

# THE HAPPINESS OPTION AT MEALTIMES

## Feelings and Choosing

Our feelings are not determined automatically by external events in our lives. Nestled between outside events or stimuli and our feelings and actions lie a rich store of beliefs, judgments, and interpretations. As the event-stimuli move through these internal filters, we respond with our own personal feelings and actions. How we feel about something depends on what we believe about the event and the interpretation we give it.

If I am a farmer looking across a field of slowly growing corn, I may feel joyfully happy as I watch an approaching rainstorm. I believe or judge that rain is good for me and for my crops. If I am a child who has been looking forward to a sunny day of play and swimming at the beach, I may feel very unhappy when the same rainstorm begins. I believe that the rain is bad for me because it will prevent the trip to the beach.

Every experience is personal. Twenty different people can participate in the same event, but it will be a different experience for each of them. Each person will experience the event in harmony with inner beliefs.

Our beliefs and the way we look at life actually determine our experience.

In describing his experiences as a survivor in a Nazi death camp during the Holocaust, Viktor E. Frankl wrote the following powerful statement in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning* (1):

*“Everything can be taken from a man but. . .the last of human freedoms - to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.”*

One of these freedoms is to choose happiness. We can choose to be happy no matter what external events surround us. Barry Neil Kaufman in his book, [\*Happiness is a Choice\*](#) (2), provides many guidelines for exploring our beliefs in relationship to choosing a life of happiness. His work and ideas have profound implications for those of us who share our lives with children who have special feeding needs. Our effectiveness as parents and therapists is strongly influenced by the happiness or unhappiness that we bring into our lives and into mealtimes.

## **Mealtimes and Happiness**

The birth of a child with special needs is a profound event for most families. Concerns about the child's survival, medical, emotional and educational needs may become overwhelming. This becomes particularly challenging when the child has difficulty eating. Feeding problems often unleash many previously unrecognized beliefs and judgments that we hold about food and mealtimes. Feelings of fear, frustration or anger may join the parent and child as they struggle to find the best way to deal with this new problem.

Unhappiness becomes a powerful guest at mealtimes. Unhappiness sabotages mealtimes by increasing the overall difficulty that the child has with eating and by reducing the parent's or therapist's ability to discover creative solutions to make the mealtime easier and increase the child's skills.

Happiness is the most important factor at mealtimes and in therapy programs to help children develop feeding skills. Unhappiness gets in the way of helping children move toward their most comfortable and skillful relationship with food and liquid.

Consider the following happiness and unhappiness possibilities and their impact on children, families, and mealtime programs.

- Infants who experience pain or discomfort initially experience simply a strong sensation. Their crying is simply communication about their experience. They do not automatically interpret, fear or judge this sensation. We frequently interpret their responses to their sensations as "unhappiness". Children learn to be unhappy from the beliefs and responses of the adults who care for them.
- Children may choose not to eat or to eat in very selective ways as a means of taking care of themselves. They notice that they do not tire as easily or are more comfortable when they avoid certain foods or eating situations. They eat (or don't eat) in the very best way they know how.
- When we become unhappy (i.e. fearful, angry, frustrated) about the child's eating abilities and preferences, the child may begin to relate to mealtimes in a different way. He may become more fearful or experience pressure to eat more or eat faster. She may discover that she can control her father's behavior by becoming unhappy herself. Instead of closing her mouth and turning away from the spoon or say "no", she may scream and cry to communicate that she doesn't want the food with strong unhappiness. She may smile and glance at the refrigerator

to convince her father to bring her some pudding that would make her smile and “feel happy”.

- We often use unhappiness as a way to motivate ourselves to find the answers we want. We can motivate ourselves to help the child develop eating skills in many happy ways. We will be much more effective in moving toward what we want when we are happy than when we use unhappiness as a motivator.
- Happy people continue to move toward what they want. They don't become lazy and stop moving just because they are happy. We don't have to be unhappy about our child's feeding tube to motivate us to help him develop an enjoyment of food and the skill to eat and drink.
- When we are happy, we think more clearly than when we are unhappy. Fear and anger cloud our ability to observe mealtime details and take steps that could make the mealtime easier for everyone.
- When we are happy, we notice small differences in a child's ability to communicate more clearly than when we are unhappy.
- When we are happy, our creativity-circuits work more efficiently. We see connections and solutions that are invisible when we are unhappy.
- When we are happy, we support our child's desire to relate to food and eating in an open and positive way. When children are curious and happy, they are natural learners and explorers.
- When we are happy, we are more loving and accepting of our children and ourselves. Love supports and expands both healing and learning. Mealtimes are about nourishing others and ourselves. Love is the greatest nourishment in our lives.

### **Moving Towards Happiness at Mealtimes**

Barry Kaufman (2) describes 6 “Shortcuts to Happiness” that illustrate ways in which we can become happier. By following these guidelines we can invite happiness to be a part of each meal and therapy session.

#### **Shortcut #1 - Make Happiness the Priority!**

Most feeding programs create a set of priorities that place the child's handling of specific foods at the top of the list of priorities for the meal. The mealtime revolves about the mechanics of eating and drinking and the amount and type of food eaten. When the child doesn't eat the food

served or eats it in an immature or unacceptable way, we may become tense and unhappy. We rarely put happiness at the top of our list.

What would happen if happiness became our first priority? We might work on the same skills and hold the same desire that the child learn to eat in a healthier or more mature way. But we would approach the journey toward this goal in a different manner. Our intent to be happy, no matter how the child or a family member chooses to respond, opens doors that can change meals into a time of creative discovery for everyone.

### **Shortcut #2 - Personal Authenticity**

We often try to be what others expect of us. When we have a child with feeding difficulties, we are inundated by the “shoulds”, “should-nots” and standards of family, friends and society. Everyone else knows how to get our child to eat and many appear to criticize the choices we have made. We often try to meet the expectations of others and abandon our own inner knowing, spontaneity, curiosity and vulnerability.

When we are able to share how we really feel and what we really value and want for our children and ourselves, we open a doorway to happiness. We have more energy because we aren't wearing ourselves out by putting on the mask of “the good mother” or the “therapist who has all the answers”. Personal honesty and authenticity allow us to develop deeper and more meaningful relationships with the children and adults in our lives. Children know us best from the unspoken information we communicate about ourselves. They become confused when this nonverbal information conflicts with what we are saying in words or body gestures. You can't fake it with kids! They always know when you are trying to con them into doing something they don't want to do. They know you are angry, even if you have a smile on your face and are telling them that you are happy that they swallowed a bite of chicken. They also know when your interest in a new taste is genuine and when you have assured them that you are just tired and not upset with them.

### **Shortcut #3 - Letting Go of Judgments**

Judgments consist of a strong set of beliefs that we use to place value on events, others and ourselves. Judgments come in many variations but all are related to the words “good”, “bad”, “right” or “wrong”. Judgments limit the information we receive, the activities we engage in and the people we spend time with. Judgments restrict the learning opportunities that we offer our child at mealtime. Becoming aware of judgments and releasing them, allows us to experience mealtimes in a totally different way - a way that promotes happiness.

When we label or judge the child as being a “picky eater”, we tend to see the child through a label of “bad” or “wrong”. We don’t see the child’s emerging curiosity or interest in some foods; we don’t notice the small attempts to move in a new or different direction. All we see is the resistance to new foods and picky eating which we want to extinguish. We may even stop offering our child the opportunity to try unfamiliar foods because we assume she won’t accept them because she is “picky”. When we let go of judgments of good or bad, we become free to appreciate the uniqueness of our child. We engage the happy curiosity that might allow us to discover and appreciate his preference for purple foods or her caution about foods that are green. We may notice that we have said or done something that was followed by a particular response from the child. We become “happy detectives” (2) on a journey of discovery about our children, our mealtimes, and ourselves. We open ourselves to the wonder and excitement of discovering new ways of looking at the world of eating and mealtimes. We invite our children and the events in our lives become our teachers.

**Shortcut #4- Being Present**

Unhappiness is usually a reflection of a past regret or the anticipation of a future worry. We may blame ourselves and feel unhappy because we didn’t offer textured food earlier (or we offered it too early!). We may make ourselves miserable because our child has experienced the discomfort of gastroesophageal reflux. We fear that our child may not learn to chew or may never experience comfort with food. In the present moment there is no regret or fear. There is only the present and how the child is responding to this spoonful of food or this moment of tube feeding.

When we are really present during a mealtime, we are less inclined to judge what is happening. We become free, instead, to really experience the meal with our child. We focus our attention more easily and handle situations that arise more effectively. We are more aware and attentive to the child’s subtle signals of readiness for the next spoonful or need for a pause in the meal. We are not thinking about going to the grocery store, or worrying about a report that needs to be completed or anticipating another child’s therapy session. Happiness is one of the byproducts of being present in life.

**Shortcut #5- Being Grateful**

Gratitude and happiness are partners. When we are happy, we feel grateful. When we are grateful, we feel happy. When we are thankful for the small gifts in our lives we increase our happiness. Viktor Frankl (1), in the midst of the most abominable degradation, misery and starvation at the concentration camp at Auschwitz found meaning and

happiness in choosing to focus on memories of his wife and the gratitude he felt for the years they spent together.

At mealtimes we can feel grateful that we have nutritious food. We can express a heartfelt thank-you for the miracle of a child's brief smile. We can appreciate the moment when our child stares with interest at the new food we have placed on the table. We can choose to be grateful for every event in our life, including have a child with special eating challenges. Our children are our greatest teachers and the unique issues that they bring to mealtimes can teach us so much about nourishment, courage, ingenuity and love.

### **Shortcut #6- Deciding to be Happy**

When we decide to be happy we affirm that we have the ability to choose our beliefs and the feelings that accompany them. We take the position that we are not victims of life and the events that have come our way. We simply make the conscious decision to be happy. Clear intention is an extremely powerful and effective tool. We make the unambiguous decision that want to be happy, and our feelings and actions follow that intention.

Our happiness at mealtimes is not tied to how much food or what type of food the child eats. It is not dependent upon whether the child chews, swallows or spits out the food. It is only a matter of deciding to be happy.

### **References**

- 1) Frankl, Viktor E., *Man's Search for Meaning*, Washington Square Press, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1963. p.104
- 2) Kaufman, Barry N., *Happiness is a Choice*, Fawcett Columbine, Ballentine Books, 1991.

### **About the Author**

**Suzanne Evans Morris** is a speech-language pathologist who specializes in the development of feeding programs for infants and young children. Suzanne maintains a professional practice that includes direct clinical work, continuing education workshops, development of clinical materials and clinical research. She is the director of New Visions, which sponsors innovative workshops for the teaching of feeding-related skills, and provides family-oriented clinical services.



She is the coauthor of *Pre-Feeding Skills: A Comprehensive Resource for Mealtime Development*, 2nd edition, the *Mealtime Participation Guide* and the *Homemade Blended Formula Handbook*.

New Visions  
1124 Roberts Mountain Road  
Faber, Virginia 22938  
(434)361-2285

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