



Joy is possible. The authors show how to build habits that fill our lives with joy and satisfaction. Based on the latest neuroscience and attachment theory—but written in everyday language—this book is easy to comprehend. The authors provide exercises and tools you can put into practice immediately.

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CHAPTER 1

Joy, Trauma, and Building Our House

I'LL NEVER FORGET SITTING in the county jail feeling like my life was over. I (Chris) was in college and had been pulled over with my second DUI in only a year. I thought of myself as a fun guy. People liked hanging out with me. I certainly loved going to parties, but in that moment of darkness came a growing clarity—my life wasn't working. Something needed to change. Sitting in the county lockup that night, I never dreamed that someday I would become a relationship expert who trained people on how to live with joy.

As part of the sentence for my DUIs I had to give up my license, seek counseling, and pay hefty fines. Without a license to drive, I was limited on my options, so that summer I joined an out-of-state ministry for a summer

internship. I found myself at a center that helped severely traumatized people. Talk about a fish out of water! This was the last place I wanted to be. I was away from all my friends, away from any sign of familiarity. I wanted to put in my time and get out of there as quickly as I could. Just a few days into the internship, I decided it was time to leave. However, this organization was run by Christians and, before I could leave, I knew they would ask if I had prayed about my decision. I wanted to give them an honest answer, so I prayed. I said, “God, if I’m supposed to be here, please show me, otherwise I’m leaving in the morning.”

Within a few minutes, I realized there was a new thought bouncing around in my head like a Ping-Pong ball. The thought made no sense to me, but I kept seeing the words floating in my mind. It was simply the words, “Isaiah 61.” Now, I had grown up in church but had not taken my faith very seriously up to this point. It occurred to me that Isaiah sounded like a book in the Bible. I found a Bible on the shelf where I was staying, and looked for the table of contents. Sure enough, there was an Isaiah about two-thirds of the way down the list of books. I then thought, “What are the odds that Isaiah has sixty-one chapters?” I flipped through the pages and was completely shocked to find that there was indeed an Isaiah 61. The next words I read changed my life. It said, “The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to

the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners” (v. 1 NIV). In that moment of insight, I realized that I was right where I was supposed to be. I felt like God wanted me to walk alongside deeply wounded people—to do something to bind up their broken hearts and help them find freedom from the prisons of mental darkness in which so many of them lived.

It was this unexpected calling to work with highly traumatized people that led me to neuroscience, attachment theory, and the importance of joy.

TWO LIFE-CHANGING RELATIONSHIPS

While working at this center, I made two life-changing relationships. First, after a few years of working there, I met my future wife, Jen. She arrived as a volunteer, and we found ourselves working together more and more often. Like me, Jen was overcoming some issues in her own life. She often struggled with depression so debilitating it kept her from getting out of bed. Gradually, we both realized that our joy levels increased as we spent time together. We became friends. We eventually fell in love and got married.

The second life-changing relationship was with Dr. Jim Wilder. I heard Jim speak at conferences, and several times he came to visit our center as a guest to help us understand the brain and attachment theory. It was Dr. Wilder who introduced us to the importance of joy.

Both Jen and I were highly motivated to apply what Dr. Wilder was teaching. We wanted more than that, however. We wanted to figure out how to make this material as practical as possible for the people we were trying to help. Over time, Dr. Wilder would suggest practices we could use to help those we served—practical steps and exercises based on brain science. While I tested these training methods, my colleagues and I would discuss what worked and what didn't. I would report back to Jim the effects of this training. Within a short time Jim and I were running training events called THRIVE Training, and Jen counted nineteen skills in our training that were essential to helping people grow their emotional capacity. I (Chris) gained experience in creating exercises to help people grow missing relational skills.

A TRAUMA AND B TRAUMA

The core issue we were trying to address was how to help adults learn relational and emotional skills they should have developed as children. In his model, Dr. Wilder taught that two kinds of traumas had stunted the emotional development of our clients.¹ Along the way, we discovered that everybody has some level of stunted maturity because of these two kinds of trauma. Jim called these A Trauma and B Trauma.

Most of us are familiar with B Trauma. B stands for the “bad” stuff that happens to us—like verbal, psychological,

sexual, or physical abuse. B Trauma stunts our maturity because of the things that we've been through. All of the people we were trying to help at this center had gone through significant B Trauma. Some had been beaten, some sexually abused, some psychologically tormented. Some had even been tortured. It was easy to see how B Trauma impacted their lives.

Perhaps less familiar to many of us is what we know as A Trauma. A stands for the "absence" of the good stuff we all need. For example, if no one stayed relationally present with us as children while we recovered from big emotions like shame, anger, and fear, chances are high we never developed the skill to bounce back from these sometimes overwhelming emotions. As a result of missing these experiences, a hole began to form in our maturity. A Trauma includes things like neglect, not getting hugs, missing out on having both parents in the home, and basically any other good thing that would have helped us mature. A Trauma stunts our maturity development because of the good experiences we miss.

It sometimes helps to think of A Trauma this way. If you wanted to kill a plant, how would you do it? The most common answer we hear is, "Don't water it," followed by "don't give it the right amount of sunlight or the right kind of soil." Clearly, what you don't give a plant can kill it. And what you don't give to a child can kill their development.

The temptation at the ministry where Jen and I were working was to spend all our time trying to help with the B Trauma. However, what we discovered was that recovery was actually more predictable based on how well people overcame the A Trauma in their lives. As we spent more and more time helping people do the exercises that filled the holes left by A Trauma, we could see their joy levels increase noticeably. People with higher levels of joy had less trouble processing their B Trauma, while people with low joy levels and minimal life skills related to A Trauma often struggled to make any progress with getting past the B Trauma in their lives.

WE CAN ALL GROW OUR CAPACITY FOR JOY

The good news is that what Jen and I (Chris) learned about helping people overcome the A Trauma in their lives taught us lessons that anyone can learn, so that all of us can intentionally grow our capacity for joy. The four habits taught in this book serve as a summary of the foundational lessons that can move our default setting from fear to joy. Here are a few testimonies of people who went through the five-day training program we ran with Dr. Jim Wilder called THRIVE Training.²

Marvin, a professional, wrote us after his training week,

I have attended and participated in hundreds of seminars, conferences, and workshops over the timeline of my

career. I have trained thousands of professionals through my private practice as a consultant. However, I have never been impacted in the manner in which I was through the THRIVE Training. This has changed my life forever. Daily, I am witnessing the impact of joy in the lives of the men I minister to as a result of THRIVE through what was deposited into my soul. THRIVE will remain a part of my continued growth and development for the rest of my life. Thank you so very much for such a memorable and life-changing experience and opportunity!

Julie wrote to share her experience and highlight some of the changes in her marriage after participating in THRIVE Training.

[Because of this training], I now know how to get and stay in joy. Thank you! It is almost too good to be true. Once you experience genuine joy, you cannot live without it.

Last, Gail wrote to express her observations about her pastor who returned from the THRIVE Training:

My pastor really gained something out of your training last week. He didn't just come back with information; he came back changed. And I think it's great. I've never seen something like this happen to him. It's like he's finally alive with joy, and really REALLY "there." Thank you for the work you are doing to spread relational skills!

We share these stories to let you know the habits you are about to learn can truly be life-changing. Just reading this

book won't change anything, but putting into practice what you learn here can make all the difference in the world.

So, how do we grow our capacity for joy? Let's get started.

TEARING DOWN THE HOUSE OF FEAR

We all have an inner world. It is a world of thoughts, emotions, and impulses that others don't see. We can smile at people around us while we are dying inside. We can put on a good front even when inwardly we feel like we are falling apart. In order to grow our capacity for joy, we have to bring some structure to that inner world. We have to tear down the house of fear in which most of us live, and begin building a house of joy.

Joy is the key to emotional resilience. It is like the air in the ball that lets it bounce. Let's face it. No one goes to counseling because they have too much joy and need to get rid of some of it. We don't stand around the water cooler at the office and complain to our coworkers about all the joy we had over the weekend or whine about how joy is ruining our lives. When we start our day with joy, it is easier to face the challenges we will meet throughout the day. When we know we will end our day in a place of joy and peace, sleep comes more easily and we do not dread life quite so much. Knowing we can get back to a place of joy helps us bounce back from hard experiences.

So how do we build a joy house in our inner world?

First, we need a foundation. When it comes to joy, that foundation is laid by two essential habits—*calming* and *appreciation*. It has been said that the ability to share high-energy states like joy, then quiet and calm from upsetting emotions, is the number one predictor of emotional stability throughout life.³ Nothing grows joy faster than learning to experience the feeling of appreciation several times a day. Routinely quieting ourselves and entering into feelings of appreciation just a few times each day lays a foundation for a life of joy as it trains our brains that joy and peace are normal experiences.

Once the foundation of calming and appreciation has been laid, our house needs to be framed. This framework helps us return to joy and peace from a variety of troubling emotions. To construct this part of our joy house, one of the most important habits we can form is that of *storytelling*. We are specifically referring to sharing brain-friendly “joy stories.” These are practiced tales of times we faced upsetting emotions without getting overwhelmed, or times we got overwhelmed initially but were able to recover. Collecting such stories constructs a framework for resilience in our brains. “Joy stories” anchor our brains in the understanding that no matter what emotion I may be feeling right now, it is not the end of the world. There is a path back to joy from there.

After our foundation and framework are in place, it is time to finish the structure and complete our joy house.

We do this by learning to attack the toxic thinking that so often keeps us locked in negative, self-defeating emotions and behaviors. Many of us are imprisoned by unhelpful narratives about how unlovable we are, or what failures we are, or how the world is out to get us. As these narratives take root, toxic thinking becomes a habit of its own and we need a game plan for winning the battle for our minds.

Not only do we want to teach you the four habits that help you build your own joy house, we want to help you learn how to fill that house with good things that make life satisfying as opposed to the okay (or sometimes bad) things that fill our lives with meaninglessness and trouble. Learning to distinguish what is truly satisfying from what is temporarily pleasurable is essential to building a life worth living.

To help you remember the four habits you will need to build your joy house, we have outlined them to spell the word CASA. (It seemed appropriate for the model.) Here are the four habits of joy-filled people.

- C—Calming (Learning to live with a quiet mind)
- A—Appreciating (Learning to find joy in the everyday pleasures of life)
- S—Storytelling (Developing a positive narrative of how to act like our best selves when facing upsetting emotions)
- A—Attacking toxic thoughts (Creating a strategy for replacing thoughts that imprison us in unpleasant emotions)

In the chapters ahead we will explain why these habits are so important, give you some practical ideas for how to build these habits, and provide you with exercises to get you started. We want everyone we know to grow their capacity to live with joy.

BUSTING SOME MYTHS ABOUT JOY

It is not uncommon to think that high-joy people must have some unfair advantage over the rest of us. Perhaps they were simply born happy, or maybe their life is easier than ours. In Western cultures we also tend to see joy as a choice and we can beat ourselves up for not being better at choosing this happy emotion. As we try to understand the importance of joy, let's consider three common—and false—beliefs about joy.

Joy is a choice. While there are choices we can make that increase the odds of feeling joy, there is a simple fact that eliminates the idea that joy is a choice. Joy happens predominantly in the relational right hemisphere of the brain, while choices and cognition happen in the left. One of the reasons this is significant is that the data flow in the brain moves from right to left, not the other way around. Right-brain activity informs left-brain activity, not the reverse. We could take the rest of the book to explain how Western ideas regarding the will have influenced the way we look at everything from love and joy to character and destiny. Our point here is that joy is

primarily a relational experience that is more like a reflex anchored in the relational part of our brain.

How can our choices help us move toward joy? Here are a few examples. We can choose to visit a friend who lights up to see us. We can choose to dwell on memories of relational joy. We can choose to spend time quieting and appreciating the good things in life. One of the more powerful stories we have heard about someone who made the choice to practice appreciation despite adverse circumstances involves a member of the Dutch Resistance during World War II. Her name was Betsie ten Boom. She and her sister, Corrie, were arrested for hiding Jews in their home and sent to a Nazi concentration camp. As you can imagine, there was very little about the camp to inspire joy. But Betsie made a choice. She decided to find something to appreciate in every situation she had to endure. Her demeanor and joyful attitude gave strength to others. She tried to teach her sister the importance of living this way—of giving thanks in everything. Corrie was a bit slower to pick up the habit.

One situation in particular stood out. She and her sister along with a crowd of other women were packed into inadequate barracks. Nothing about these conditions was appealing. To make matters worse, the place was infested with lice. Corrie hit her limit. She told Betsie, “There is no way I am thanking God for lice!” With Betsie’s encouragement, Corrie begrudgingly made the choice to thank

God anyway, even though she couldn't see how in the world there could be anything good about lice.

Within a few weeks, Corrie and Betsie began to notice that the guards didn't like the lice, either. They stayed away from their barracks and largely left these women alone. As a result, every evening they were able to read from a smuggled Bible and encourage one another in prayer. Consequently, the morale in this group of women stayed relatively strong. They were able to strengthen one another in ways that gave them the joy and strength they needed to face the daily horror of the place. None of this would have been possible without the lice.⁴

Some people are just born joyful. Have you ever met someone and thought, "It seems like this person was just born happy"? I (Marcus) recently had the chance to work with a former executive at a large bank who exudes joy. She began her career as a teller and worked her way up to serving in a corporate leadership position with one of the largest banks in America. Part of her secret was that she was so good with people. Everyone liked spending time with her, and she was good at dealing with problems in a way that let people know they had been seen, heard, and appreciated. In talking to her about her optimistic, positive approach to life, she said that it just came naturally. She didn't remember ever thinking about why she did it or how to do it. The skills were just there. They showed up without her having to think about them.

For some of us, this would seem to suggest that she was simply born this way. But neuroscience points us in another direction. She had been raised in a large and basically happy family. She grew up with a lot of smiles, a lot of people who were happy to see her, and lots of family members who knew how to navigate troubling emotions well. As a result, the mirror neurons in her brain that learn by watching and imitating got lots of practice in learning how to live with joy and return to joy from upsetting situations. Many of these skills were likely already in place by the time she was three years old and just continued to develop with practice. Thus, by the time she was an adult, she had formed well-established habits that showed up without even having to think about them. This is how joy-fueled maturity formation is supposed to happen.

There is evidence that genetics and heredity play a role in predisposing people toward joy, so we see both nature and nurture have a role in how the brain grows and organizes itself over time.⁵ However, at the time of birth the part of the brain that grows with the experience of joy is barely developed.⁶ How well it develops and grows is largely influenced by relational activity.⁷

Our brains need to share joy with other people and learn how to return to joy from all of the various emotions that threaten to overwhelm us. The essential skills can be developed before we are even old enough to speak.⁸

Joy-filled people have fewer problems than low-joy people. You would think that the happiest people in the world would be those who are the richest, healthiest, and most influential. But that is rarely the case. History is replete with the stories of people who had it all and died miserable, lonely, and—in some cases—even took their own lives. On the other hand, the world is filled with people who struggle to make ends meet, have few opportunities for upward mobility, and even face persecution, but live with joy. I (Marcus) formerly served on the board of an organization that ran “mercy homes” and training centers throughout India. The Mercy Homes were something like orphanages. They took in people who had lost their families. They also provided training for low-income people and helped them start microbusinesses. Eventually, this organization was able to open a hospital just in time to help with the COVID crisis.

I had the privilege of traveling to India and participating in the ribbon-cutting ceremony that opened their primary training center. Having grown up in northern Indiana, India was quite a culture shock for me.

The world is filled with people who struggle to make ends meet, have few opportunities for upward mobility, and even face persecution, but live with joy.

I had never seen so many people living in poverty. The sheer magnitude of the problem is overwhelming. In the midst of a country in which over 600 million people live in poverty, it was equally striking to see the joy with which the people in the Mercy Homes lived. These were people who had lost everything, but you couldn't help but leave encouraged and uplifted after spending time with them. I have encountered similar situations in a variety of countries I have visited—low-income people with very hard lives who live with more joy than most well-fed Americans I know.

So what is their secret? How is this possible? We would suggest that the reason has to do with relationships. Most of these people live in very tight-knit communities that go through everything together. There is a sense that “my people will be there for me” and that “I will never go through anything alone.” There is also very real joy shared relationally with friends and family in these communities. In the end it is the relational joy that provides the foundation for life rather than the hardship.

GOOD NEWS! JOY CAN BE DEVELOPED

I (Chris) mentioned that when I first met my wife Jen she was a volunteer at the organization where I worked. I also mentioned that she struggled with depression and sometimes had trouble getting out of bed. Today, Jen and I teach people around the globe how to live with joy.

One of the reasons we are so confident of what is being taught in this book is because we have experienced joy for ourselves. We are now passing joy on to our sons, our family and friends, neighbors, strangers, and pretty much wherever we can. Joy changes everything!

As Jen and I developed exercises for the people at the center to practice, we practiced them as well. The interactive exercises had a profoundly transformational impact on both of us. We found that we smiled more often. We reflected on joy, talked about joyful memories, and shared joy stories with each other and those in our lives. Interactions became opportunities for the good stuff to spread. The information and exercises in this book have deeply changed our lives, transformed our parenting, invigorated our marriage, and changed how we approach life and relationships. We now run trainings, write blogs, develop resources, and speak on the power of joy!

In this book we want to help you learn the habits that transformed our lives and that brought so much hope and healing to people we have trained. We want to help you build your own joy house so that when it comes to joy, there is enough for you and some to share.

At the end of each habit chapter, we will have a joy workout to help you practice the skills that build the four habits of joy-filled people.

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