Successful, but not happy [1]

Dear Alice,

I'm not in college anymore, but students could benefit from this question, too. I'm single with a 'great' job (pays well, insurance, pension, etc.), a decent place to live, no debt... in short, life could be much worse. But the only thing lately that makes me happy is doing kind things anonymously for people. I'm rather wealthy but don't want a big TV or a fancy car. I'd rather spend a vacation at a local monastery meditating and performing service. I'd be committing economic suicide to quit my job, and so many are worse off, but 'success through hard work' doesn't make me happy. I'm sure a number of students must have these feelings already. What are your feelings about this, Alice?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Feeling like you aren't satisfied by all those things the world says should make you happy? First and foremost, happiness isn't one-size-fits-all?that is, while some people prefer to buy fancy cars or go on exotic vacations, others may feel their happiest when performing acts of kindness. It's also common for the things that make you happy to evolve over time. While you might have found more fulfillment in your personal achievements in the past, perhaps you've come to appreciate the "gift of giving" more as you've gained some life experience. Finally, with a little self-reflection and self-care, perhaps you'll find doing what makes you happy, such as selfless acts of kindness, and having what makes you feel secure doesn't have to be a trade-off?it may be possible to have both!
It's great that you've found enjoyment in anonymous acts of kindness. Some studies show that altruism, or performing acts of kindness for others, may be associated with improved morale, self-esteem, and mental health. When it comes to the age-old pursuit of happiness, it's also good to remember that your perception of what it means to be happy might be influenced by your culture and others around you. Do people in your life tend to put a lot of stock into having material things or being wealthy? As the adage goes, money doesn't always buy happiness. It can, however, bring you a certain type of contentment in the form of security, like knowing that you can afford to buy dessert with dinner or get that nice computer you've been eyeing. That said, it's not uncommon for people to seek feelings of fulfillment or purpose from experiences rather than material goods; perhaps seeking out like-minded folks who prefer spending their days serving others and prioritize other non-material things in their lives might help you put your situation in perspective.

Speaking of reaching out to others who find enjoyment in the similar activities, you may also consider exploring careers that allow you to make a stable living but also serve others, such as working for a philanthropic organization, charity, or transitioning to a "helping profession" (like teaching, nursing, or social work). Even getting connected with a regular volunteer opportunity or pioneering a service program at your current workplace might help you find that balance between keeping your job and finding meaning in your life.

At the end of the day, though, as much as you enjoy helping others, it's still wise to prioritize your own mental health and personal well-being. After all, you can't help others if you're feeling down in the dumps yourself. Taking time in your day to put yourself first can go a long way in helping you strike that balance of selflessness and self-care. You may consider trying these tips to brighten your mood, and best of all, they don't factor money or career into the equation:

- Keep a gratitude journal to track things for which you are thankful.
- Regularly reflect on the things you like about yourself or that make you feel proud of yourself.
- Work on self-acceptance, or loving yourself for being you.
- Spend time with family and friends.
- Avoid alcohol and drugs or any substances that alter your mood.
- Get enough sleep.
- Follow a healthy, nutritious diet.
- Engage in physical activity or exercise.
- Try yoga, meditation, tai chi, or other relaxation methods.

It may also be helpful to ask yourself a few reflective questions as you decide where to go from here. For example, how satisfied are you with your job at this time? To continue in your current position, what do you need to do to sustain a happy life? What's your ideal work/life situation? If your ideal work/life situation doesn't describe your current state, what can you do to change it? Can you change your perspective on your current situation (particularly if changes may be difficult to make)? These questions may help you start to pin down what sorts of activities or actions could make your life feel more meaningful and happier. Talking with a trusted friend, colleague, family member, clergy member, or mental health professional may help you sort through your thoughts and decide what might be the next best step as you move forward.

Finally, don't be too hard on yourself; it's likely that your mood will improve gradually, rather
than immediately as you continue to figure this out. Wherever you begin though, keep in mind that a positive perspective, self-care, and taking time to reflect on what brings you meaning and joy are key ingredients in the recipe for a life of happiness and fulfillment.

Alice!
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Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside)
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