'Happiness can be found by constructing a good story and then living your way into it.'

Your story

All the world's a stage.
And all the men and women merely players.
And one man in his time plays many parts...
William Shakespeare

Shakespeare did not invent this metaphor. It was already in common use in the 16th century and he would have expected his audience to recognize it. So does Jonathan Adler talking to people after the September 11th attacks in New York. We are all protagonists in our own life story – and also the narrator. Crafting this most important fiction holds the key to real happiness. Especially in the wake of adversity.

The most important fiction

Bad things happen to all of us. Every life is peppered with the unexpected and the uncomfortable. These events challenge us with the task of meaning-making; they force us to question how our lives can continue to make sense in light of what has happened. In essence, unanticipated adversity dares us to revise our lives.
A growing body of interdisciplinary research broadly labelled ‘the narrative study of lives’ suggests that each of us carries with us a story about our lives that is continually evolving. This story helps smooth our sense of self over time; it connects the person we have been to the person we currently are and to the person that we will become. It unifies, while so much of modern life splinters and compartmentalizes. The story also imbues our life with a sense of purpose – it answers that most challenging question: ‘why?’ Bad things that happen to us challenge the story we’ve been telling. They can shake us from our story-line and can even cause us to doubt the meaning of every chapter that has already been crafted. One of the major reasons life’s struggles feel so bad is that they usher in this sense of narrative uncertainty, that robs us of the unity and purpose we find so reassuring. But for this very reason, the challenges we face also provide us with the opportunity to step out of our stories, exchanging the role of the protagonist for the role of the narrator.

In my own research, I have studied the ways in which people grapple more and less successfully with narrating life’s turning points. I am especially interested in stories of those periods when people work towards happiness in the face of adversity. What I have found is that all stories are not created equal, when it comes to psychological well-being. It turns out that different ways of telling our story have profoundly different impacts on how happy we are.

One of the most compelling examples of how our stories relate to our happiness concerns the way the main character is portrayed. You are the protagonist in your life story and it turns out that the type of character you are matters a lot. Specifically, it matters whether this main character is portrayed as being in control of his or her circumstances, as opposed to being completely powerless to the whims of fate. In stories about wrestling with difficulties, this theme – called ‘agency’ – predicts how happy a person is, above and beyond the impact of other qualities that might predict happiness, like personality traits. In one of my studies, people who sought the help of a psychotherapist in order to manage some difficulty told their stories before beginning treatment and then again after each session of therapy. I found that the portrayal of the main character in these stories shifted towards including more and more of the theme of agency over the course of treatment. And even more interesting, the changes in their stories happened before they reported feeling happier. This suggests that in the wake of life’s challenges, happiness can be found by constructing a good story and then living your way into it.

The stories we craft about our lives are just that – stories. We know that memories, especially memories of highly emotional events, cannot be assumed to be completely accurate recordings of what really happened. But the stories’ imperfections do not render
them powerless when it comes to our well-being. Indeed, the stories we tell about our lives imbue our day-to-day existence with a sense of meaning and purpose. This is why I think about each person's life story as ‘the most important fiction’. Conceiving of your story as one of the keys to a meaningful and happy life is a wonderfully empowering insight; for regardless of your life circumstances, the story that you tell about your life is malleable and in your control.

The keys

→ Remember that when bad things happen they present you with an opportunity to step back and revise the story of your life.
→ Realising that you are both the main character and the narrator in the story of your life empowers you to shape the plot of the story – and the way you live it.
→ Sometimes changing the story can precede changes in your happiness, so find a way to revise your story and then live your way into it.

Jonathan M. Adler is an assistant professor of psychology at the F.W. Olin College of Engineering in Needham, Massachusetts (USA). His research is focused on the ways in which the process of responding to challenges fuels identity development and well-being. He has published scholarly articles on the relationship between well-being and people’s life stories, their stories of psychotherapy, and their stories of the September 11th attacks in the United States. His work has been covered by The New York Times, as well as by Elle Magazine.