

# In your 30s, you'll discover happiness is just persistence and sheer will

[Lauren Alix Brown](#) December 22, 2015



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**Exploring the prickly expanse of happiness in Joshua Tree National Park.**

I've never believed in happiness. As an anxious person, I've always valued peace more. But last month, it occurred to me that I'd stumbled upon happiness anyway, and here's what I learned in doing so: It's not about good endings or how people treat you. Happiness is an uncompromising, calculated approach to life.

After I was diagnosed with [breast cancer early in 2014](#), I had a lot to be unhappy about: losing my breasts, my hair, possibly my fertility, and what felt like a year of my life. But the illness put things into sharp focus. There were really only two states of being: alive or not. When faced with the latter,

the former felt fantastic, no matter the conditions.

The experience taught me that, despite all of the circumstances in life we can't control, "happiness" is one thing you can. Happiness is not a feeling, but an orientation. It is an active approach to life, in a million small ways, that insists on persevering through shitty circumstances. Sure, this approach means that much of the time, you're faking happiness before you feel it. But that's when it's most important.

It may sound counter-intuitive to have a formula for feeling good. But we can't control other people or events, and even our emotions and reactions to life's vicissitudes are variable. So be disciplined, strategic, and deliberate with what you can control.

## Hope can be disciplined

I [choose to believe in love](#) in spite of what, at times, has felt like endless rejection and disappointment. I decide that this Tuesday will be the best Tuesday ever, even though the medicine I have to take to prevent a recurrence of cancer has prevented me from sleeping through the night for nearly six months now. I try to run every day because, regardless of the health benefits, or the calories burned, I know that I will feel better for just having done it.

## Change can be strategic

But I'm not inflexible—after all, the only constant thing in life is that it's never what you expect it to be—both bad and good. Navigate that unpredictability by being willing to change course from what you think you want or need.

In my early 20s, I spent the majority of my social energy focused on relationships with men, all of which were more fleeting than I had hoped. Around the age of 25, I made a concerted effort to cultivate better relationships with women. Now I'm reaping the rewards. A multitude of new

and important people have entered my life—and often, the people I had expected to be minor players have taken on significant roles. Even if I never find a partner, I think I could be fulfilled spending my life loving this amazing cast of characters I call my friends.

## **Fun can mean being the unpopular one**

The pursuit of happiness can be misleading; it clouds your inner voice, your nuanced motivations, and ability to see yourself as an individual distinct from your parents and peers. Toss it aside, swiftly, so that you can do what you really enjoy.

It's all too easy, especially for women, to be swayed by social pressures and the hold of the collective "shoulds." Most Friday nights I go to the gym or see a movie by myself instead of going on dates or out for happy hours. I have learned to take stock of my choices, big and small, to make sure I'm doing exactly what I want. Feeling comfortable and confident about that, even when your choice is uncool or unpopular goes a long way in daily contentment.

It takes a little while to locate that signal, the one that tells you what really matters to you. But it's a signal worth following.