of opportunities brought by the digital

revolution. We're the first generation who can browse hundreds of hotels, cars or new sofas at the click of a mouse. But with choice comes pressure. A study by Florida State University found that many of us are now 'maximisers' – people who obsess over every option in an effort to make the perfect decision. But the study's happiest people were 'satisficers' – those OK with settling for good enough.

Ups and downs are unavoidable in life, but day-to-day, we feel more content somewhere in the middle, says Shattock Dawson. 'On a scale of one to 10, there will be days when we feel as low as two or three, and others at eight or nine. But for most, five or six is OK. There's nothing exciting going on, but nothing bad happening either. It can give you feelings of stability you'll crave when bad times hit.'

STRESS THE SMALL STUFF

Aim for low not 'wow' and you'll feel happier, agrees a new study from University College London. Researchers found it isn't how well things go or how amazing an event is that counts, it's whether it's better than expected. So invite friends for a relaxed, kitchen supper, not a formal one, and chances are they'll have a better time as their expectations will be lower (and hopefully you'll exceed them!).

Of course, we do need 'wow' experiences in our lifetime, whether it's scuba diving in the Maldives or centre court seats at Wimbledon, says Akhtar – just don't rely on them for long-term happiness. 'Lots of small moments of pleasure will make you more content as they have an accumulative effect which builds wellbeing.' A comfy chair with a good book or sunrays breaking through the clouds; let the wow factor be found in the small stuff.

How to feel more content

1 POCKET HAPPINESS Savouring is the ability to appreciate simple pleasures: fresh bed linen or a hug from a child. The more often we do it, the better we get at it. 'Savouring tiny pockets of happiness builds positive emotions,' says Akhtar.

2 THINK 'DOING', NOT 'FEELING' 'Studies show if you focus on living a meaningful life, feelings of contentment go up,' says Akhtar. Draw three columns on some paper, one for a list of your core values; one for the things you're doing that reflect them; in the third, note some simple

changes you could make to bring your life more in line with your values.

3 MIND THE GAP People who perceive a large gap between what they have and what they want (be it money, a job, friends, health) are unhappier than those who see a smaller one. Cultivating an attitude of gratitude can close the gap, says Shattock Dawson. Before you go to sleep, ask yourself: what went well today and what part did I play in making the good things happen? **h**