A birthday is a special day for many of us. We all make wishes on our birthdays. Yet it seems that this is more of a ritual as most of us often forget our wishes and goals right away. Even if some of us have tried to achieve our goals, we might not have been able to resist the temptation of relinquishing our dreams on the way through. It has been said that fewer than 15 per cent of birthday wishes are realized: most are broken within two weeks. People could not stand the feeling of frustration when they fail to attain their goals or when they find their goals in conflict with reality. We may start wondering why our birthday wishes would make us so miserable. Aren’t they supposed to make us hopeful and anticipative of our future?

Step 1. What are your genuine wishes?

The “most-wanted” wishes for many people are becoming a millionaire, or even a billionaire. However, it is suggested by scholars that this would not bring us happiness. In a recent article in Psychological Science – “Zeroing in on the Dark Side of the American Dream” by Nickerson, Schwarz, Diener and Kahneman (2003) – it is found that people who rate financial success as the most important wish of their lives are generally unhappier than those who do not. This is particularly deleterious to satisfaction with family life. Other scholars even suggested associations between aspirations to financial success and depression, anxiety, and reduced self-

The best moments usually occur when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
esteem. According to humanistic psychologists (e.g., Maslow, 1970; Rogers, 1965), pursuing wishes or goals based on extrinsic rewards, contingent approval by other people, and “having” instead of “being,” distract the individual from the meaningful aspects of life, hinder the individual from achieving his or her inherent potential as a human being, and lead to psychological distress.

If aspiring to financial success does not make us happy, what kinds of wishes would do? According to Sheldon and his colleagues (2001), psychological needs are the key to enhance personal thriving. Topping the list of psychological needs that appear to bring happiness are autonomy (feeling that your activities are self-chosen and self-endorsed), competence (feeling that you are effective in your activities), relatedness (feeling a sense of closeness with others) and self-esteem. Thus we should pursue wishes that are related to development of self or relationships with others, and should be inherently meaningful to ourselves.

This is not to refute the importance of financial success. Yet more important is what lies beneath this aspiration to financial success – the pursuit of competence, autonomy, or merely a game with numbers? When we make wishes, have we considered our relationships with our families or friends? This determines whether your wishes are content and fulfilling.

**Step 2. Well, I know my wish, what’s next?**

Some people have their genuine aspirations identified, and yet feel gloomy and want to give up their aspirations. This might be because they do not set goals to get themselves closer to their wishes. Wishes and goals are not identical though they both orient us to our future. Goals are the steps we take in order to realize our wishes. They should be closely intertwined with one and other in order for us to be happy. We can’t set any concrete goals without wishes, and we can’t make our wishes come true without goals and plans.

If we have only beautiful goals and timetables but no wishes, we would easily fall into the trap of focusing so much on the steps and lose sight of our destination. We would have the risk of forgetting the reason to pursue the goals in the first place. The motivating power of goals comes from their connections to a bigger inspiring wish.

If we have only wishes without any goals to support them, we could easily feel overwhelmed by the enormity of our wishes and dreams. We need goals, both short-term and long-term. **Short-term goals** provide achievable intermediate targets that direct us toward our wishes. And, as Charles Noble said, “You must have long range goals to keep you from being frustrated by short range failures”.

But some may ask, “I have set myself some goals, but why am I still a failure?”

**Step 3. How to set a SMART goal then?**

We cannot set our goals arbitrarily. For instance, we may refer to the concept of setting SMART goals in Industrial Organizational psychology and management. For goals to be SMART they should be **Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Timely.**

- **Specific** – Setting “exact” goals
- **Measurable** – Using goals that can be measured
- **Attainable** – Can you actually get there?
- **Realistic** – Are you being honest with yourself?
- **Timely** – Seeking to set time frames for the various stages of your goal

With these SMART goals, it is more likely for us to take actions and proceed towards our wishes. (For more information about goal setting theory or SMART goal, please refer to the suggested reading below)

**Step 4. Why bother with the process?**

People suggest that while achieving our goals, we might be thinking most about whether we got what we expected to get. Yet I do not fully agree with this. Like David Watson has suggested, the process of goal pursuit, rather than the outcome, is the key to happiness and positive emotions. When we learn to enjoy the progression of attaining goals, every result we get could increment our feeling of
Joy, even if the progress is minimal. The pleasant sensation brought about by attaining a goal is momentary, whereas the process of attaining a goal allows us to realize the meaning of life. My argument is that only if we learn to appreciate the processes we went through in attaining goals, would we be able to achieve a flourishing life.

Life is like sailing in a gigantic ocean. Each ship has its distinct destination (wishes) and a distinct route (goals) it takes to reach the destination. We, with different personalities and abilities, are like different types of ships. We have to come up with our destinations (different wishes in different stages), and the specific routes (specific goals) to reach our destinations, which we have set up ourselves. It is not possible for us to sail without destinations; nor to reach our destinations without planned routes. Besides, it is impossible for us to get to our destinations directly, and we would have many chances to stop by different places in the journey (process). The journey to our destinations might be long and hard, and it might be frustrating if we always purely worry whether we will reach our destination. When we learn to appreciate the views of different places along the journey, we will find our life enjoyable and flourishing as well as be willing to move on when we may stagnate.

On my birthday today, I have reflected on my destination, planned the route, equipped my ship, and am ready to enjoy my journey. How about your ship? Don’t wait until your birthday – think about it now!

**Suggested Reading:**


**References**


Added later:


Image: birthday cake.  
*Key West* courtesy of Stig Nygaard
HAPPY BIRTHDAY, TIMOTHY!!!
I really like this quote:
>> And, as Charles Noble said, "You must have long range goals to keep you from being frustrated by short range failures".
And really like your ship analogy. Bon voyage! And have fun!
Thank you,
Senia
KENNY LI  
April 19, 2008 - 6:07 am

I will definitely show your “SMART” to my students. Hope they will be smarter.
Happy Birthday!

JEFF DUSTIN  
April 19, 2008 - 12:00 pm

Timothy,
Specific – To wish you a “Happy Birthday”
Measurable – Did I do it? Yes.
Attainable – Can I do it? Yes.
Realistic – Will I do it? Yes.
Timely – By the time I push “Submit Comment”

PETER P  
April 20, 2008 - 10:33 pm

Happy Birthday TS, I’m sure your parents and family are very proud of such wisdom in one so young. Enjoy the journey and keep helping those of us who often find ourselves wandering about aimlessly without destination, plans or wishes (not SMART).

TIMOTHY SO  
April 21, 2008 - 11:09 am

Senia –
I think it is a good chance for me to express to you here my wholehearted thanks, for the opportunities you have offered me to learn from PPND and to contribute to it. Still remember the first time I met you was also around my birthday in 2007! ☺
And for sure one of my long term goals is to use my knowledge to contribute more to PP and a short term one would be working well on PPND and CPPN.
Thanks so much for your greetings on my B-day everywhere (email, facebook, and here, kaka), this is indeed warm and lovely.
Timothy

TIMOTHY SO  
April 21, 2008 - 11:10 am

Rui –
I also think you would be interested in this article at this stage!
A speical note to you: ‘Your dream is out there awaiting your capture. And, I am certain that it is attainable.......by you!!’
All the best!
Timothy
Hey Kenny,
I hope you and also your students would enjoy reading it. It is my pleasure that my ideas is spread out through sending the article around, I think it’s the honor for every author.
Also, your students are lucky to have a great teacher like you who always concern how to teach and benefit them.
All the best to your teaching!
Timothy

Yo Jeff –
What a creative comment, well let’s set a SMARTER goal to send you my gratitude for your greeting –
Specific – To let you know it is so lovely receiving your B-day greeting!
Measurable – Yes, everyone would see this on this page!
Attainable – Yes!!
Realistic – Absolutely
Timely – Do it once I get my work done today.
E – Enthusiastic – It is always a positive trigger to reply to someone’s greeting, I am so very happy and enthusiastic for doing this!
R – Reward – Not financially but psychologically. The happiness brought by gratitude is definitely one of the best rewards to human beings!
THANKS~~
Timothy

Thank you very much Peter.
Positive Psychology News Daily is always a wonderful place for us to share, discuss, and exchange our thoughts on ‘applying positive psychology’. We are very encouraged and motivated if we do influence or stimulus others’ thoughts positively on this platform.
And personally, it’s such a big compliment seeing your nice words to me. There’s yet an incredibly long way for me to develop and learn before I could claim myself ‘wise’… I would surely devote my efforts and time to make my dreams come true and enjoy the journey.
Peter, thanks for your nice words again. And may I ask for your contacts as well?
Best wishes,
Timothy

Hi Timothy,
Happy Birthday to you! Keep up the great writing!
Best to you,
David
Dear Ryan, It is so warming my heart to read your testimonial. Of course, Singing in Gibberish...

Dear Alex, I also love singing with my kids in Gibberish! You are a real "treat" for this...

To tell the truth, we lie almost constantly and every day: from small tricks and hushing up small flaws...

Given that this article was posted in 2009 and the work by Brown, Sokol, and Friedman to...

Nice article. Related to this – a framework for ethical speech that was shared with me and that I...

You support a completely discredited hypothesis (Losada Line)?

Thank you Elaine. Your review very great

This article really resonates with my personal journey of understanding my own cycles. Thank you for further...

As a man, I can say you nailed everything there is to know about men in relationships. In 2 lines! Secret #1:...
List of positive psychology courses:

All Positive Psychology Courses HERE
(Over 50 courses listed so far in America and the world!)

If you are teaching or know someone who is teaching a course, please enter the positive psychology course information here for everyone to see! This is a public list, so please be aware of that when entering your email address:

Enter Your Positive Psychology Course Info HERE

Positive Psychology Practitioner Toolkit

Read the advertisement.

21 Days to a Happier Life With Shawn Achor - Oprah.com

Registration is open indefinitely.

Random Posts
Safe Journey Messages. Every day is a journey, Some live it to the fullest While some don’t make it through. As you go, you shall come back safely. If you have a smile for me, Please keep it very safe, When you come back here, You will give me a bundle of it. Wishing you have a safe flight and happy journey ahead! No matter how high you go, No matter how turbulent up there it may be, I wish you a safe flight, like ever before. Take care. Once you have tasted flight, you will forever walk the earth with your eyes turned skyward for there you have been and there you will always long to return. Happy Journey Messages and Wishes. The way of peace and safety Is where I wish you go. The path of fulfillment and love Is where I which you take Have the best journey ever! Happy birthday, sweet friend! Having you in my life has opened my eyes to love, mercy, and forgiveness. I am so thankful for your friendship. Enjoy your day! Once in a while, life brings the best gift of all – a true friend. True friends change lives one special moment at time. Thank you for many such moments and more to come. It is said that you cannot expect to go higher with the same thinking that has brought you where you are. May you learn to adapt to life’s twists and turns. Cheers. The journey of a million miles will always begin with a single step. May you take life one successful step at a time. Inspirational Birthday Wishes for your Boyfriend. Be of good courage and march forward, for God will do what He has promised in your life. Happy birthday, my dear. Have a wonderful birthday. I wish your every day to be filled with lots of love, laughter, happiness and the warmth of sunshine. May your coming year surprise you with the happiness of smiles, the feeling of love and so on. I hope you will find plenty of sweet memories to cherish forever. Happy birthday. On your special day, I wish you good luck. Happy Birthday Quotes for Boyfriend or Girlfriend. Wishing happy birthday to the best person I’ve ever met in this world. Thank you for all the memories we have. Without you the world would have been colorless to me. I’m thanking you for always being a perfect companion on my journey. Without you I would have been absolutely lost. Wishing you a very Happy Birthday, mom.