



Conscious Life presents

Habits for Happiness

Guest - Marci Shimoff

Disclaimer: The contents of this interview are for informational purposes only and are not intended to be a substitute for professional medical or psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment. This interview does not provide medical or psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical or psychological condition.

[00:00:09] Meagen Gibson

Welcome to this interview. I'm your co-host, Meagen Gibson. Today, I'm speaking with Marci Shimoff, a New York Times best-selling author, a world-renowned transformational teacher, and an expert on happiness, success, and unconditional love.

Her New York Times best-selling books, *Happy for No Reason*, *Love for No Reason*, and six titles in the *Chicken Soup for the Woman's Soul* series have sold more than 16 million copies. She currently hosts a podcast called Living in the Miracle Zone and leads a global online group called Your Year of Miracles to help people live a more miraculous life. Marci, thank you so much for being with us today.

Marci Shimoff

So great to be here with you, Meagen, and with everybody.

Meagen Gibson

So I wanted to start just with having people that aren't familiar with you. If you could tell us a little bit about your journey and how you ended up teaching about happiness.

Marci Shimoff

Yeah. I am one of the least likely people in the world to be teaching about happiness. People say, "Oh, weren't you always happy, Marci?" And I say, "Well, absolutely... not."

I was not. I was born depressed. I came out of the womb with existential angst. I had a great family, great circumstances, but just this dark cloud around me. I've come to think that it was ancestral trauma that I was carrying, maybe, or who knows, perhaps past-life PTSD. But nonetheless, I was depressed as a kid.

My go-to for depression, my answer back then was sugar. It was the only thing that made me feel good. So I became a sugar addict. By the time I was in high school, I was about 35 pounds overweight, and of course, the sugar doesn't help over time. That was a bummer.

[00:01:54]

But I decided in my 20s that I just really wanted to be happy. I did what I think a lot of people do. I set goals for myself, and I set five goals that I thought, once I get those goals, then I'll really be happy. I'm going to share them with you because I think a lot of people can relate to them.

I wanted a successful career helping people, a fabulous husband or life partner, wonderful friends, a comfortable home, and the equivalent of Halle Berry's body. Now, I got four out of the five. I do not have Halle Berry's body, but I have a healthy body for which I'm deeply grateful. I worked so hard, Meagen, to get all my ducks in a row so I could finally be happy.

And I had a turning point moment. It was in 1998. I had all those things working for me. I had three books in the top five on the New York Times best-seller list at the same time. I think it was the first time that had happened. I had just finished giving a speech to 8,000 people. I had autographed 5,432 books.

My client had a massage therapist there to massage my hand so I could keep on signing. And on one hand, I felt like an author rock star. But after autographing that last book, I went up to my hotel room, which was the penthouse suite that my client had gotten for me. I walked over to these huge windows overlooking Lake Michigan.

I was in Chicago. I took in that great view, and I turned around and collapsed onto the bed and burst into tears. And I burst into tears because I realized I had worked so hard to get everything right. And I still felt that same emptiness in my heart that I had felt as a kid. And I could no longer fool myself into thinking that just that next thing was going to do it for me.

And I know a lot of people have been there where you get something you really wanted and you're happy for a week or a month or whatever, but it doesn't do it. And so I decided, I gotta figure this thing out. I dove headfirst into the study of happiness. The field of positive psychology was just burgeoning then.

I interviewed all of the researchers on happiness, and I did my own research. I interviewed 100 happy people, and I started doing what they were doing, and it worked. It actually shocked me, really, because I started feeling happy for the first time in my life.

I would say that I went from a D+ in happiness to an A. Now, that's not to say I'm not a work-in-progress because I think we all are, but it's solid. I got so excited about it that I decided to write *Happy For No Reason*. And I've now shared this with truly millions of people. I know that no matter where you are in your happiness, you can raise your happiness level.

Meagen Gibson

I love that. I love that story. I always relate to more, and I think our audience relates to more, when people have been through it. They're not prescribing things that they haven't had to walk themselves. I can relate to that so deeply. I had my own mental health issue about 10 years ago now and went to my doctor mystified.

I was like, "I eat great. I exercise six days a week. I have a loving family. I love my children. I have everything I'd ever wanted." It wasn't as big and flashy as yours sounded, but I was very content

and yet terribly unhappy. And we're like, "But I'm doing all the things, and I'm doing all the things everybody tells me I'm supposed to do", and sometimes they're not actually the right things.

[00:05:37] Marci Shimoff

And that makes things even worse because you think you're doing all of the right things. What's wrong with me? What's wrong with me? And so we tend to beat ourselves up thinking we're doing something wrong or something's wrong with us. And in fact, often it's just some really clear fixes that change things. I imagine that's what you found.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, absolutely. All right. So I want to talk to you about what those things are that you help people, what you put into place. What did you find in your research on happiness that helped you turn it around?

Marci Shimoff

The number one thing I found about happiness that was, to me, a breakthrough in my understanding, is that we all have what's called a happiness set point. It's like a thermostat setting. No matter what happens to you, whether it's good or bad, we tend to hover around our thermostat setting, our happiness set point, unless we do something consciously to change it.

This explains why people who win the lottery... You think, "All I'd have to do is win the lottery and I'd be happier." You would be... for a few months. But within a year, you would have returned to your original happiness set point. And the same is true of people who have tragedies. Often within about a year, they return to their set point.

So the set point is key, and here's how you change it. Well, first, let me tell you how it's determined. It's 50% your genetics. Now, I was not born with those good genetics. It's 10% your circumstances. Now, notice, that's what everybody's busy trying to fix. It's only 10% of the equation. The other 40% is our habits of thoughts and behavior. And that's what we can really do something about to shift the whole thing.

Now, I'm going to take it a step further and say that that genetic piece that you think, "Oh, I can't change that." Well, scientists in the field of epigenetics, like Dr. Bruce Lipton, who wrote *The Biology of Belief*, they found that our genetics change or can be influenced by changing our habits.

So that means 90% of our happiness set point can be changed by changing some simple habits. I think that should be headline news. The one thing that people have wanted from time immemorial is happiness. And science now knows how to get it. So we should be teaching this in the schools. So the only difference between happy people and everybody else, they have different habits. Yay, it's that simple.

Meagen Gibson

I think a lot of people listening probably are in the same position I was 10 years ago where we're like, "But I am practicing all the habits everybody tells me will make me happy."

And so I would love to drill down into what those habit changes are and our outlook on life, because it's so interesting the way that you phrase that. It was like 40% can be worked on, but

that 40% is like the circuit breaker that turns on your ability to influence the 50% of genetic predisposition. So I would love to hear some more about how we can change that 40%.

[00:08:43] Marci Shimoff

Yes. So 90%, really, when you count that genetic piece. And by the way, I know that this is a conference on anxiety. And anxiety and happiness, or unhappiness, are very deeply correlated. My definition of happiness, I call it happy for no reason, because it's an unconditional state of peace and well-being that doesn't depend on your circumstances.

So even though stuff is going on in your life that you might think, "Well, that's anxiety-producing", you have an inner backdrop of peace and well-being no matter what. Now, things happen. People die. You're going to feel grief. Things happen, you're going to get upset or frustrated about it.

But when you've got that inner backdrop of peace and well-being, you bounce back. You can deal with it in such a better way. And so that peace and well-being is the antidote to anxiety, really. So we're going with the habits that are going to also help anxiety.

Well, I found that there are 21 main happiness habits, and they fall into seven main categories. And what I want to do right now is I want to go through these seven main categories so that everyone can see where you are weakest?

Because that's your Achilles heel. That's the thing that's going to trip you up. You might be doing six out of those seven, great. But if you've got one that's weak, that's going to drag you down. You're really only as strong as the weakest link on this.

As I go through these seven areas, I want everybody to be thinking about, where are you the weakest? Meagen, I'm going to put you on the spot. You're going to be my guinea pig.

Meagen Gibson

Please do. Everyone knows I'm willing to humiliate myself for the good of others.

Marci Shimoff

Good, good. Well, hopefully this will not be a humiliation. This will be an aha.

I know that people have a hard time remembering seven of anything. I created a metaphor for remembering it. I call it your inner home for happiness. There are seven components of a home. There's a foundation, four corner pillars that the walls form around, a roof, and a garden.

Here's how this relates to the seven main areas of your happiness. The foundation of your home for happiness is taking responsibility for your life and your happiness. In other words, showing up not as a victim of life. "I can't be happy because..." of something outside of yourself. That's a victim. Or showing up as a victor in life. "I can take responsibility for my happiness."

And there are three signs that you are being a victim in your life. They are blaming, shaming, and complaining. Blaming others, shaming, which is blaming yourself or complaining about the circumstances. So that's the foundation.

[00:11:49]

Then there's four corner pillars. They're the pillars of the mind, the heart, the body, and the soul. The mind, it's about your thoughts. Are your thoughts robbing you of your happiness?

The heart. I've never met a happy person who had a closed heart. Do you live with an open heart? Do you have love, compassion for others and yourself? Forgiveness, generosity, loving-kindness, all of those towards others and yourself? That's an important piece.

Then there is the pillar of the body. Do you have the biochemistry of happiness? Do you have enough of the right chemicals? Serotonin, oxytocin, dopamine, endorphins. We're talking about anxiety here. Gaba. Do you have enough of those biochemicals running through you? That, by the way, was my weak link. Every time I start to feel a little unhappy, that's where I go first because I know that's my weak link.

Then there's the pillar of the soul. That has to do with how connected you feel to all of life, the greater energy of life. Whether you call it God, the Divine, Mother Nature, creative intelligence, I don't care. But it's that feeling of being part of this greater energy of life.

Then there is the roof. The roof has to do with your life purpose. Are you living an inspired life? I believe we're all here for a purpose. Are you doing what your purpose here on the planet is?

Then finally, there is the garden. The garden is who you're surrounded by. Are you surrounded by a lot of roses and gardenias? The people who uplift you, who inspire you, who support you in going for your happiness? Or do you have people who drag you down, maybe the weeds, who are choking out your happiness?

Those are the seven areas. The foundation of responsibility, the foundation of the mind, the foundation of the heart, the foundation of the body, the foundation of the soul. Then there's the roof, your purpose in life, and the garden, your relationships. So, Meagen, where would you say you're the weakest?

Meagen Gibson

This is going to sound strange to people, considering where I am and what I'm doing at the moment. But my roof, my purpose, and I'm not talking about this particular job. Nobody panic. I literally love my job. I wake up every single day loving and feeling really lucky to do this job.

But there are things that I want and need to do with my voice and my personal work in the world beyond the ways that I borrow wisdom from other people, if I could put it that way, that I have been sitting on for a long, long time. And that's been the work of the last year has been really getting ready to finally put it out in the world.

Marci Shimoff

Wonderful, wonderful. Well, I, first of all, want to acknowledge you because I know the courage it takes to do that. And I think for everybody, what we're called to do in life, our life purpose, it takes courage for almost everybody. It's what we're here to do, but it doesn't mean that it comes easily.

[00:15:10]

It usually means stretching. And so that's when it's super-important to honor it and do it, even though there's a fear or a stretch to it, and to surround yourself with support of other people so that you aren't feeling like you're doing it alone.

And it also has to do with our thoughts, the mind piece, because it's often our minds that are telling us, "Oh, gosh, we're not going to be any good at that", or we're going to compare ourselves to other people. And that comparison is a fast track to misery.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. And just going with the analogy that you've put out... And it's just interesting, and I'll reflect this to you and to everybody that's watching. About a year ago, almost to the day, I booked a trip to go away for a week to work on this project that I thought I was ready to put out in the world.

And the universe, if you will, handed me an opportunity to test my readiness as it often does. What happened was that I had to get my foundation and my pillars and my garden solidified and had to do a lot of weeding and a lot of cultivating. And that has been the work of the last year with a ton of support. And I feel more ready than ever.

So it's not that you necessarily have to be clear about your purpose or clear... It's like these things take time. I'm thinking about the garden part. I live in Florida, where the flora and fauna are constantly trying to take the land back. Every year, it's like a battle against the garden. And so that's not a one and done, right? These are fortitudes that we need to be constantly checking and evaluating and in conversation and relationship with, I imagine.

Marci Shimoff

All of them are. Definitely. And as time goes on, there are new technologies, new things that come up that can help us in various areas. I mean, I'm finding things all the time. I'll just mention it. I've never mentioned it before, but a friend of mine told me about this little device called the Sensate, and it's something that... Have you heard of this?

Meagen Gibson

I know the name, but I might be confusing that with a television show. I think they had the same name. Tell me about it.

Marci Shimoff

It's just this little device that you plug into... I plug into my phone and I put it on my heart and it beats. It has certain beats that go with certain music, and it really calms the vagus nerve. I mean, I've never heard of that.

I've been meditating since I was 16, and I totally am all for meditation. I think it's the key to everything, but it doesn't do everything. I found this new technology. I think to keep our eyes and ears open to what's new and cool and awesome. I want to share some really practical things today that people can do to immediately shift their experience of happiness or anxiety. Is that good?

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, please do. Also, that self-evaluation... Is what you just gave us, this example, also the way that you would self-evaluate your set point and what it is that you can do to influence it?

[00:18:38] Marci Shimoff

It is. I actually have an assessment to see where you are on the Happy for No Reason continuum. It's 21 questions to see where you land. And what I often tell people to do is take it before you do any of this and then do it for a couple of weeks and then take it again and see for yourself. Use your own life as an experiment to see what shifts for you.

Meagen Gibson

I mean, the worst that happens is you get happier, right?

Marci Shimoff

Exactly. Why don't I give you three things that you can do? How does that sound?

Meagen Gibson

Sounds great.

Marci Shimoff

Okay. Why don't I start with the body since it was my weakest area? I think often when people are experiencing anxiety or depression, it often is because they are low in serotonin or GABA for anxiety. I found the coolest little tip from a Qigong master, a Chi Nei Tsang master, former Qigong, named Gilles Marin, and he taught me this.

It's called a Sunning Meditation. It's probably different than anything you've done before. It's quite simple. What you do is you go out into the sun, and I'll tell you in a minute what to do if there's no sun, but you're in Florida, so you're in luck. You go out in the sun and you face the sun for two minutes with your eyes closed.

This is the most important piece. You're going to close your eyes. You can do it early in the morning, you can do it later in the afternoon. It doesn't have to be at the height of the sun.

You, just with your eyes closed, face your eyes towards the sun and you imagine the sun's rays coming in towards your closed eyelids and penetrating, going through to the middle of your head which is the pineal gland, and warming up your pineal gland. You can also imagine in those two minutes that warmth flowing down through your whole body.

What that does is it stimulates serotonin production. If you were to do this twice a day for a week, he said you would completely reset your serotonin level. Now, your serotonin level is key to happiness, but it's also key to your melatonin, which is your sleep mechanism. The more serotonin you have, the better you're going to sleep at night.

Then it's the cycle because the better you sleep at night, the happier you're going to be the next day. It actually resets your serotonin-melatonin cycle, your sleep cycle, and your happiness cycle. I say just try this as an experiment. Just remember to keep your eyes closed twice a day for two minutes.

If you don't have sun, even if there are clouds, you can see where the sun is and you can just feel a little bit of the rays coming through the clouds. If it's raining and you really don't have sun, then you can look at anything beautiful in nature. You can look at trees outside if you have any. You can

look at flowers, and that will also help produce serotonin, not to the degree that that warmth of the sun will.

[00:21:54] Meagen Gibson

I love that. It's beautiful. And also, I'm sure, lowers cortisol a bit as well, because I know that that has a relationship to melatonin and serotonin as well. So all of these chemicals that we have in our body that our body knows how to release when we give it the right cues, right?

Marci Shimoff

Yes, yes, yes, yes. So that's for the body. Now, let's go to the mind, because this is the one I think most people are tripped up with, our thoughts. They say that on the average day, scientists say that the average person has 60,000 thoughts a day, and for the average person, 80% of those are negative.

It's called the negativity bias, and we inherited it from our cavemen ancestors. So don't beat yourself up for your negative thoughts. That's adding insult to injury. It's this natural thing that we have. We have a lot of neural pathways in the brain that were formed at the time when we were children that are negative neural pathways.

What we want to do, and what happy people have done, is they've created new neural pathways in the brain for the positive. My friend Rick Hansen, who wrote *Hardwiring Happiness*, said that our minds are like Velcro for the negative. The negatives just stick to us, but they're like Teflon for the positive. The positive slide off of us.

If you get 10 compliments in a day and one criticism, what do you remember at the end of the day? Most people, the criticism. Happy people don't dwell on that. They go to the positive and they've created these neural pathways for the positive. I'm going to share with you three things you can do, scientifically proven, to create new neural pathways in the brain for the positive.

Number one, be on the lookout for the good. We get eleven billion bits of information every second. There is a lot of good out there. We're just not focusing on it. So be on the lookout like you're a detective.

One of the women I interviewed for *Happy For No Reason*, pretends that she is on the Academy Awards committee, and her job is to give out five Academy Awards for happiness during the day.

So she sees a little cute dog walking along the street. She goes, "Oh, that gets the Cutest Dog of the Day Award." Or she sees an act of kindness. She said, "That gets the Act of Kindness Award." That's tip number one. And if you've got kids, play this game with your kids. It's a great game.

Point number two, savor the good for at least 20 seconds. It takes 20 seconds for the good to seep in long enough that it creates a change in the brain.

When you see that cute dog, go up to the owner and say, "Your dog gets my Cutest Dog of the Day award", and you talk about it with each other for about 20, 30 seconds, and it's landed then in your brain.

[00:24:52]

If you see a beautiful sunset, don't just say, "Oh, there's a pretty sunset." Stop and take it in for 20 seconds. It's not very long, but it's about... I love the word savoring. It's about really savoring that.

Then the third step is to go for a three-to-one ratio, meaning three positives to every one negative. The negatives are going to happen. It's not to say we sweep things under the rug. You address the things that need to be addressed. This isn't about sugar-coating things, but it is about saying, "Okay, that happened. Now, let me find three great things I can appreciate as well."

Those are simple things. Those three little steps: look for the good, savor it for 20 seconds, and go for a three-to-one ratio, will shift the neural pathways in your brain.

Meagen Gibson

I love those, and they're simple, they're easy to implement today. Especially the noticing and savoring one, it reminds me of the research they've done on how long a hug needs to last or when you get the most benefit.

For me, mentally, I'm imagining like, hugging those moments. It's like, just till it gets uncomfortable, and then you can let go. Obviously, we're always giving consensual hugs here. But yeah, it's more than just noticing or noting something. "Oh, that's a pretty sunset." It's taking it in and really appreciating it.

Marci Shimoff

Yeah. I like to imagine that those good things are like a piece of dessert, a bite of dessert. You want to savor that and go, "Oh, my God, that tastes delicious." It's about really experiencing life as yummy and delicious. That's my second tip. The first was for the body, the second one is for the mind. Let's do one for the heart, if that's okay. Do we have time?

Meagen Gibson

Please do. Yeah.

Marci Shimoff

Good, good, good. My favorite researcher on the heart is the Institute of HeartMath. They're the world's leading researchers on the heart and happiness. They found that five minutes of feeling angry or frustrated puts our heart in heart rhythm incoherence, our ragged, jagged heart rhythms, and it can suppress the immune system for up to six hours.

But five minutes of being in what they call heart rhythm coherence, where we're in love and appreciation and our heart rhythms go in these very rhythmic patterns, that can strengthen the immune system for up to six hours.

Now, that to me is staggering. It means that every time we're in frustration, we're suppressing our immune system. But every time we're in love and appreciation, we're strengthening it. So I'm not going to do five minutes. I'm going to do about one minute. I want you to notice if you feel any different.

[00:27:41]

Again, I'm going to have you be my guinea pig, Meagen, okay? All right, good, good. This is a technique that I learned from them called the Inner Ease technique. It's very simple to do. I'm going to invite everybody to close your eyes if you're able to. If you're driving, of course, don't do this.

You can do it with your eyes opened as well. But I think it goes deeper with the eyes closed. The first step is to simply place the palm of your hand on your heart. That simple act creates a chemical called oxytocin, which is known as the bonding hormone or the love hormone, because it's what we have when we feel connected to other people. But just putting our hand on our heart right now is stimulating more oxytocin, being connected with ourselves.

The second step is to imagine that you are breathing in and out through the center of your heart. It's called Heart-Focused Breathing. So inhaling in through your heart. Now, you can breathe all the way down to your belly, but it's coming in through your heart, and then the exhale is also going out through your heart. At your own pace, breathing in through your heart and breathing out through your heart. You may already start to be feeling different.

Now, the third step is where the real magic is. Every time you inhale, imagine that you are breathing in love, ease, and compassion. You can exhale out of your heart and then breathe into your heart, love, ease and compassion.

You can think about somebody or a beloved four-legged that helps you feel that way, or you can remember the last time you felt that way, or you can just say the words silently to yourself. Love, ease, and compassion. Exhaling through the heart.

One last inhale, breathing in love, ease, and compassion, and breathing out through your heart. You can slowly move your hand away. If your eyes were closed, you can open up your eyes and just notice if you feel any different, either physically or emotionally, than you did a minute ago. And so, Meagen, how do you feel any different?

Meagen Gibson

I feel good, definitely. And what came up for me when we were doing that exercise was just how much love, understanding and compassion I have for people who tend to give more of it away to others and always bypass themselves, right?

And I was guilty of that for so long. So, so long, as if it's a limited currency. All I can tell you from experience, and let me know if you agree, Marci, is that there is no limitation on it, and you can turn it all towards yourself and still have plenty left to give those that need it and depend on you.

Marci Shimoff

I couldn't agree more. I think actually the basis of real, authentic love is not running on empty and taking care of everybody first, but honestly, taking care of ourselves first. If you tend to be one of those over-givers, or under-giver to yourself, I should say, you can just ask yourself the question a couple of times a day, "What's the most loving thing I could do for myself right now?" And then go do it. It could be drinking a little sip of water or getting some fresh air or calling a friend. Take care of yourself, and life shifts.

[00:31:39] Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I used to start really small. It was like, "What would future Meagen do? Or what would I do for future Meagen?" It could be tomorrow morning Meagen. It could be something like filling the coffee pot, the coffee maker the night before, or leaving myself a note on my steering wheel, or little things that someone who loved me a lot would do for me. It turned out that was me.

Marci Shimoff

I love that. That's great. Beautiful exercise. What would the tomorrow me be grateful for that I did right now?

Meagen Gibson

I know that you talk about sometimes when we first start doing these practices, it feels selfish because it's a muscle we maybe haven't worked out before. So how can we shift out of that feeling of selfishness when we start to turn toward ourselves with the same love and compassion that everyone else deserves?

Marci Shimoff

I think we have a myth in our society, and that myth is just what you said, "If I take care of myself, that's selfish." I believe it is the least selfish thing you can do, because when you take care of yourself, you are actually, you're emanating...

We all emit chemicals in the atmosphere that people pick up on all day long. It's called emotional contagion. You want to be emitting those chemicals of happiness that everybody else around you picks up on. You influence your family, your friends.

They say your happiness level influences at least five levels of people. That means your neighbor's, cousin's, son's school teacher is getting a benefit who you don't even know is getting a benefit from your own happiness.

There's a beautiful Chinese proverb I always love to share that explains my passion for doing this, for wanting people to be happy. It goes like this. It says, "When there is light in the soul, there will be beauty in the person. When there is beauty in the person, there will be harmony in the house. When there is harmony in the house, there will be order in the nation. And when there is order in the nation, there will be peace in this world."

And my prayer and my wish for every single one of us is that we know that light in our own souls, and through that, we help spread it on this planet of ours that needs it.

Meagen Gibson

Fantastic. Marci Shimoff, how can people find out more about you and your work?

Marci Shimoff

You can go to happyfornoreason.com. Actually, if you go to happyfornoreason.com, we have all 21 of the happiness habits there for you with exercises and a workbook that includes, in fact, that Happy for No Reason self-assessment.

It's all right there for you as our gift to you. I'm so grateful to everyone who's here because you have a commitment. Just by being here, it's clear that you have a commitment to living a better life

for yourself and ultimately for this planet. I really want to give my gratitude to you for being here. And to you, Meagen, for hosting this.

[00:34:48] Meagen Gibson

Well, thank you again for being with us today. I'm sure everybody's going to check that out. I think that self-assessment is a great place to start. Thanks again.

Marci Shimoff

Thank you.