

[A Lot More Than Happy](#)

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Happy Holidays! Happy New Year! And today, Happy Birthday to my son, Brendan! Happy is good. But this time of year can be emotionally intense. Sometimes overwhelming. And it is common for us to experience a whole host of feelings - now and throughout the year - that take us beyond happy.



[Photo Credit](#)

Feelings like pain, anger, anxiety, fear and sadness. So essential to our human experience. Lifesaving, in fact. But while we hold the door open for "happy," we are prone to slam it shut when these other feelings come knocking. The popular press - and even much of the scientific literature - on mental health and wellbeing can lead us to believe that our job is to avoid these feelings like the plague. I say, not so fast. These diverse feelings are messengers that enrich our lives, increase our self-knowledge and expand our capacity to care for and about each other.

1. Pain. Congenital insensitivity to pain (CIPA) is a rare condition characterized by inability to feel pain and temperature and decreased or absent sweating (anhidrosis). Also referred to as congenital analgesia, at first glance we might think CIPA would be awesome. No more back pain. No more headaches. Even broken bones don't hurt. But the reality is that this condition puts people at extreme risk. Unintentional self-injury is common in people with CIPA. From simple injury like biting the tongue to life threatening injuries of burns and accidents. The same is true for emotional, psychological pain. Pain is a lifesaving messenger - whether it be in response to a hand on fire or an abusive relationship. Attending to the pain we experience in our emotional and psychological worlds opens the door to understanding the sources of pain. And if we learn to listen carefully, we have the chance to become more adept at responding early. Pain is like fire; it is easier to extinguish a match than a blazing house.

2. Anger. We all feel angry at times. Anger arises in many different contexts and can range from mild dissatisfaction and annoyance to frustration and on up to seething rage. Anger is what we call a secondary emotion in psychological terms because it reflects underlying primary emotions like sadness, fear, and anxiety. Once again, when we treat anger as a messenger, we have the opportunity to go inward to understand our feelings and ourselves more fully. We gain increased access and greater understanding to how we think about ourselves and the world around us. Anger invites us to rethink assumptions we make. Did my loved one intentionally hurt me? Anger mobilizes us to take a stand and act on beliefs we hold dear. What can I do to stop the practice of incarcerating people with mental illness? Once again, when we treat anger as a messenger, many constructive responses are possible.

3. Anxiety. Feelings of tension, worried thoughts, and physical changes like increased blood pressure are

hallmark features of anxiety. Again, anxiety heralds us to attend to our surroundings and helps us navigate in the world if we take the time to listen and learn how to decipher the language of this emotion. We may feel anxious in situations that we experience as dangerous. We may feel anxious when we challenge ourselves to move from our familiar comfort zones to try something new. Feeling anxious is generally associated with feeling vulnerable. It cues us to know that it is time to call on other resources - maybe some courage and resilience from within; maybe some social supports from friends; maybe a change of environment.

4. Fear. A close cousin to anxiety, fear is characterized by rapid heartbeat, muscle tension, and cognitive alarm that result in an intense feeling state and desire to take action (fight or flight). Fear derives from the detection of imminent threat. Fear can be experienced when avoiding or escaping an aversive situation - running away from an attacking lion or grabbing a toddler who runs into the street. Again, fear may not be pleasant, but it may be lifesaving.

5. Sadness. Having lived through a protracted period of grieving, one of the things that struck me most was how desperately people did not want me to be sad. Of course we do not want to get stuck wallowing in sadness, but the flip side is that we also do not want to send sadness packing before it gets its proper embrace. Sadness is another messenger. It helps us reflect on what matters most to us. It challenges us to examine where we need to rethink what we expect from ourselves and others. It reminds us that we are vulnerable and need self-care. It deepens our capacity for empathy. It puts into high relief where we find joy.

Pain, anger, anxiety, fear, sadness. If we treat them as messengers, if we learn their language, if we welcome them when they first knock rather than shut them out, they become allies in life's journey. Of course, these feelings can also wreak havoc with our lives and be at the core of debilitating psychological disorders, and sometimes this is true no matter how hard we try to constructively engage them. When that threshold is crossed, there are good treatments to help us.

And so, I wish you happy holidays, happy new year, and a lot more than happy. I wish you all the good that comes from pain, anger, anxiety, fear and sadness, too.