

For 2009, A Happiness Action Plan

Dr. Sandra R. Scantling | Intimacy, Sex & Relationship

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Every New Year's Eve, as the clock ticks its remaining few seconds and the ball in Times Square begins its descent, I feel excitement and trepidation. It doesn't seem to matter where I happen to be celebrating. Be it a big party or quietly at home with my husband (and Dick Clark, of course), my reactions are the same.

Like so many others, when the final countdown begins, I want to "be there" to witness the birth of the New Year. At that instant, at the juxtaposition of old and new, I feel compelled to hold on, to pay special attention, as a voice inside whispers: "This is it ... this is all there will be in 2008. The record is sealed."

Amid the joy and celebration, there is a solemnity as I reflect on my personal responsibilities and wonder, "What will the coming year bring? What is my role in making it a happy year?"

Aristotle said: "Happiness is the meaning and purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence." It is one of the most often wished for, most frequently written about and most poorly understood experiences. There are thousands of texts on the subject, from the wise to the mundane, from spiritual guidance to self-help — but happiness still often eludes us.



Dr. Sandra R. Scantling Bio | E-mail | Recent columns

Although I'm a sex therapist, most couples come to see me because they'd like to be happier. They know this can't be all there is in life. Arguing and work. Where's the joy? Where's the passion? they ask.

As they look across my office at their partner and make blaming statements, like "you never tell me you love me any more" or "you always wait for me to initiate sex," they ignore the hurt looks that result. Each party feels slighted and often defensive. Even if they sound like they're taking responsibility — "Yes, I admit it, I'm not a very expressive person, but I've always been this way ... " — it sometimes comes out as justification for their behavior. And, in case you haven't noticed, nagging, complaining or finger pointing only builds resentment and hostility. I've never heard a patient say, "I finally decided to change because my partner yelled at me in a convincing enough way."

So I can hear you asking, "What am I supposed to do? I deserve to be happy."

Yes you do. So why aren't you? Who is responsible for your happiness?

Perhaps you are the person stopping yourself from being happy. How do you feel when you think about acting differently to achieve happiness? Maybe you're annoyed at the suggestion of changing, a case of "Here we go again; I have to do it all. If only he wasn't so cold, selfish, controlling (fill in the adjectives), things would be fine." I can guarantee he's thinking the same thing.

This is a fruitless struggle that leaves both partners exhausted. No wonder you're tired and don't have any energy left to make love.

The New Year is the perfect time to experiment — when the calendar resets, we're given a chance for a "do-over." Instead of making the usual resolutions, create a happiness action plan. Then follow through. Find where happiness is present in your lives, and do more of it. Remember something you're grateful for in your partner that you haven't acknowledged. Then tell them. Laugh and smile more often.

As this challenging year comes to a close, and we make our personal wishes for health, peace, prosperity and happiness, it's comforting to know that people all over the globe are wishing for the same things. As Mahatma Gandhi said, "Be the change you want to see in the world."

Happy New Year!

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