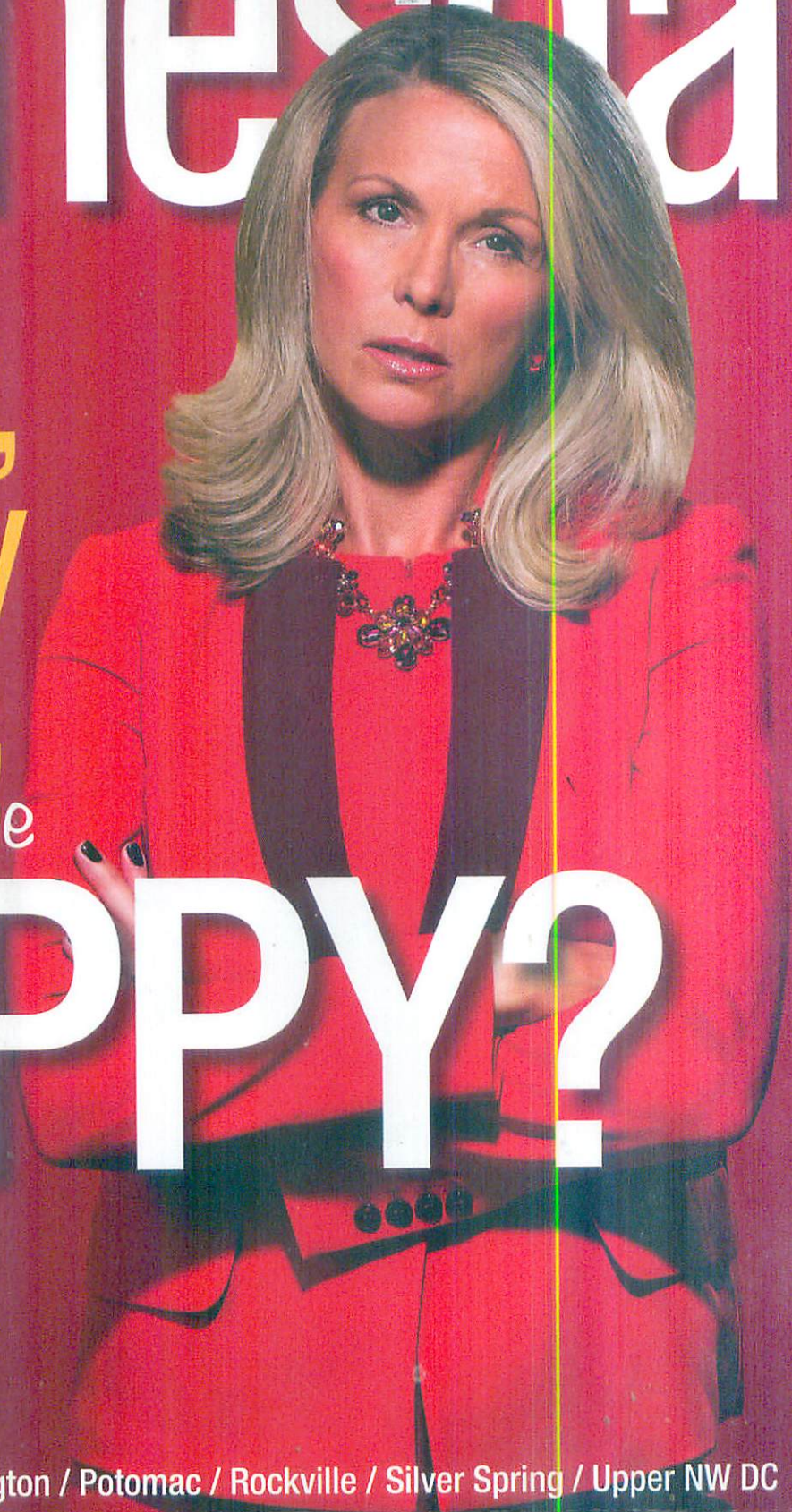


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# HAPPY?

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# DISCONTENT

Bethesda-area residents are among the best-educated, highest paid, healthiest people in the nation. So why are people complaining they're not happy? A look at existential angst.

By Stacey Colino

PHOTO BY ERICK GIBSON;  
MAKEUP AND HAIR STYLING BY JACQUIE HANNAN



## AS A FIRST-GENERATION AMERICAN,

the woman just wanted to make her family proud. So she went to a good college, and then to law school at Catholic University.

Over the years, she rose through the ranks, first in the federal sector, then in an international organization. She got married, bought a beautiful home in Chevy Chase, had the prototypical two kids, and took up strength training and aerobics to keep fit.

Today at 45, the lawyer is the model of success among family members and peers. So why isn't she happy?

"To a lot of people, it looks like I'm living the American dream," says the woman, who, along with many others interviewed for this story, asked to remain anonymous. But "at times I feel like I'm living a lie.

"Reaching all these benchmarks has sometimes felt anticlimactic. People would be surprised to know that, because I always look cheerful and very put together. But the pressure to deliver on high expectations gets to be exhausting. ...It's always this feeling of: *What's next for me?*"

**WE'RE** all searching for happiness, aren't we? But what does it take to be truly happy? Having "enough" money? The Bethesda area boasts one of the highest median family income rates in the nation, according to a 2012 report in *Money* magazine.

The satisfaction of knowing you're capable and smart? *Forbes* magazine recently named Bethesda the "most educated small town" in America since more than half its residents possess a graduate or professional degree.

Health? "If you have your health, you have everything," according to the aphorism, so by that measure, most Bethesda-area residents have it all. *Self* magazine consistently rates Bethesda one of the

healthiest places for women, with rates of smoking, obesity, heart disease and diabetes among the lowest in the country. And in 2012, the American College of Sports Medicine ranked Greater D.C. the second fittest area in the U.S. (Minneapolis came in first), thanks in part to the number of people who walk or bike to work and/or exercise regularly. Stroll down Bethesda's Woodmont Avenue any weekday morning and you'll see women in yoga pants and men in track suits and running shoes.

If "having it all" is the key, then people in the Bethesda area should have a lock on happiness. So why is it that on any given day, many of the people striding through downtown Bethesda look either distracted or disgruntled? Why aren't more of them smiling? Why does someone like that Chevy Chase lawyer—with the beautiful house, the beautiful family, the successful career—seem so discontented?

Lisa Teitel Schlesinger, a psychotherapist in private practice in Rockville, sees it all too often. "In my work, I encounter many people who seem to have everything except peace of mind," she says. "They may have been able to successfully complete their mental checklist of what their life should look like—yet they still feel unhappy or have a gnawing sense of emptiness or an overwhelming sense that something is missing in their lives."

Dr. Robert Hedaya, founder of the National Center for Whole Psychiatry in Chevy Chase and a clinical professor of psychiatry at the Georgetown University School of Medicine, estimates that 50 percent of people living in the Bethesda area "are mildly to severely unhappy." Since moving here 34 years ago, he has definitely seen "a growing sense of unhappiness and lack of fulfillment."

Hedaya partly attributes the problem to the competitive atmosphere here. "It doesn't really matter how much you

have," he says, "because there's a sense that it's never really enough. A lot of people are asking: *Is this all there is? Is this it?* Like a drug, the benefits of power and money are transient, and one always needs another fix. Until a person can step out of this paradigm, happiness will remain elusive."

In dozens of interviews with experts and area residents, the subject of keeping up with the Joneses (who happen to be doing *very well*) arises again and again. The pressure is on socially, professionally, materially and intellectually, with many people feeling their worth is measured by how they stack up.

"There's this sense here that nothing is quite enough. You have to keep getting ahead in your career, you have to be active at the gym, take trips abroad and know what's on *The New York Times* best-seller list," says a North Bethesda lawyer and father of two who lives in an airy, contemporary home and whose household earnings exceed \$300,000. "You're expected to keep up with all of it to be accepted, and this leads to feelings of emptiness.

"We're never content because we're always looking for something more," he says. "I see it all around me and I feel it, too. Sometimes I wonder: *When is the bucket full enough?*"

**PART** of the problem, experts say, is that many of us look in the wrong direction when making comparisons—namely, upward (toward those who have more), instead of downward (toward those who have less).

"To compare up is to invite envy; to compare down is to invite gratitude," says Dr. Norman Rosenthal, a North Bethesda psychiatrist and author of *The Gift of Adversity* (Tarcher, 2013). "When we compare and find ourselves wanting, we make ourselves unhappy."

Dr. David Goldman, chief of the laboratory of neurogenetics at the National

Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) in Rockville, has noted the same phenomenon. "Regardless of how many possessions they have," he says of area residents, "the disparity between them and their neighbor may make them feel dissatisfied."

And we spend a disproportionate amount of time making these comparisons. In a 2008 study, researchers at the University of Illinois found that 12 percent of people's daily thoughts involve comparisons.

"In our old neighborhood, people were never satisfied with what they had because they always wanted more," says an artist and mother of two who moved from Bethesda to Germantown partly to get away from that in 2012. "Everybody was always getting the latest gadget or the hottest workout gear and checking in with each other so they could try to keep up with getting the best. But trying to keep up wasn't making them happy, and the discontent was practically contagious."

Amassing wealth and material possessions can be a hollow victory, experts note, creating the illusion of a happy life without the actual substance or feeling.

"The striving pathway to do more, to get more, to be more does not lead to happiness," says Laurie Cameron, an executive coach based in Chevy Chase who works with successful clients who are seeking a deeper sense of purpose and passion in order to gain greater happiness in their lives. "In this area, there's a lot of judging and rating and comparing, and we're often coming up short when we compare ourselves to others. It's a mental habit that brings a sense of unease."

In a study published in 2010, researchers at Princeton University surveyed 450,000 people across the U.S. about their household income, everyday emotional states, and overall feelings about their lives and well-being. They found that happiness increases along with annual household income up to about \$75,000. Beyond that amount,

# COME ON, GET HAPPY

Experts say there are a number of things you can do to regain or experience a sense of happiness. Here are a few:

**Don't defer happiness, figuring you'll have it once you get that big promotion, take that big trip, acquire a bigger and better house.** "The postponement dilemma blocks us from happiness," says Laurie Cameron, an executive coach in Chevy Chase. "We need to learn how to focus on what's going on around us and pay attention to the joy that is available right now."

**Take time to practice gratitude, perhaps by jotting down three to five things you're grateful for in your life each day.** Research has found that keeping a record of what you're grateful for can improve your mood and lead to enhanced well-being. "Gratitude is one of the most powerful ways to create happiness," Cameron says, "because it helps you learn to appreciate what you have. Plus, training your mind to pay attention to these things during the day shifts how you relate to the world."

**Look for an activity that's so engrossing and enjoyable that you become fully immersed in it and lose track of time—whether it's playing a musical instrument, doing something artistic or creative, or playing a game or sport you love.** Doing this is a matter of achieving "flow." "The sweet spot of flow is when you have focused attention, and you're pushing yourself in terms of your competence," Cameron says. "Flow sets you up for overall happiness if you have enough of it in your life."

**Volunteer to do something kind for someone else, whether reading to an older adult or serving food to the homeless.** A 2013 study by researchers at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland found that altruistic attitudes, volunteering and informal assistance behaviors contribute to people's sense of satisfaction and well-being.

**Focus on the present.** "The key to happiness is to be relatively immersed in the moment and the rewards you are receiving moment to moment and hour to hour," says Dr. David Goldman, who heads up the neurogenetics laboratory at the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism in Rockville. In a 2010 study, Harvard University researchers used an app to prompt 2,250 adults at random times during the day to note how they were feeling. They found that people who are focused and fully engaged in what they're doing at any given moment are more likely to be happy than people who are distracted from the task at hand.

**Recognize that small things can make you happy, rather than focusing only on major life events, and set realistic goals.** By creating more opportunities to engage in activities that bring you pleasure—whether it's drawing, cooking, fly-fishing, meditating, or something else—you'll enhance your enjoyment of these experiences and boost your capacity for happiness, says Dr. Norman Rosenthal, a North Bethesda psychiatrist.

—Stacey Colino

## HOW POSITIVE ARE YOU?

What's your positivity ratio—the number of positive personal interactions versus negative ones? You can take the test at [www.positivityratio.com/single.php](http://www.positivityratio.com/single.php).

earning more money has no effect on emotional well-being.

**"For generations, people have tried to understand what is the secret to the well-lived life," says Caroline Adams Miller, a Bethesda-based executive coach and author of *Creating Your Best Life* (Sterling, 2009). "But our happiness levels have not kept up with income or pedigree. There's this myth that if you get a particular home or a certain pair of expensive shoes or something else you want, you'll be happy. But we adapt to possessions and salary levels. I call it the hedonic treadmill: We get caught up in needing the next fix."**

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a professor of psychology at Claremont Graduate University in California and author of *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (HarperCollins, 1990), has researched this very topic. "If people strive for a certain level of affluence thinking that it will make them happy, they find that on reaching it they become very quickly habituated," he writes in a 1999 article in *American Psychologist*, "and at that point they start hankering for the next level of income, property or good health."

In other words, people's goals tend to get pushed upward as soon as the lower ones are attained, leading to a continuous yearning for more.

"Where I think it becomes a problem is when unhappiness becomes not just an undercurrent in life but a dominant force," says the NIAAA's Goldman, author of *Our Genes, Our Choices* (Academic Press, 2012). "Here in this area, we have many people who suffer from addictions, depression, anxiety disor-

ders and obsessive disorders—and these can lead people into a chronic state of unhappiness."

Cameron tells of a Bethesda mother of two, a fun-loving woman with significant wealth, a gorgeous home, a country club membership and lots of friends. She volunteered on numerous school and philanthropic boards, and pushed herself to excel in tennis and to attain the material goods and positions in society that she thought would make her happy. On the surface, the woman seemed to have it all, yet she felt unfulfilled—and eventually, that took its toll.

"She had been numbing herself with alcohol, drinking wine with friends or by herself every night, and it got out of control," Cameron says. The woman eventually checked into rehab. Now that she's recovering, she's preparing to launch her own creative agency, a dream she had long postponed.

"For other people, it may be food or shopping or another false refuge [that's used to numb their discontent]," Cameron says. "It's not a true way out or a path that leads to happiness."

**TO** an extent, each of us is born with a capacity for happiness. In 2011, researchers at the London School of Economics reported finding a so-called "happiness gene" that regulates the movement of serotonin in the brain. Their research appeared in the *Journal of Human Genetics*.

Studies of twins suggest that genetic factors account for 35 percent to 50 percent of a person's propensity for happi-

ness. In other words, as much as half of our capacity for happiness is genetically determined by "our biological mother or father or both, a baseline or potential for happiness to which we are bound to return even after major setbacks or triumphs," says Sonja Lyubomirsky, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Riverside, and author of *The How of Happiness* (Penguin, 2007).

The other half of a person's propensity for happiness can be influenced by environmental, cognitive or behavioral factors. These include expressing gratitude, cultivating optimism, avoiding overthinking and social comparisons, nurturing social relationships, learning to forgive, pursuing meaningful goals and savoring life's joys, according to Lyubomirsky.

On its own, "happiness is an elusive goal: If you pursue happiness, you're less likely to be happy," says Steven Stosny, a Germantown psychologist and author of *Living and Loving after Betrayal* (New Harbinger, 2013). "I think happiness is a byproduct of having meaning and purpose in your life."

Many people operate on cruise control, however, staying in a lackluster job or doing the same activities day after day despite the lack of gratification.

**"Too many people are not setting hard, proactive goals," says Miller, the executive coach. "Instead, they're reaching for low-hanging-fruit." And success that comes easily isn't all that satisfying, she says.**

Even as we're pursuing that "low-hanging fruit," we're rushing around to do so. We hurry from a meeting or appointment to a child's soccer game, then perhaps to a social engagement on any given day. We often feel that our time, energy and attention are spread so thinly that we aren't doing anything well enough.

"People here are always on a time schedule; even pleasure is scheduled," says Helene Brenner, a psychologist in Rockville and Frederick and author of *I Know I'm in There Somewhere* (Gotham,

2003). “The pressure here is constant and it’s contagious.”

What’s more, “people feel like they can’t afford to stop to experience the magic of the moment, which contributes to chronic anxiety or tension,” she says. “People never feel like they’re safe or OK as they are now. There’s this sense that you always have to get further or have more.”

Stosny sees another problem endemic to this area: a sense of entitlement that’s accompanied by resentment when things don’t pan out as we believe they should. “There’s a lot more [resentment] now than when I started out in my practice 30 years ago,” he says. “We need to get rid of some of our sense of entitlement. We need to get back to the idea of feeling good by doing good, by being true to our deeper values.”

Hedaya, the holistic psychiatrist in Chevy Chase, has observed it, too. “People here have a sense of entitlement,” he says. “Maybe it’s because they’re working hard and pushing themselves and their children to come out on top, and it doesn’t fill them up.”

And that sense of entitlement affects people’s attitudes. “There’s a huge rudeness factor,” one Bethesda restaurant owner observes. “People complain about everything, and they always want attention right now. They act as if they should have a different standard that should apply to them. Some of these people are doctors or dentists or in businesses where we have to wait for them. But God forbid we’re five minutes off on a reservation—they get really fired up and they get insulting.”

The manager of a high-end Bethesda fitness club sees it, too. “The expectations are inflated here,” she says. “Some members believe they’re entitled to have things exactly as they want them, so they complain about all kinds of stupid stuff—like someone mopping the floor near the cardio machine they’re using. I believe it’s a sign of their unhappiness: They feel like they need to control something, and they get very bitter when they can’t. It’s like the



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the reasons of our discontent

**SINCE** moving here 34 years ago, Dr. Robert Hedaya has definitely seen “a growing sense of unhappiness and lack of fulfillment.”

more miserable they make someone else, the happier they are.”

**REAL** happiness comes from a variety of sources, experts say, including meaningful social interactions. But those can be hard to come by these days.

“I grew up here and I barely recognize the place,” says a Chevy Chase woman in her early 40s. “People used to seem happy and friendly; now they are more like robots. They won’t make eye contact and sometimes won’t even respond if you smile or talk to them in a store.”

But creating meaningful social contacts can be difficult with our hectic schedules and the nature of our environment. “Even though most of us want relationships and connections in our hearts, this is a very transient place,” Hedaya says. “People aren’t born into a social network, and it’s hard to establish one and find stability in one here. There’s a relational emptiness.”

Brenner agrees. “I keep hearing how much people feel isolated,” she says. “Their circles of connections and support keep shrinking. ...And because people aren’t that happy, they feel like it’s a shameful secret, so they retreat—and that makes them more isolated and less likely to have those nurturing relationships.”

Many people don’t even know their neighbors, despite having lived on the same street for years, Hedaya notes. Or they don’t make time—outside of posting thoughts or news on Facebook—to socialize with friends.

“Wherever you go, you see people on their phones and electronic devices,”

says Schlesinger, the Rockville psychotherapist. “Instead of being emotionally connected with the people who are physically present, people are conversing electronically with people who aren’t there. But there is no app or substitute for true face-to-face connectedness. Having close relationships with others where you are your true self helps you feel understood and validated, which can make you feel happier.”

Complicating matters is the fact that in a competitive, high-stress area, “people are very self-involved,” Miller says. “Relationships need to be reciprocal to be healthy and meaningful.” And that’s not happening as much as it should, she says.

A 2011 poll of 18,000 women by *Self* magazine found that 84 percent had at least one venomous pal (aka a “frenemy”), and this was largely “because women don’t want to be seen as not nice,” Miller says. “If you have these incredibly toxic people in your life and you can’t determine who should make the cut and who shouldn’t, you’re undermining your own happiness. There’s an element of social contagion: The people you spend time with affect your happiness and success in life.”

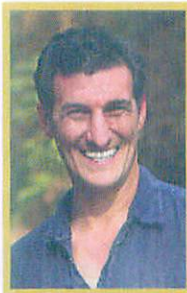
To illustrate the importance of positive social contact, Miller cites “the positivity ratio.” Barbara Fredrickson, a professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, describes the formula in her controversial 2009 book, *Positivity* (MJF Books). She suggests that to be happy in your day-to-day life, you need three positive interactions for every negative one in your professional, familial and social relationships.

“If the ratio is off—if it’s under 3-to-



# THEIR SECRETS TO HAPPINESS

There's no doubt that some people find happiness elusive, even when everything seems to be going their way. But then there are those who hold the golden ticket, who have a fulfilling life and are loving it. We asked around for the names of people who seem both successful and happy. Then we asked those people their secrets.



**SETH GOLDMAN**, co-founder and TeaEO of Honest Tea in Bethesda:

"I have a very simple formula, where what you have is greater than what you want. Most people assume that the way to be happy is to

have more. But I think the way to be happy is to want less and realize what really does make you happy and have that. For me, it's being able to have a spouse who shares my values, a family who really appreciates, trusts and supports each other, and having a company that is having the kind of impact on issues I care about—diet and nutrition, sustainable agriculture, and economic conditions in the developing world."



**CATHERINE RONAN KARRELS**, head of school, Stone Ridge School of the Sacred Heart in Bethesda:

"I am fortunate that most of my time is spent doing things I really believe in—taking care of my family and educating our amazing students. It is easy to be happy when you are around young people who are full of purpose and joy. I like to spend a minute, either at the dinner

table with my family or with my son as he goes to sleep, to recall moments in the day for which we are grateful. It is so easy to get in a mindset that allows challenges to overshadow the goodness in our lives. A daily reminder of the people or events for which I am grateful keeps me grounded and reminds me of my many blessings."



**PATRICE BRICKMAN**, Bethesda philanthropist:

My connectedness to my family and friends is probably the single biggest factor in how happy I am at

any given moment. It keeps me grounded and helps me let go of negative feelings. In recent years, I also have been meditating more. I think meditation can be a catalyst for all sorts of positive things, including deepening my compassion for other people as well as myself. This makes me more accepting and less critical, which enhances my sense of well-being."



**DAISUKE UTAGAWA**, creative director of Sushiko restaurant in Chevy Chase:

"I count what I have; I don't really count

what I don't have—and that [approach] makes me happy. The most important thing for me is people—having family and close friends around me who wish me well and are happy when I'm happy. The restaurant is an extension of that because when people are being fed, they're happy. At the end of the day, we're social animals. I really embrace that."



**EILEEN CAVANAGH**, president/CEO of METRIX Technologies, a technology services firm based in Rockville:

"To stay happy, I make a point to indulge in life's

little pleasures—having a glass of wine, eating chocolate, taking a walk with family or friends. I also enjoy music, especially local bands and my granddaughter's piano programs through the Levine School at Strathmore. My faith in God and giving to others in the community—especially through two causes that are dear to my heart, Combat Soldiers Recovery and Family Services—give me perspective on life, which helps keep me feeling upbeat and optimistic."

—Stacey Colino

—you will languish and go into a downward spiral of negativity,” Miller says. “If the ratio is 5-to-1 or higher, you will begin to flourish and enter the upward spiral of well-being.

“I think the positivity ratio is off for a lot of people here,” she says, “because we have too much emphasis on the wrong things, and we have limited interactions with high-quality friends and too many negative interactions with long hours at work and long commutes.”

Sometimes travel brings that point home. Anna Pelesh, a senior at Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School, spent several weeks in Tanzania last summer in a village where people had few material possessions. She stayed with one family in a dirt-floored hut with walls made of mud and water. Yet their personal inter-

actions seemed to be quite rich. She later remarked to her mother, *Bethesda Magazine* Food Editor Carole Sugarman, that people there seemed incredibly happy.

Cameron had a similar experience while spending much of last summer in a small village in Tuscany. “The people there were so happy, and they had other ways of living and being that we’ve lost sight of here,” she says. “They were very connected to the people in their community and the present experience. ... Around here, our minds are constantly wandering. Happiness isn’t available when we’re thinking about what happened yesterday or what will happen tomorrow.”

**NEW** York author Gretchen Rubin sought to address this existential angst

and sense of yearning with *The Happiness Project* (Harper, 2009), a book that followed a yearlong quest to find greater fulfillment in her life. It “is one of our best-selling titles,” says Amelia Duroska, community relations manager at the Barnes & Noble in Bethesda. And roughly four years after its release, the book was still No. 542 on Amazon’s best-seller list.

As Rubin discovered, “happiness is not something that happens to people—but something that they make happen,” says Csikszentmihalyi, the Claremont professor.


That means it’s a mistake to defer happiness. “A lot of people think: *I’ll be happy when I get that promotion or when my child gets into a great college,*” Cameron says. “The postponement dilemma blocks us from happiness.”

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**A better strategy: Embrace the life you want starting now by setting meaningful goals. "Happy people make short-term and long-term goals, many of which are out of their comfort zones," Miller says.**

That was the case for one Chevy Chase woman. She lived in a six-bedroom house, owned an enviable art collection, and had lots of friends and the financial resources to be a stay-at-home mom for her four kids. Yet the woman spent years feeling discontented.

"I kept wondering: *How can I have so much and feel so empty and unfulfilled?*" she says.

In fact, she was stuck in a conflict-ridden marriage and juggling multiple family responsibilities without the ability to recharge through more personally meaningful pursuits. So two years ago

she divorced her husband and went back to work as a communications consultant. Only then did she regain the sense of engagement and emotional equilibrium that she'd been missing. Even though her financial status took a hit, she says she feels more grounded and content. She derives a sense of meaning and purpose from her work and her broader social network.

Last summer, the Chevy Chase lawyer who works at that international organization similarly decided to add activities that would bring her a greater sense of personal satisfaction—and allow her to get off the hamster wheel of professional achievement with its continuous push to the next level.

"I realized I had to get off this train or I would self-destruct," she says.

She took extended time off from work so she would have more time to relax and rebalance her life. She also began taking acting and writing classes, things she'd always wanted to do. Already she's feeling a greater sense of well-being.

"I decided I need to give myself permission to do the things I want to do that will bring me more fulfillment," she says, "even if they're not aligned with the professional expectations that others have of me. You can't wear a mask of success and cheerfulness forever, because eventually cracks start to show." ■

*Stacey Colino lives in Chevy Chase and frequently writes about health for national magazines such as Real Simple. To comment on this story, email comments@bethesdamagazine.com.*

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