

BUILDING A GOOD DAY

I know what I need to be happy. To be happy we need to learn how to structure a day that is rich in meaning and joy-producing activities. How we spend our time defines who we are. There is no magical future. Today is our future. Our lives are events that unfurl in real time, minute by minute.

Mary Pipher's book entitled "*Women Rowing North, Navigating Life's Currents and Flourishing as We Age*" is primarily directed to women age 65 and older. (1) However, many of the concepts can be generalized to other ages and to men. Mary Pipher is a psychologist and has written several *New York Times* best sellers.

Right up there with the need for oxygen, food, and sleep is the need to have a reason to get out of bed every morning. We want to be able to think of events **we are looking forward to and activities that will give the day a sense of purpose**. If we can envision these things, we can find the energy to face even a difficult day.

It is as important to know what to delete as it is to know what to add. We don't want our lives to be one long to-do list filled with should and musts.

We need to remember to monitor ourselves so that we don't get too hungry, lonely, tired, or angry. **When we experience these states, we can take immediate corrective action**. We can learn to control our reactivity by breathing deeply and slowly. We can take **mini-vacations** that last five minutes or a day.

Repetition gives us security, while variation provides zest. **We want a balance between regular habits that are deeply satisfying and spontaneity with its freshness and excitement**. We want a good strong comfort zone and we want to be able to push ourselves outside it on a regular basis.

"Subject change" is a good phrase for thinking about contrasts. A day feels fresher if every now and then we can say, "Subject change," and switch to doing something different. Working hard on a project, then reading the daily newspaper, taking a fifteen-minute walk or a thirty-minute nap is a subject change.

Perhaps the most important factor in building a good day involves managing expectations. Globally, happiness correlates with reasonable expectations. Intuitively this makes sense - the higher our expectations are about anything - the more likely we are to be disappointed. If we expect our days to be problem-free, we set ourselves up for disappointment and complaint. **Much of life is solving problems**.

Psychology researchers have found there are two types of people: **minimizers**, who keep their expectations low, and **maximizers**, who want every experience to be a little better than it is. The maximizers can pitch their tents in the best spots on a glorious June night but then notice a spider and consider their campout ruined.

Minimizers tend to be satisfied with what they have. They settle for “good enough” experiences. On a camping trip when it is rainy and they forget the hot dogs, they are still likely to say they had fun. Fortunately, maximizers can teach themselves to tamp down expectations and correct their tendencies to allow small disappointments to color entire events. **Over time, doing so will make them much happier.**

A skill similar to maintaining reasonable expectations is keeping things in perspective. **When times are tough, think short term.** Long-term, we are all going to die. But short-term, we can plan for happiness, one day at a time. If life is particularly rough, think in terms of the next ten minutes.

A variant of this idea is the importance of breaking complicated projects down into one step at a time. We can break down a complicated process, such as changing residences, into small manageable steps. **The one-hour-a-day rule for overwhelming tasks is an excellent idea.** If a job is overwhelming, just work on it for an hour each day. Over time it will be completed.

This experience of “enjoy the moment” is an important lesson of living an enjoyable lifestyle. **We will find what we look for.** When we look for humor, beauty, or joy, we will discover them around us.

Closing the day is a vital part of experiencing a good day. As we wait for sleep to come, it’s soothing to reflect upon what happened during the day that we learned from, felt proud of, or enjoyed, and to re-envision our happiest moments. **We can also pray or meditate - much more calming activities than worrying.**



(1) Mary Pipher, *Women Rowing North, Navigating Life’s Currents and Flourishing as We Age*. (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019) pp. 122-135.

– Submitted by Dr. Dale Johnson