

Happy disorder

By Ruth Ostrow

I SPENT time with a happy friend recently. This person is truly deliriously happy all the time. If it's sunny, he beams; if it's rainy, he chatters merrily about how exquisite it is that his garden is getting so much nourishment. His optimism is infectious, but it does border on insane.

Which is apparently the case. There is a psychological condition being discussed in textbooks nowadays called pronoia, which is the positive counterpart of paranoia. It is the belief that the universe is plotting to make you happy and there's nothing you can do about it.

According to Professor Marc Cohen, founding professor of complementary medicine at RMIT University and president of the Australasian Integrative Medicine Association, this state has been discussed in recent psychiatric literature as a pathological condition.

Symptoms of pronoia include "delusions of support and exaggerated attractiveness as well as the delusion that others think well of one and ... the products of one's efforts". Pronoics, like their negative counterparts, see subterfuge but they believe everything and everyone is plotting for their highest good.

Cohen says that rather than viewing pronoia as a pathological state, it is possible to view the condition of unbridled happiness as highly desirable and to cultivate it for good health.

"By adopting the attitude that whatever happens is for your benefit, you open yourself up to the possibility of positive outcomes, and thus stop being afraid of change. You simply assume that any change occurring will eventually be a great lesson or source of joy, and that even if circumstances appear negative, there's a hidden treasure waiting to be uncovered."

Cohen adds: "Many people in today's society endure the present, waiting for the promise of future happiness, thinking: 'I'll be happy when I'm rich', or 'I'll be happy when I get a good job', or 'I'll be happy when I get a nose job', or 'when I get married/divorced'. This line of thought is not supported by available evidence, as research on Lotto winners has shown. "If you are happy now, you are likely to be happy later, and if you are unhappy now, instead of changing your circumstances, you need to change your attitude to your circumstances."

With scientific studies proving that happy people have more resistance to heart disease, diabetes, hypertension and a host of immune disorders, pronoia is the healthiest mental disorder around.

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