

To Enjoy Life More, Embrace Anticipation

The following is excerpted from the article, “To Enjoy Life, Embrace Anticipation,” by Holly Burns of The New York Times, May 31, 2022.

“What’s so exciting about a trip is the anticipation before it,” said Ms. Pierce, the founder of a luxury travel company which plans group trips for women. Experts say she’s probably right. Numerous studies suggest that having something [to look forward to](#) boosts your mood and [lowers your stress](#).



“Imagining good things ahead of us makes us feel better in the current moment,” said psychologist Simon A. Rego, who has written extensively on the effect of anticipation on mood. “It can increase motivation, optimism and patience and decrease irritability.”

There are ways to incorporate the power of anticipation into your everyday life.

Credit...Jakov Jakovljevic

Get excited about a lot of little things.

Anticipating a smattering of small, delightful experiences can be as enjoyable as looking forward to one big event, said social psychologist Carrie L. Wyland. “At the end of every day, write down one thing you’re excited for tomorrow,” she said. “Maybe it’s a new book or getting doughnuts or a package you’re expecting.”

The accumulation of these mini-thrills means you’ll still reap the benefits of looking forward to something, even if it’s not a big-ticket reward.

Connect with your future self.

When Torrie Lloyd-Masters, co-founder of a staging business, is preparing a house for sale, “we’re showing people what their life could be like if they lived here,” she said. “We’re essentially saying, ‘This could be your future.’”

It works because it’s compelling to imagine yourself as the kind of person who always has a bouquet of tulips on the kitchen table. Research has shown that feeling as though you’re on

a path to your “future self” can have a positive effect on your well-being. Thinking of the future may help you [prioritize your health](#) and even [act more ethically](#).

A gentle bribe can work wonders.

Anyone who has taken a child for a flu shot and then ice cream knows the power of building anticipation for a thing you don’t want to do by pairing it with a thing you do. [In a 2013 study](#) on “temptation bundling,” participants who were given an iPod loaded with audiobooks that they could listen to only at the gym worked out 51 percent more than those who weren’t. It was so incentivizing that, when the study ended, 61 percent of subjects said they’d pay to have gym-only access to the audiobooks.

Focus on experiences.

[Several studies have also suggested](#) that we get more happiness from anticipating experiential purchases than material goods.

You can maximize anticipation before an experience, like a date. Choose an activity that’s meaningful to you or a place you want to show the other person. “Then you’re looking forward to two things,” she explained. “The date itself but also introducing the other person to your world and seeing how they react.”

Remember that anxiety and anticipation can coexist.

The flip side of positive anticipation is anticipatory anxiety — and the fascinating thing, Dr. Waugh said, is that they often happen together. “Anxiety and excitement are sister emotions,” he said.

It’s only detrimental “when you only focus on the anxiety part and neglect the excitement part,” he added. The key is acknowledging the happy, positive aspect of what you’re doing along with the nervous feelings. [Research suggests](#) that “when you reappraise anxious things as exciting, it actually makes you feel better about them.”

Make something up.

If parties are something you look forward to, don’t wait for a holiday to celebrate — just invent one. Throw a birthday party for the dog, or host a pancake breakfast for all the kids on your street.

Whether it’s a party or a bribe or a nightly list, anticipation can be a powerful tool in manipulating our emotions.

Holly Burns is a writer in the San Francisco Bay Area and a frequent contributor to The New York Times.