

Cultivating Happiness

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Good morning, Elder and Sister Christofferson, Elder Gong, Elder and Sister Gilbert, President and Sister Reese, Professor Dr. Karad, esteemed members of the board of trustees, distinguished guests, respected faculty, proud parents, and, above all, extraordinary graduates of Brigham Young University. It is an honor to stand before you today on this momentous occasion and witness the radiance in your faces. As I gaze upon you, I am filled with a sense of profound humility, recognizing the boundless potential for achievement, goodness, continued learning, creativity, and love that each of you embodies.

In a world in which the pursuit of happiness reigns supreme, let us pause to reflect on its essence. We are reminded by the Prophet Joseph Smith that “happiness is the object and design of our existence,”¹ yet many find themselves adrift in discontent. The recently released *World Happiness Report* by Gallup, Oxford, the UN, and others details a disturbing self-reported decline in happiness among Americans under thirty.² Various factors—including the pervasive influence of social media and comparison culture, feelings of isolation, economic pressures, and societal discord—contribute to this pervasive sense of dissatisfaction.³

Echoing the sentiments of Nephi regarding his people, who “lived after the manner of happiness” (2 Nephi 5:27), we recognize that while we may not control all circumstances, we do possess agency over our happiness. Permit me to share a few insights on cultivating happiness.

First, savoring and gratitude serve as powerful catalysts for happiness. Savoring involves relishing both the simple and profound moments of our lives, anchoring us in the present and fostering gratitude for the experiences we are privileged to have.⁴ Similarly, gratitude holds transformative power: it elevates mood, reduces stress, and fortifies our overall well-being.⁵ As articulated in the Doctrine and Covenants, “he who receiveth all things with thankfulness shall be made glorious” (Doctrine and Covenants 78:19). Countless blessings await those of us who cultivate a spirit of gratitude, particularly as we express gratitude for the support of loved ones on this promising day of graduation.

Moreover, service emerges as a profound source of happiness. As graduates of Brigham Young University, an institution that nurtures holistic growth encompassing spiritual and secular dimensions, you are uniquely equipped to engage in acts of service. By extending ourselves to uplift others, we transcend self-interest, thereby discovering

Hillary Nielsen, president of the BYU Alumni Association, delivered this commencement address on April 25, 2024.

fulfillment and purpose as we use our education to benefit the world. Research corroborates the profound impact of service on happiness,⁶ affirming the timeless wisdom encapsulated in the scripture “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:40). Indeed, in giving of ourselves, we receive the greatest blessings.

Furthermore, meaningful connections constitute a cornerstone of happiness.⁷ Cultivating deep relationships and engaging in genuine conversations, even if brief, can significantly enhance our well-being.⁸ Belonging to communities and organizations fosters a sense of belonging and contributes to overall happiness. In this spirit, as its president, it is my privilege and honor to confer upon you lifetime membership in the Brigham Young University Alumni Association, where our motto, “Connected for Good,” underscores our commitment to fostering connections that transcend graduation day. Our nearly 460,000 alumni connect with current and prospective students, alumni, and friends to have fun and serve within our communities. I encourage you to actively participate in any one of our 108 alumni chapters, Cougs Care tailgate projects, and various campus and community activities wherever our alumni reside. These opportunities allow our alumni to serve as ambassadors of goodwill.

I bear witness to the enduring truth that despite life’s challenges—of which I have experience—happiness is attainable and adherence to these principles profoundly enriches our lives. Congratulations, class of 2024! May the next chapter of your journey be adorned with abundant happiness. Thank you.

Notes

1. Joseph Smith, “Happiness,” *HC* 5:134.
2. See John F. Helliwell, Richard Layard, Jeffrey D. Sachs, Jan-Emmanuel De Neve, Lara B. Aknin, and Shun Wang, eds., *World Happiness Report* (Oxford, United Kingdom: University of Oxford Wellbeing Research Centre, 2024), 29, 40–42, worldhappiness.report/ed/2024.
3. See Carol Nickerson, Norbert Schwarz, Ed Diener, and Daniel Kahneman, “Zeroing in on the Dark Side of the American Dream: A Closer

Look at the Negative Consequences of the Goal for Financial Success,” *Psychological Science* 14, no. 6 (November 2003): 531–36; David G. Myers, *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2000); Thomas C. O’Guinn and L. J. Shrum, “The Role of Television in the Construction of Consumer Reality,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 23, no. 4 (March 1997): 278–94; Erin A. Vogel, Jason P. Rose, Lindsay R. Roberts, and Kathryn Eckles, “Social Comparison, Social Media, and Self-Esteem,” *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* 3, no. 4 (October 2014): 206–22; and Juliet B. Schor, *The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don’t Need* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1998).

4. See Paul E. Jose, Bee T. Lim, and Fred B. Bryant, “Does Savoring Increase Happiness? A Daily Diary Study,” *Journal of Positive Psychology* 7, no. 3 (May 2012): 176–87.

5. See Robert A. Emmons and Michael E. McCullough, “Counting Blessings Versus Burdens: An Experimental Investigation of Gratitude and Subjective Well-Being in Daily Life,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 84, no. 2 (February 2003): 377–89; Martin E. P. Seligman, Tracy A. Steen, Nansook Park, and Christopher Peterson, “Positive Psychology Progress: Empirical Validation of Interventions,” *American Psychologist* 60, no. 5 (July–August 2005): 410–21.

6. See Keiko Otake, Satoshi Shimai, Junko Tanaka-Matsumi, Kanako Otsui, and Barbara L. Fredrickson, “Happy People Become Happier Through Kindness: A Counting Kindnesses Intervention,” *Journal of Happiness Studies* 7, no. 3 (September 2006): 361–75; Sonja Lyubomirsky, Kennon M. Sheldon, and David Schkade, “Pursuing Happiness: The Architecture of Sustainable Change,” *Review of General Psychology* 9, no. 2 (June 2005): 111–31.

7. See David G. Myers, “The Funds, Friends, and Faith of Happy People,” *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (January 2000): 56–67; Ed Diener and Martin E. P. Seligman, “Very Happy People,” Research Report, *Psychological Science* 13, no. 1 (January 2002): 81–84.

8. See Andrew Osborn, “America’s Loneliness Epidemic,” *Daily Universe*, 1 March 2024.