



How to appreciate life

Introduction

You are alive. Isn't that amazing?

Many of us tend to be so busy and absorbed in the pressure and rush of everyday living that we rarely (if ever) take time to step back from our lives and appreciate the remarkable fact that we are alive and what this really means.

Learning to appreciate life like this, and reminding yourself about it regularly, can be one of the great pleasures of life, and can add a real sense of meaning to your life. No matter how difficult everyday living may be sometimes, seeing our lives in this wider context can help us to put everyday worries into perspective and give us a great sense of calm.

This article provides some thoughts about appreciating the experience of living in order to help you think about it. The article is split into two sections – first, appreciating the fact that we exist in the first place, and secondly appreciating the experience of being alive.

Appreciating the fact that we are alive

One of the most mind-blowing aspects of being alive is realising what it means to be alive.

We live on a planet that is a tiny speck in the universe, and that has the highly fortunate placement in its solar system to be able to accommodate life. Through a lucky draw in the evolutionary lottery, you were born and have survived up to this point where you are now reading this article. What's more, you have been born into a species with the capacity to reflect on your own existence – a quality that, as far as we know, most other species do not possess.

Somehow, you have emerged temporarily out of the non-experience of not-living, for a brief period of 70 years or so, to be living.

It can be very good for us to reflect on this fact regularly – indeed, some people do it every day and simply register their gratitude and appreciation of the fact they exist. This doesn't have to be thanking anyone (like a god) in particular – it is just the process of acknowledging your luck in existing.

This acknowledgement and gratitude can help us to see our lives in a positive way and give us some perspective, no matter what daily life might throw at us. It can also help us to ease up on the pressure we put on ourselves to succeed or achieve particular goals in life. Many of us strive for particular goals in our lives – from material success to the desire to be loved – but perhaps we don't need to achieve any goals in life in order to appreciate our lives, as the very experience of existing itself is amazing enough.

A final point in this section is that an appreciation of the fact that we're alive can change the way we see death. As individuals, it is easy for us to have a negative and doom-laden attitude to the idea of our own life and death. We often see our life as the focus point, and death as the end of it, where there begins an infinite period of nothing. Why can't we see it the other way? We could see life as a brief window of light in an otherwise featureless universe – an amazing opportunity to exist, and to appreciate the experience of existing.

Appreciating the experience of living

How does it feel to be alive?

It can not only be valuable for us to regularly appreciate the fact that we are alive, but we can also get great pleasure and meaning out of appreciating the experience of living. Yet, amazingly, many people rarely take the time to do it.

*Just for a moment now, pinch yourself. Look at your hands and your body. Look around where you are. Breathe in some air and feel it in your mouth or in your nose. See yourself as a creature. Reflect on the fact that, somehow, you are able to touch, taste, smell, see and hear things. And, even more miraculously, you are *able to reflect* on the fact that you are experiencing these things!

In summary, you know what it's like to *be* – to exist and experience things, and you can reflect on what it's like.

The idea of appreciating the experience of 'be-ing' is central to many religious and relaxation practices. A popular way of reaching a profound appreciation of the experience of 'be-ing' is to clear one's mind of all the thoughts that are flowing through it by relaxing and focussing the mind. This idea of 'mind clearing' is the aim of meditation, and meditation can be one of the most effective ways of achieving it. It can have a number of benefits for us beyond the appreciation of living, such as helping us to relax and find peace. A similar effect can also be achieved just by slowing down and sitting calmly in a quiet place. How about lying in a field on a sunny day with the breeze blowing over your face?

Meditation can help us to develop a focussed appreciation of the experience of living, without the clutter and distraction of our thoughts and external influences. You don't have to be sat peacefully in a meditation room to appreciate the experience of being alive though – you can do it in any waking moment of the day, because let's face it – you're experiencing life all the time, whether or not it is peaceful at a particular point. You might be at work, feeding the kids, going for a walk, speaking with friends, but at any point you can just mentally 'stand back' from the scene like you did at the start of this section (in the paragraph marked with an asterisk*) and remember that you are an 'experiencing creature' – touching, tasting, smelling, seeing and hearing, as well as having an ongoing stream of consciousness and thought that enables you to think about all of this. In this situation, ask yourself what it feels like to be experiencing it.

Going through this process of remembering what it feels like to 'experience' anything can give us a sense of wonder and appreciation in our lives that can really inspire us and improve our well-being.

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