



Joy induces a state of well-being that calms us even as it beckons us forward with the promise of beauty and connection. (DenisProduction.com/Shutterstock)

TRADITIONAL WISDOM

Feeding Your Heart and Soul With Joy

Joy is a human need, as intrinsic to our well-being as food and friendship

BY [Emma Suttie](#) TIME [March 4, 2022](#)

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wonder. The world has turned upside down, and we are all still reeling, trying to catch our collective breath.

The past two years have been destabilizing: financially, physically, and emotionally. Constant anxiety, new variants, and endless restrictions have worn us down. And the things that previously brought relief in times of distress have also been disrupted—most notably our relationships with each other.

How much better do you feel after talking to a trusted friend—someone you can spill your guts to wholly and honestly? These are the things that help us cope and improve mental health. Having limits placed on so many aspects of life has been challenging, but not knowing when to expect relief is worse. So perhaps we need to shift our focus and seek something more positive to remind us that [joy](#) is still out there.

And joy is the thing we need. Now more than ever.

The Eastern View

In Chinese medicine, joy is the emotion associated with the heart. Our ability to feel joy openly and honestly directly reflects our heart energy. This connection makes sense

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JOY IN OUR BODIES. WHEN YOU WATCH a child master a new skill, come home after a long day to a pet that is happy to see you, or reach a goal that has taken months or years to achieve, we usually feel this sense of joy deep in our chests—in our hearts.

In Eastern philosophy, joy is a healthy mental state that promotes our internal organs' effective functioning and a balanced emotional state. Joy makes the mind peaceful and relaxed, benefits the immune system, and causes the body to relax and slow down. Joy is a crucial aspect of a healthy body and a meaningful life. Our ability to feel joy means having a healthy, balanced heart and essence.

The heart has a spiritual component called the shen. The shen is difficult to explain as it can't be seen, touched, or measured. It's the part of us that becomes consciousness, awareness, inspiration, and, later in life, wisdom. The shen is our ability to feel joy, wonder, love, and enchantment and guides us on our path through life. It embodies our true nature and helps us realize it.

Our ability to feel joy represents a healthy heart and shen. When someone lacks joy in their life or can't feel the joy around them, we look at the heart and suspect

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now. Some symptoms of an imbalance in the heart or problems with shen are:

- insomnia
- dream-disturbed sleep
- palpitations
- anxiety
- concentration problems
- being easily startled
- unable to communicate clearly
- being overly talkative
- feeling disconnected

Interestingly, these symptoms are common after trauma, directly affecting the heart and spirit.

The Science of Joy

Joy, it seems, is something that even science is beginning to explore.

[Positive psychology](#), a relatively new movement born in the late 1990s, actually studies joy and its effects.

Positive psychology emphasizes the positive influences in life and focuses on a person's strengths instead of weaknesses. It is the scientific study of what makes life worth living.

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LAMBERT CHAIKIN [THE SCIENCE OF Happiness](#)” explains that “for much of its history, psychology has seemed obsessed with human failings and pathology. The very idea of psychotherapy, first formalized by Freud, rests on a view of human beings as troubled creatures in need of repair.”

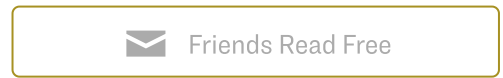
The [article](#) continues, “though not denying humanity’s flaws, the new tack of positive psychologists recommends focusing on people’s strengths and virtues as a point of departure.”

It seems that science is finally catching up to what many ancient traditions have believed all along.

In Eastern medicine, human strengths and virtues are where we begin. We are beauty, perfection, and joy manifest. It’s how we are created and come into the world. Neuroses, illness, and disease are considered a separation from our true nature—the physical world’s way of telling us that we aren’t aligned with our authentic selves.

Joy, unlike happiness, is not all about self. Joy is about connection. Beethoven knew little happiness, but he knew joy. The mystics have linked joy to connection with a power greater than themselves

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FINDING JOY IN EVERYDAY LIFE

The three main religions (I prefer to think of them as philosophies) of China—Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism—all advocate restraint when it comes to emotions and each has made contributions to Chinese medicine. This idea of moderation is a thread that runs throughout Eastern medical theory. The importance of moderation is worth noting in a time of extremes.

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That said, seeking out joy is a worthy pursuit. And the limits to finding it are only our imaginations. One way to figure this out for yourself is to turn your attention inward and think about what brings you joy.

Below are some examples that might help you find inspiration:

- spending time with friends
- your children
- being in nature

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- dancing, singing, or painting
- helping others or volunteering
- listening to music
- cooking for yourself or someone else
- gardening or building something

Throughout the pandemic, there have been many inspiring stories of creative ways people are bringing joy into their lives and the lives of others. If you are not sure how to find joy in your own life, bring it to someone else. This giving works because the act brings joy to you as well.

Finding joy usually isn't difficult; it is a natural byproduct of a happy life. However, during a pandemic, we are all cautiously feeling our way through uncharted waters. Our unusual circumstances mean we have to be a little more deliberate about our search.

So find joy in the world and your life, then spread it around as much as possible. Joy is one way we can come back together and, at the same time, feed our hearts.



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Emma Suttie is an acupuncture physician and founder of Chinese Medicine Living—a website dedicated to

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a healthy lifestyle in the modern world. She has lived and practiced in 4 countries and now works through her practice Thrive Consulting. She is a lover of the natural world, martial arts, and a good cup of tea.

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