

9 HABITS OF HEALTHY CHRISTIANS

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Melgosa, Julián, author. | Melgosa, Annette, author

Title: The nine habits of healthy Christians / Julián and Annette Melgosa.

Description: Nampa, Idaho : Pacific Press Publishing Association, [2020] | Summary: "Nine lessons from Philippians on healthful Christian living"— Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020043864 | ISBN 9780816367191 (paperback) | ISBN 9780816367207 (e-book edition)

Subjects: LCSH: Mental health—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Interpersonal relations—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Well-being—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Christian life—Seventh-Day Adventist authors.

Classification: LCC BT732.4 .M38 2020 | DDC 248.4—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020043864>

January 2021

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Joy

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

—*Philippians 4:4*

Heather spent a few years establishing herself professionally before starting a family. At thirty-five, she and her husband decided to have a child, and she soon became pregnant. She delivered a healthy baby girl. But a few days after giving birth, Heather began to feel sad and frequently tearful. She had no appetite, experienced insomnia, and felt worthless. She no longer found enjoyment in things that had previously brought her pleasure. Most devastating to her self-esteem as a new mother, she lost interest in taking care of her little girl. Her husband and mother pushed her to see a psychiatrist.

At the doctor's office, it became apparent that Heather was experiencing an abundance of negative thoughts: She felt that she had failed her daughter because she had not been allowed to give birth in a "natural" environment. Her baby did not latch during nursing, and she had to begin feeding her formula. She considered formula less healthy and saw this as another failure. Her little girl cried during the night, and she felt incapable of soothing her. Heather felt overwhelmed and alone, as her mother did not live close enough to help with the baby very often. Each negatively viewed event reinforced the thought that Heather was not a good mother. Heather succumbed to these feelings of inadequacy and felt unable to get out of bed. Caught in a repetitive cycle of thought rumination, she rehearsed over and over the things that proved that she was an unfit mother.

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The doctor prescribed antidepressants to stabilize her emotions and advised that a very important part of healing would be her participation in counseling. There she would learn how to change her thoughts and build skills that would help her regain a sense of adequacy as a new mother. This, in turn, would foster a happy, contented attitude.

Jen was of similar age and had also recently given birth to a baby girl. Like Heather, she also experienced symptoms of depression after the delivery and went to see her doctor. She was also prescribed antidepressants. In Jen's case, negative thoughts did not

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take a firm hold because she had learned that these thoughts do not represent reality. After a number of weeks in consultation with her psychiatrist, she was able to drop the medicine and did not need an extended period of therapy. Throughout her time of treatment, Jen chose not to believe the negative thoughts that popped into her head. Instead, she reassured herself each

time negative emotions presented themselves. Jen was also dealing with problems, but she recognized the power of a hopeful attitude. During this time, her husband was unemployed, but she used to say: "He is qualified and is looking for work. I know he will find something. In the meantime, he is very good with the baby and will take good care of her after I return to work." They lived far from shopping amenities, but she reasoned: "We do have a few neighbors who might help us with our shopping." When she considered her depressive symptoms, she affirmed: "These thoughts and feelings are nasty and painful, but I am taking the prescribed medication." Each time she felt overwhelmed, she reminded herself, "I know that God is with me, and He has shown me His mercy many times in the past."

Why couldn't Heather "make" herself happy just as Jen did? What prevented Heather from seeing the positive side of her troubles? Was Jen predetermined genetically to deal successfully with adversity while Heather was naturally predestined to unhappiness?

In many similar cases, there are genetic determinants. Researchers from the University of California and the University of Missouri¹ examined studies on the long-term

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happiness and other traits of identical and fraternal twins. They concluded that about 50 percent of the desirable state of happiness is due to genetics, or the natural extent to which we are inclined to be joyous or despondent. They called this inclination the *set point*, and it is assumed to be fixed and stable over time. The remainder of the happiness pie, however, is divided into surrounding circumstances (10 percent) and one's own choices, decisions, and agency (40 percent). While our inherited set point, or inclination toward happiness or despondency, is real, we must also recognize that we can control a significant portion of our sense of well-being. We are told by the apostle Paul to “rejoice.” Rejoicing focuses our attention on the things that we can change.

Current times seem filled with more sadness and less happiness. A recent macro-study led by Jean Twenge² from San Diego State University used data from more than 200,000 adolescents (ages 12–17) and almost 400,000 young adults (ages 18–25). Participants were asked to rate their distress over the past month in terms of feeling nervous, hopeless, restless, fidgety, sad, or depressed; feeling that nothing could cheer them up; feeling that everything was an effort; and feeling down on themselves, no good, or worthless. They also reported their frequency of suicidal thoughts, plans, and attempts. Figures were compared with prior records, and it was found that between 2005 and 2017, depression rates increased 52 percent in adolescents and, between 2009 and 2017, 63 percent in young adults. Rates in adults (26 and older) also increased but moderately by comparison.

Against these odds, we must make a concerted effort to become happier people. This is particularly true for Christians because we can know the joy of salvation.

First how-to: Rejoice

Joy is incompatible with depression. The states of joy and depression cannot coexist simultaneously. Paul's appeal for joy in Philippians 4:4 resonates with messages from previous paragraphs in the same letter to the Philippians: “Rejoice with me” (Philippians 2:18) and “Rejoice in the Lord” (Philippians 3:1). In Philippians 4:4, the apostle adds “always,” which could be rendered as “all the time.” This message invites the reader to do whatever it takes to make joy a *predominant* emotion, thus keeping depression away.

But is this a fair admonition? Are we able to rejoice at will, or are we subject to genetic

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traits and other circumstances outside of our control? Consider the evidence of MRI readings that show that brain activity is different when people follow instructions to worry or not to worry about something. We can conclude from this that people are, to a large extent, able to regulate their emotions. Research shows that people can learn to exercise significant control

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over their moods. People can learn how to adopt and maintain an attitude of happiness and act in certain uplifting ways according to personal choice. In fact, psychotherapists today spend much time teaching clients how to build positive feelings and emotions by

thinking and acting intentionally in certain ways. Cognitive-behavioral therapy promotes reasonable control over mood toward attaining joy and happiness.

Sonja Lyubomirsky, director of the Positive Activities and Well-Being Laboratory in Riverside, at the University of California, Riverside, is a leading figure in positive psychology. She and her team conduct research to identify behaviors and attitudes that help people experience happier moods. Paul was not being unreasonable when he urged his readers to rejoice. To improve your state of joy, try the following activities based on Lyubomirsky's recommendations:³

- Express gratitude. Write a letter of appreciation, make a phone call, or pay a visit to thank someone for something specific that they have done for you. These simple acts can bring positive change. Experimental studies reveal that men and women who offer appreciation, no matter their age or health, feel better than those who *receive* it, just as Jesus Himself affirmed (Acts 20:35).
- Practice optimism. Optimism is very desirable and can lead to a stable sense of well-being. Optimism is not illusory or unable to recognize drawbacks. Rather, it focuses on the bright side of things while trying to repair what is wrong. Perhaps that is why it is said that a pessimist sees difficulty in every opportunity, while an optimist sees opportunity in every difficulty.
- Avoid overthinking. A worrisome thought, when rehearsed again and again, is

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like someone trying to go to sleep in a state of alertness—tossing over and over to no avail. You must break the cycle. How? Psychologists teach patients to distract themselves by changing activity (for example, calling someone or working out). If a problem is real, instead of worrying, jot down possible solutions. If there seems to be no solution, identify healthier ways (other than worry) to respond to the problem. Ask someone to help you. Then start trying the solutions.

- Practice random acts of kindness. It is well known that someone who is discouraged or affected by depression can feel better by helping someone else in need. Consider helping someone to be a way of following in the steps of Jesus, who “went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil” (Acts 10:38).
- Forgive. Extending forgiveness is a key factor in happiness. Experts recommend it, and not necessarily for moral reasons. However, when forgiveness is guided by moral principles, it becomes more authentic and complete because then forgiveness is granted wholly, unconditionally, and out of the love that comes as a gift from God.
- Savor the small things. Expensive or impressive pastimes do not lead to joy. Rather, learn to observe and enjoy the simple things in life: a natural landscape, a good friend, a great book or piece of music, prayers of thanksgiving, a simple meal, or a relaxing walk. All of these activities can improve your mood.
- Practice the religious life. Contemporary psychology recognizes the health benefits of religion, and the American Psychological Association now has the Division of Religion and Spirituality. Prayer, churchgoing, outreach, reading of sacred texts, and fellowship with other believers have been studied empirically and found to foster well-being.
- Nourish relationships. Connecting with others improves your mood. Sharing good news can be a source of happiness. In the parable of the lost coin, the Bible explains: “And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘*Rejoice* with me’ ” (Luke 15:9; emphasis added).

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- Find and practice your personal strengths and virtues. The happiest people are those who understand their strengths (such as persistence, ability to communicate, or logical reasoning) and virtues (such as compassion, fairness, authenticity, or humility) and how to use them to benefit others. This brings to mind the gifts of the Spirit referred to in 1 Corinthians 12. These gifts are a path to well-being and allow us to better serve God and others.

The concepts just listed are proven to increase joy and happiness. But there is a further step. The apostle says, “Rejoice *in the Lord*.” This adds the most important

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dimension. Psychological techniques and strategies are helpful in lifting your mood, but the Lord can strengthen and complete your happiness, making it permanent. Rejoicing “in the Lord” means surrendering to Him, accepting His gift of salvation, and experiencing the fullness of gratitude. It means believing that His love is so immense that it communicates joy. Experiencing His

presence in our lives each day makes us happy enough that we will share our joy with those around us. This is authentic happiness.

Second how-to: Keep busy

Jesus did and said so many things that “if every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written” (John 21:25). It is difficult to imagine Him in idleness. We are told that “each day Jesus was teaching at the temple, and each evening he went out to spend the night on the hill called the Mount of Olives, and all the people came early in the morning to hear him at the temple” (Luke 21:37, 38). He also healed the sick until there was no more illness in a town:

Hour after hour they came and went. . . .

Not until the last sufferer had been relieved did Jesus cease His work.⁴

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Keeping yourself busy is not just a matter of accomplishing more things; it also protects against mental maladies and promotes a happy mood. To keep yourself busy and motivated, try the following:

- Set goals for yourself. Whether it is a do-it-yourself project, visiting someone, or completing an entire degree, you must be clear about what you want to accomplish. Be realistic—setting too many goals and not accomplishing them is disappointing; on the other hand, goals that are too small may not motivate and satisfy you.
- Don't be perfectionistic. This may lead to spending too much time planning rather than doing and may also lead to countless “barriers” and “errors” that will prevent you from advancing. To counteract this, impose time limits (*I must finish this by four o'clock!*).
- Find social support. Although many things may be performed individually, when you carry out a project with someone else, it is easier to keep at it and avoid discouragement. In choosing a work partner, find someone who is positive, thus avoiding unnecessary negativity.
- Take the first step and start. The simple act of beginning might provide the necessary push to take you to the next step and onward. Writers know that when they lack inspiration, they must push themselves to write anyway. Even if the result is poor, it can be corrected and improved. It is always easier to work with something than with nothing.
- Keep physically active. An active lifestyle provides extensive benefits to both physical and mental health. The link between exercise and good mood is indisputable. People being treated for depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and other serious mental conditions are routinely assigned physical activities, preferably in the company of others.
- Get involved in learning. Education, as evidenced by research, is the single variable most strongly associated with health and longevity. Of course, living

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a healthy, long life is a solid foundation for happiness. Learning does not need to involve a formal degree at a prestigious university. Explore courses at a community college or a local foundation. Or find ways to regularly seek out information. Read about particular topics of interest. Any of these activities transmit the joy of learning, which is a long-lasting emotion.

Third how-to: Focus on happiness and contentment

Some teach that one should not focus on the past because the future is what really counts. Others say that contemplating the past helps avoid future problems and helps us attain our goals. Still others say that we possess neither the past nor the future—only the present, and our emphasis should therefore be on the here and now. All of these perspectives are true but incomplete. It is better to look at the past, the present, and the future positively. It is healthy to remember the good of the past and learn from the old mistakes, to experience the present with joy and enthusiasm, and to look toward the future with anticipation and hope.

- Follow happy people. One method consists of identifying happy people and finding out about their habits and lifestyle. Start with their relationships. Happy people are good at relationships in general: family, friends, colleagues, even pets! Next, explore and emulate how they view life. They are likely grateful and helpful, optimistic about the future, and committed to their life goals. Many are also spiritual or religious.
- Adhere to and grow positive psychology principles. Positive psychology founder Martin Seligman summarizes the principal components of this field with the acronym PERMA, which stands for positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement.⁵ Review each of these and incorporate them into your daily life:
 - Positive emotions—joy, love, serenity, compassion, gratitude, hope, confidence, or contentment
 - Engagement—intense involvement in a preferred activity to the point of losing track of time

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- Relationships—optimal connection with others
- Meaning—the ability to see significance and purpose in life events; for the believer, this means acknowledging that God is directing things in one's life and in the world
- Achievement—setting and envisioning goals, creating action plans, moving toward them, and reframing obstacles to see them as challenges

Joy counts among the highest blessings and can be adopted and nourished. According to Paul, Christians should seek joy. Jesus experienced many emotions, including joy. He shared joy with His disciples “so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them” (John 17:13). Jesus wants all of His followers to experience joy. Use the tools available to you and, above all, partner with Jesus and ask Him to put His joy within you.

Reflection questions and activities for individuals

1. Choose two or three ideas from this chapter that may fit your personality and lifestyle. Plan to apply them over the next few days. Ask God to bless your effort to become a happier Christian. Note any changes in your mood as a result of the practice.

2. To exercise your ability to think positively, reflect on an adverse episode from your past. Naturally, there were many negative aspects to it. However, in perspective, can you also think of something good that came from it?

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3. List two or three personal strengths or virtues that you possess. Think of how you might use these to benefit someone in need. Then follow through and observe how serving others affects your mood.

4. Keeping busy is one of the best ways to promote happiness and prevent depression. What can you do to fill idle time? Find wholesome ways to complete your activities, thus avoiding the negative thoughts surrounding unfinished work.

5. Review your social interactions. Do you have too many or too few? Do those people with whom you associate transmit joy, or do they tend to be negativistic or depressing? Identify what you can do to build positive relationships.

6. Determine how you can incorporate antidepressant measures into your life, such as expressing gratitude, engaging in physical exercise, or granting forgiveness.

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Discussion questions and activities for small groups

1. Discuss with your group the influence of heredity and environment on people's ability to experience happiness. How can choice and determination help? How can our relationship with God make a radical difference?
2. Share with your group your reflection on the verse, "Those who are kind benefit themselves" (Proverbs 11:17). How do you think this happens? Consider organizing a group project to show kindness.
3. Share with your group one or two things that make you happy. Share also one or two religious or spiritual activities that bring joy to your life.
4. Read John 17:13. Why is Jesus praying specifically for His disciples to have joy? What would promote (or impede) the fulfillment of Jesus' prayer?
5. Share a time when you expressed specific gratitude to someone and how you felt afterward.
6. Share a time when you granted forgiveness to someone. How did it make you feel?

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3. Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade, "Pursuing Happiness," 111–131.

4. Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press®, 2005), 259.

5. Martin Seligman, "PERMA™ Theory of Well-Being and PERMA™ Workshops," Positive Psychology Center, accessed September 29, 2020, <https://ppc.sas.upenn.edu/learn-more/perma-theory-well-being-and-perma-workshops>.