

# WHY CAN'T WE JUST BE?

WE ALL HAVE GOOD AND BAD DAYS, SO WHY DO WE RARELY ADMIT TO FEELING DOWN? DITCHING THE MYTH OF 24/7 HAPPINESS IS THE FIRST STEP TO BALANCE, SAYS ARIEL LEVE

PHOTOGRAPH RACHEL WHITING

It begins with three simple words. How are you? I never know how to respond. It's such a loaded question, and yet it's posed daily in a casual manner, usually with no vested interest in the response. Am I wrong to answer this question honestly? When I do, it's often met with silence.

Here's an example. A few weeks ago, I ran into someone on the street, a friend I hadn't seen in a while. 'How are you?' she asked. I paused. Then I said, 'I don't know.' Suddenly, she looked confused. There was nowhere to go after that. The tension hung in the air. Eventually, not wanting to make her uncomfortable, I amended my comment. 'I'm sure I'm fine,' I said, unconvincingly. She nodded and we moved on to something else. She could live with that.

There is, it seems, not just an obligation to be happy, but to report it to others as well. Even when you're not feeling great,

we tend to think it's better to project a sense of being in control – doing 'well'. So, what does that mean?

One person's 'well' can be another person's hell. There is nothing prescriptive about what it means to be happy or doing well – or any of those other terms we use to describe what it means to be in a good place. But it is the drive to be in this place that leaves people feeling inadequate.

Happy is an elusive concept and different for everyone. Making money, being busy, having friends and a social life – being a participant, rather than an observer, is usually a good place to start. The problem is, sometimes, when we slow down and take stock of what we are really feeling, what comes up is: unsatisfied. But isn't that okay, too?

It should be, because it's what will propel us to ask questions and seek answers that will help us make choices to have a more fulfilling life. But admitting we are not there yet is the



issue. People are uneasy with saying, 'I'm not sure if I'm happy, but that's okay; it doesn't bother me.'

Why should we be made to feel defective because we are not on top of the world?

I always tell my friends, when they are feeling bad, that there's nothing wrong with it – don't feel bad for feeling bad. For some reason, they tend to think it's a sign of weakness to admit they are blue.

Of course, your personality and nationality impact, as well. As an American, I do notice that my fellow country folk feel they are entitled to be happy. (It's even in the Declaration of Independence: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness). It's as though being happy is everyone's right. While it's true everyone has the right to try to be happy, does this mean you have the right to feel bitter and ripped off when it doesn't work out? Personally, I've found lowering expectations helps. The less I expect, the less I am let down. And this, in a perverse way, helps create moderation.

Nearly every woman I know struggles to have a more balanced life. Whether it's work, or children, or both, managing not to lose themselves in the process of living their life has become an ongoing challenge. Yet how they are perceived is often what creates the most pressure.

A British friend of mine, Helen, has a naturally upbeat demeanour. Because of this, she says she feels a great deal of pressure to maintain it. When she is down, or in a bad mood, she never lets on to others. When I press her for more details, she reveals she worries that if she doesn't project that she is enjoying herself, people will feel sorry for her.

'I worry they'll think I'm unhappy,' she says, 'and I hate the idea of being pitied.'

No wonder Helen finds parties a strain. Unlike me, who has no problem scowling or looking glum, she sustains a perpetual

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easy-going, party smile. Helen believes she needs to act as though she is enjoying herself, even when she isn't. 'Most of the time, I would prefer to be at home reading a book,' she says.

The problem for Helen and others like her is that pretending to be happy is easier than admitting she isn't. Since I have no problem talking about what's bothering me, this issue doesn't apply. If someone were to say, 'What's wrong?', I'd welcome the opportunity to discuss it. It's just that no-one asks. Or, if they do, they're being polite and not really interested in an in-depth response.

Most likely the reason for this is because being engaged in a conversation with someone who talks about their feelings means you might have to look at yours, too. No-one wants that. All the yoga classes, scented candles and anti-oxidant-filled juices in the world can't stave off an introspective flash of darkness once it occurs.

That is the moment you think about where you are in your life: if it makes sense, if you have what you want and, if you don't, what are you going to do about it. Usually, this is followed with an unbearable sense of panic and an impulsive, uncontrollable need to buy something expensive and indulgent.

There is such an expectation to feel good all the time that, often, when we don't, it seems intolerable. Rather than what it really is: a natural occurrence.

Dr Nick Baylis teaches the science of wellbeing at Cambridge University and is author of *The Rough Guide To Happiness* (Penguin, £10.99). He believes that there is no such thing as positive or negative, good or bad emotions, and that as soon as we free ourselves from the burden of trying to feel good all the time, then life really comes alive. 'It's okay to feel shame, loneliness, regret and fear, because they act as a compass,'

he says. 'People who anaesthetise or bury painful emotions are not moving forward.'

Dr Baylis encourages people to ask what these feelings are telling you. His belief is that in the relentless quest to be happy all the time, people block out, rather than allow themselves to experience, bad feelings and, without that, there is no true understanding or appreciation of what we have. 'Parents want their children to be happy, but they need to reconsider and want them to know how to love and be loved. To experience the pain and also the joyful.'

What Dr Baylis seems to be saying is that feeling 'happy' is too simplistic. There needs to be more versatility. He further explains that we are often at our best when we are capable of changing our mind, changing how we feel.

Rather than base his conclusions on statistics, Dr Baylis studies lifetimes and interviews people, taking a more naturalistic observation of what people do. 'There is a misunderstanding of human nature in that if you feel comfortable and confident, you do well and succeed, and that pleasurable emotions lead to improved performance,' he adds. Instead, he has come to the conclusion that we're not designed by evolution to prioritise feeling happy. 'Once we jettison the misunderstanding that life's about prioritising feeling happy, then we dare to be more than just that,' he says. 'We are not handcuffed or shackled to having to feel good or better, and have the freedom to live broadly, deeply and in full colour.'

In my case, that colour is shades of grey. But I have found that because I am not terrified of painful emotions, it reduces the fear of rejection. I'm not sure I dare to be *more*, but I don't shy away from being who I am, either.

Not insulating myself from pain means that I do indeed feel down but when that happens, I am accepting. It is okay to be in this place and more importantly, to not have to lie about it.

Because since when did it become mandatory to be happy all the time? Sometimes it's okay to just be. **■**  
*The Cassandra Chronicles by Ariel Leve (Portobello Books, £12.99) is out now*