

# Are you living yo



*Psychologists reveal the mental trap that holds you back from taking risks—and the simple strategies for overcoming it*

Every time we're weighing a new opportunity—whether to ask our boss about a promotion, for instance—our thoughts swirl with possible scenarios: We picture the pride of walking away with a big raise or the crushing blow of hearing no.

It's these imagined scenarios that either push us to take a chance or pull us back if an opportunity seems too risky. The only hitch? According to psychologist Timothy D. Wilson, Ph.D., author of *Redirect: The Surprising New Science of Psychological Change*, our “affective forecasting” skills—that is, our ability to predict how events will affect our emotions—are incredibly faulty. He explains that when thinking of potential outcomes, our mind draws on memories that stick out (like a particularly brutal performance review), but leaves out small yet highly influential details (like an encouraging nod from the boss).

As a result, we tend to exaggerate the potential impact of future events. “When we're imagining scenarios, we focus only on how we'll feel right afterward,” observes Wilson. “But we underestimate how quickly we'll adapt to both good and bad outcomes.”

This inability to accurately forecast our emotions often leads us to be overly cautious and prevents us from taking risks that would have turned out wonderfully. And left unchecked, it can leave us feeling unsatisfied and stuck. Fortunately, Wilson assures, it's possible to outsmart this mental quirk and uncover a whole new level of happiness.

# ur happiest life?

## JOY BOOSTER

### IDENTIFY THREE POSITIVE OUTCOMES

Faulty forecasting can narrow our focus and cause us to think in absolute terms: *The decision to run for president of the church committee will result in either eternal happiness or utter despair.* But overlooking in-between options increases the feeling of risk—and makes it more likely that you'll feel as though you're making the wrong choice. "We become so focused on winning or losing that we forget to pay attention to other benefits likely occurring at the same time, like having fun putting together campaign posters with friends," explains Shannon Martin, an affective forecasting researcher at Central Michigan University in Mount Pleasant.

The easy Rx: Consider three positive outcomes that could come from an action, advises Martin. For instance, if you're running for church-committee president—even if you should lose—hosting a meet-and-greet at your home may foster neighborhood camaraderie, giving campaign speeches will sharpen your public-speaking skills and designing posters will give you a creative outlet. This well-rounded outlook reminds you of all you stand to gain.

## JOY BOOSTER

### REWRITE PAST FAILURES

Part of how we determine whether or not a choice will pay off is by looking into our past at the outcome of similar decisions. "The mind is supposed to track failures so we don't repeat them," says Shawn T. Smith, Psy.D., author of *The User's Guide to the Human Mind*. "But the mind can do its job too well and keep us from bouncing back."

To keep past missteps from holding you back, Smith suggests asking yourself what you learned from the experience. If the last time you signed up for a nonrefundable aerobics class you ended up not going and losing your money, you might think, *Okay, I learned that I hate dance-based classes, but maybe I'll like a strength-training class instead.* "Very often when dwelling on past failures, we're operating out of implicit memory, or automatic, unconscious patterns that have no time stamp," explains Linda Graham, MFT, author of *Bouncing Back*. Reframing mistakes prevents us from responding to new opportunities with a knee-jerk "I can't."

## JOY BOOSTER

### VISUALIZE A CIRCLE OF SUPPORT

As you contemplate signing up for a new cooking class at the community center, thoughts of your recent sunken cheesecake or burnt cookies bubble up, causing you to second-guess your skills and worry that you won't hit it off with anyone. "The biggest derailer of our resilience is shame—a sense of incompetence and unworthiness," asserts Graham. "The hardest part about shame is that in feeling it, we tend to shut down and hide, isolating ourselves instead of taking in support from others."

"To feel worthy, you need to nurture a sense of love and acceptance," explains Graham. To do: Put your hand on your heart and call to mind one to two people (like your husband and your sister) who believe in you, have your back and root for you. Take a deep breath and feel the safety, love and security their presence provides. You might also recall a brief moment in one of those relationships when you felt cherished. Graham explains, "This immediately releases *oxytocin*, the hormone of safety and trust that is the antidote to stress and the silencer of the inner critic."

## JOY BOOSTER

### LOOK FOR EXAMPLES OF PAST SUCCESS

"The mind generally errs on the side of assuming we can't do something so we won't get hurt," explains Smith. So when your sister asks you to join her on her next-day hike, thoughts like, *I'm the unathletic one in the family—why didn't she ask our brother, Mike?* crowd out the

confident self-talk needed to channel your trademark adventuresome spirit.

Bolster your belief in your abilities by thinking back to a time when things went better than you expected, asserts Robert Brooks, Ph.D., coauthor of *The Power of Resilience*. For example, recall the way you quickly solved a glitch on

your last family vacation and identify an action you took that led to the better outcome (like trusting yourself to think on your feet). Brooks notes, "It's a powerful exercise in flexible thinking because it reinforces the notion that you have the power to turn any outcome into a positive experience."