

A Splash of Color Might Be the Easiest Way to Boost Happiness

Analysis by [Dr. Joseph Mercola](#)

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Bright, intentional colors do more than make a space look attractive; they activate ancient brain pathways associated with energy, attention and positive emotions, making simple everyday objects powerful mood boosters
- › The color that brings you the most joy is personal, not trendy. Shades tied to happy memories, favorite places or meaningful experiences often create the strongest emotional response
- › Chasing promotions, money or major achievements rarely produces lasting happiness. Building small moments of joy into your daily routine creates a more satisfying life than waiting for the next milestone
- › Joy strengthens creativity, motivation, productivity and relationships, creating an upward cycle where positive experiences make it easier to stay engaged and enjoy life
- › Supporting your cellular energy through nutrient-dense foods, regular movement, natural sunlight and other healthy habits gives you more focus, resilience and enthusiasm to fully enjoy the people, hobbies and experiences that matter most

Color has surrounded human life since before we had words for it, yet the spaces where you likely spend most of your time have become noticeably muted. More than 80% of cars on the road today are grayscale — white, black, gray or silver — a dramatic shift

from three decades ago, when bold colors were far more common.¹ At the same time, designers and researchers who study color argue that this gradual shift toward bland environments has quietly changed what you see every day.

Instead of dismissing color as simple decoration, it deserves attention because even small visual details influence how you feel from morning until bedtime. You don't need to repaint your house or overhaul your wardrobe.

The real leverage comes from understanding why your brain responds to color the way it does, and that explanation reaches back thousands of years into human evolution. Once you see that connection, everyday objects you already own become surprisingly powerful tools for lifting your mood. But color is only part of the story.

If you've ever reached a goal you worked toward for months or years only to feel the excitement fade within days, you already understand a deeper problem with how most people think about happiness itself. There is a better framework, one that turns joy from a distant reward into something you experience right now, and it pairs naturally with the color strategies you're about to discover.

Bright Colors Give Your Brain an Instant Lift

A feature published by TIME explored why bright colors have such a powerful effect on your emotions and why even small, intentional changes to your surroundings create noticeable improvements in how you feel.² Rather than focusing on expensive home renovations or major lifestyle changes, the article examined how ordinary objects, such as a coffee mug, front door, umbrella or pair of shoes, influence your mood because you interact with them repeatedly throughout the day.

The article drew on interviews with Ingrid Fetell Lee, founder of The Aesthetics of Joy and author of "Joyful: The Surprising Power of Ordinary Things to Create Extraordinary Happiness,"³ Color Factory CEO Ben Williams, and color psychologist Karen Haller. Instead of treating color as decoration, these experts described it as a practical tool that influences how your brain processes everyday experiences.

Unlike many wellness trends that require significant time or money, this approach starts with items you already use every day. That means you have an opportunity to improve your environment immediately without completely changing your lifestyle.

- **Your brain still reacts the way it did thousands of years ago** — According to Lee, humans evolved color vision partly because it helped our primate ancestors locate ripe fruit among dense green leaves. Although your daily routine looks very different today, those ancient brain circuits remain active. Lee explained that bright colors still act as signals of life and energy, telling your brain that something valuable deserves attention.

As she described it, "We evolved to **find joy** when we see bright color, because that means nourishment is coming." That helps explain why a colorful object often catches your attention before anything else in the room. Instead of requiring conscious effort, your brain reacts automatically because those survival pathways have remained intact throughout human evolution.

- **Brightness matters more than picking the "perfect" color** — Most people focus only on whether something is red, blue or green. Lee pointed out that two additional qualities have a much larger influence on emotional response: how light the color appears and how pure or saturated it is. Saturated means a color looks rich, vivid and intense instead of faded or gray.

Think of the difference between a fire-engine red and a dusty rose, or a cobalt blue and a washed-out periwinkle. Both pairs contain the same base hue, but the saturated version commands your attention while the muted one fades into the background. Lee explained that "Any hue can bring joy," but colors that contain a lot of gray lose much of that emotional effect because they appear muddy instead of vibrant.

This means your favorite color matters less than choosing a version of that color that looks bright and lively. You don't need to fill an entire room with bold colors, either. The article emphasized that small bursts of color often provide all the

stimulation your brain needs while avoiding the visual overload that comes from covering every wall or piece of furniture in bright shades.

- **The objects you touch every day have the greatest influence** — Instead of saving colorful items for special occasions, Lee recommended placing them into your daily routine. She explained that a brightly colored coffee mug you use every morning offers more emotional value than decorative glasses that remain inside a cabinet most of the year.

Williams expanded on this idea by encouraging people to choose colorful everyday accessories such as shoelaces, earrings, keychains, backpacks or umbrellas because frequent interaction reinforces the positive emotional response. He even suggested something as simple as writing with a blue marker instead of a black one to introduce more color into routine tasks.

- **Personal memories determine which colors make you happiest** — Haller explained that there is no universally "correct" color because emotional responses depend heavily on your own experiences. A particular shade often reminds you of a vacation, favorite place, loved one or meaningful event, even if you don't immediately recognize the connection.

Haller summarized this idea simply: "There's no such thing as a wrong color. It's what's right for you." Instead of following design trends or someone else's recommendations, she encouraged people to identify colors that naturally trigger positive memories and emotions. She also warned against assuming that more color automatically creates more happiness.

Her advice was to think of color like turning the volume knob on a radio. Highly saturated colors provide strong stimulation, so a little often produces a better result than covering an entire room with the same bright shade.

What makes color so effective is that it works through repetition, not intensity; a small joyful signal encountered dozens of times a day. That principle raises a bigger question: if micro-moments of pleasure shape your mood more reliably than you

expected, how do they compare to the major achievements most people spend years chasing? The research on that question challenges some deeply held assumptions about what a satisfying life actually requires.

Daily Joy Builds a More Satisfying Life Than Chasing Milestones

In an article published by The Aesthetics of Joy, Lee challenged the conventional idea that success depends on promotions, higher income, status or recognition.⁴ Instead, she explored why joy deserves to become your primary measure of a fulfilling life. The article examined psychological principles and practical examples that help explain why people often feel unfulfilled even after reaching goals they spent years pursuing.

Lee argued that many people postpone [happiness](#) until they reach the next milestone. That approach creates a cycle where satisfaction always remains somewhere in the future instead of becoming part of everyday life. Her message is straightforward: success feels more meaningful when your daily routine includes regular moments of joy instead of waiting for one major achievement to provide lasting happiness.

This shift matters because it places something important back under your control. You can't always control promotions, awards or financial outcomes, but you control many of the choices that influence how each day feels.

- **Waiting for happiness often leaves people disappointed** — Lee described a psychological concept called the "arrival fallacy" — the gap between the happiness you expect a goal to deliver and the happiness it actually provides. The pattern is predictable: you sacrifice present enjoyment for a future payoff, reach the goal, feel a brief surge of satisfaction, and then watch it fade far faster than you expected.

After finally reaching the goal, many immediately begin chasing another one instead. As Lee wrote, "We often reach our desired milestone only to find the promised happiness has somehow slipped through our fingers."

If that pattern sounds familiar, try a simple exercise. Think about one accomplishment that once seemed life-changing. Then ask yourself how long that excitement actually lasted. That reflection often reveals how quickly external achievements become normal while everyday experiences continue to shape your overall happiness.

- **Small joyful moments create a positive cycle that strengthens motivation** — Rather than treating joy as a reward after hard work, Lee explained that joy actually helps produce better work. She described research showing that joyful people perform better across several areas, including memory, creative thinking, problem-solving and productivity. Joyful salespeople build stronger customer relationships, while joyful leaders encourage greater teamwork and collaboration.

Joy creates what psychologists call an "upward spiral," meaning one positive experience increases the likelihood of another. Feeling happier makes you more engaged. Greater engagement leads to more satisfaction. That satisfaction encourages creativity, curiosity and stronger relationships, which create even more joyful experiences.

Instead of trying to force motivation every morning, you become more motivated because your daily routine includes experiences that naturally energize you. That creates momentum instead of exhaustion.

Workplace research reinforces the pattern. A 2021 survey by management consulting firm Kearney found that 61% of working adults experienced less joy at work than they expected, a gap that widened across every generation and industry between 2018 and 2021.⁵

The employees who reported the most satisfaction weren't necessarily in better jobs; they were the ones who received sincere recognition, understood how their work served a meaningful purpose and maintained genuine social connections with coworkers.

- **Your daily routine matters more than occasional major events** — Lee emphasized that a meaningful life develops from ordinary moments repeated over time rather than rare celebrations. Relationships grow through everyday conversations instead of a single memorable vacation.

Career satisfaction comes from enjoying your work most days instead of relying on one promotion every few years. She reinforced the point with Annie Dillard's observation that how you spend your days is, ultimately, how you spend your life — a reminder that long-term quality of life isn't decided in rare peak moments but in the texture of ordinary mornings and evenings.

- **Success looks different when it matches your own values** — Lee encouraged readers to redefine success in ways that reflect their personal priorities instead of comparing themselves with everyone else. She suggested evaluating success through presence, meaningful relationships, personal values, vitality and freedom instead of status alone.

One example came from Patagonia founder Yvon Chouinard, whose company encourages employees to spend time surfing when conditions are ideal rather than remaining chained to a rigid schedule. The philosophy focuses on aligning work with personal values instead of measuring productivity by hours alone.

Lee also highlighted Ina Garten's practice of concentrating on doing her best each day instead of becoming consumed by distant long-term goals. These examples reinforce an important lesson: your definition of success doesn't need to match anyone else's. When your choices reflect what truly matters to you, satisfaction becomes part of everyday life instead of something reserved for special occasions.

Choose Small Daily Habits That Make Joy Easier to Find

The strongest message is that joy isn't something you earn after years of hard work. It grows from the choices you make every day. Think about creating an environment and lifestyle that naturally support positive emotions instead of waiting for happiness to

arrive after the next accomplishment.

- 1. Add one meaningful burst of color to something you use every day** — Start with an object that already belongs to your daily routine instead of buying decorations that sit on a shelf. A colorful coffee mug, notebook, water bottle, phone case, backpack, umbrella or front door gives your brain repeated reminders of something enjoyable because you see it over and over again.

If you spend most of the day at a desk, brighten your workspace with one object that immediately catches your eye. If you spend more time outside the home, choose something you carry with you. Small changes repeated every day have a much greater impact than items you rarely notice.

When choosing a color, remember that saturation matters more than the specific hue. Look for versions that appear vivid and rich rather than faded or grayish. If you're unsure where to start, try swapping one neutral object per week — replace a gray phone case with a saturated blue one, trade a beige mug for a bright yellow, or switch a black notebook for deep red.

Testing a few saturated options helps you discover which colors create the strongest response for you before committing to anything permanent.

- 2. Support your cellular energy so joy comes more naturally** — I believe genuine joy rests on a healthy foundation of **cellular energy**. Your mitochondria, the tiny structures inside nearly every cell that produce the energy your body uses, influence far more than physical stamina. They also affect your mental clarity, emotional resilience and your ability to engage fully with the people and activities that matter most.

Your brain accounts for roughly 2% of your body weight but consumes about 20% of its energy, which means even a modest decline in mitochondrial output shows up first as brain fog, flattened motivation and a shorter emotional fuse — exactly the states that make joy harder to access.

As your **mitochondrial function** improves, many people find it easier to feel connected to their authentic selves and the inner guidance that helps direct them toward what brings lasting fulfillment. Being intentional with your health by eating nutrient-dense whole foods, getting regular sunlight, walking every day and supporting your metabolism gives you more energy, focus and resilience to enjoy the **hobbies**, relationships and experiences that make life meaningful.

3. Choose colors that remind you of happy memories instead of following trends —

Your favorite color doesn't need to match current decorating styles. It only needs to mean something to you. Think about places, vacations, family traditions or hobbies that always leave you feeling happier. Those memories often point you toward colors that naturally lift your mood.

I recommend looking through old photographs if nothing immediately comes to mind. You might discover the same shades appearing repeatedly in your favorite memories. Let those colors become part of your everyday surroundings.

4. Keep a simple joy journal for one week — Lee recommended keeping a daily record of joyful moments, conducting a "joy audit" by reviewing which accomplishments created lasting happiness, redefining goals around enjoyment rather than status, and celebrating smaller milestones instead of postponing every reward until the finish line.

None of these require expensive equipment, extra education or dramatic lifestyle changes. They simply encourage you to pay closer attention to experiences that already improve your life. Over time, those observations make future decisions easier because you begin recognizing which people, places and activities consistently leave you feeling energized.

5. Measure your days by how they feel, not only by what you accomplish — Goals still matter, but they don't need to become the only way you evaluate your life. If every good feeling depends on reaching the next milestone, satisfaction always stays somewhere in the future.

Instead, ask yourself one simple question each evening: "Did I make time for something that brought me genuine joy today?" That small habit shifts your attention toward experiences you control instead of achievements that often take months or years to reach. Over time, those choices shape how your days feel, and your days ultimately shape your life.

FAQs About Color and Building Daily Joy

Q: Does adding more color to my surroundings really improve my mood?

A: Yes. Bright, intentional colors attract your brain's attention and make ordinary moments feel more engaging. You don't need to repaint your entire home. A colorful object that you use every day, such as a mug, notebook or umbrella, often has a greater effect because you see it repeatedly.

Q: How do I choose the best color for me?

A: Focus on colors that make you feel happy or remind you of meaningful memories rather than following decorating trends. A favorite vacation, hobby or family tradition often points you toward shades that naturally create positive emotions. The right color is the one that feels right to you.

Q: Why doesn't reaching a major goal always make me happy for long?

A: Many people expect lasting happiness after achieving a promotion, financial goal or other milestone. Instead, the excitement often fades quickly because lasting satisfaction comes from the experiences you have every day, not from occasional achievements alone.

Q: What is one simple habit that helps me build more joy?

A: Spend a few minutes each evening writing down one moment that made you smile. After a week or two, you'll begin to notice patterns that reveal which people, places and activities consistently leave you feeling energized and fulfilled.

Q: How does taking care of my health help me experience more joy?

A: Your body and brain rely on healthy cellular energy to support clear thinking, emotional resilience and enthusiasm for everyday life. Eating nutrient-dense whole foods, spending time in natural sunlight, moving your body regularly and building healthy daily routines give you more energy to enjoy the relationships, hobbies and experiences that matter most.

Sources and References

- ^{1, 2} [TIME June 30, 2026](#)
- ³ [The Aesthetics of Joy](#)
- ⁴ [The Aesthetics of Joy, Why Joy Should Be Your Primary Success Metric for Work and Life](#)
- ⁵ [Kearney April 27, 2022](#)