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by Leo Cardez

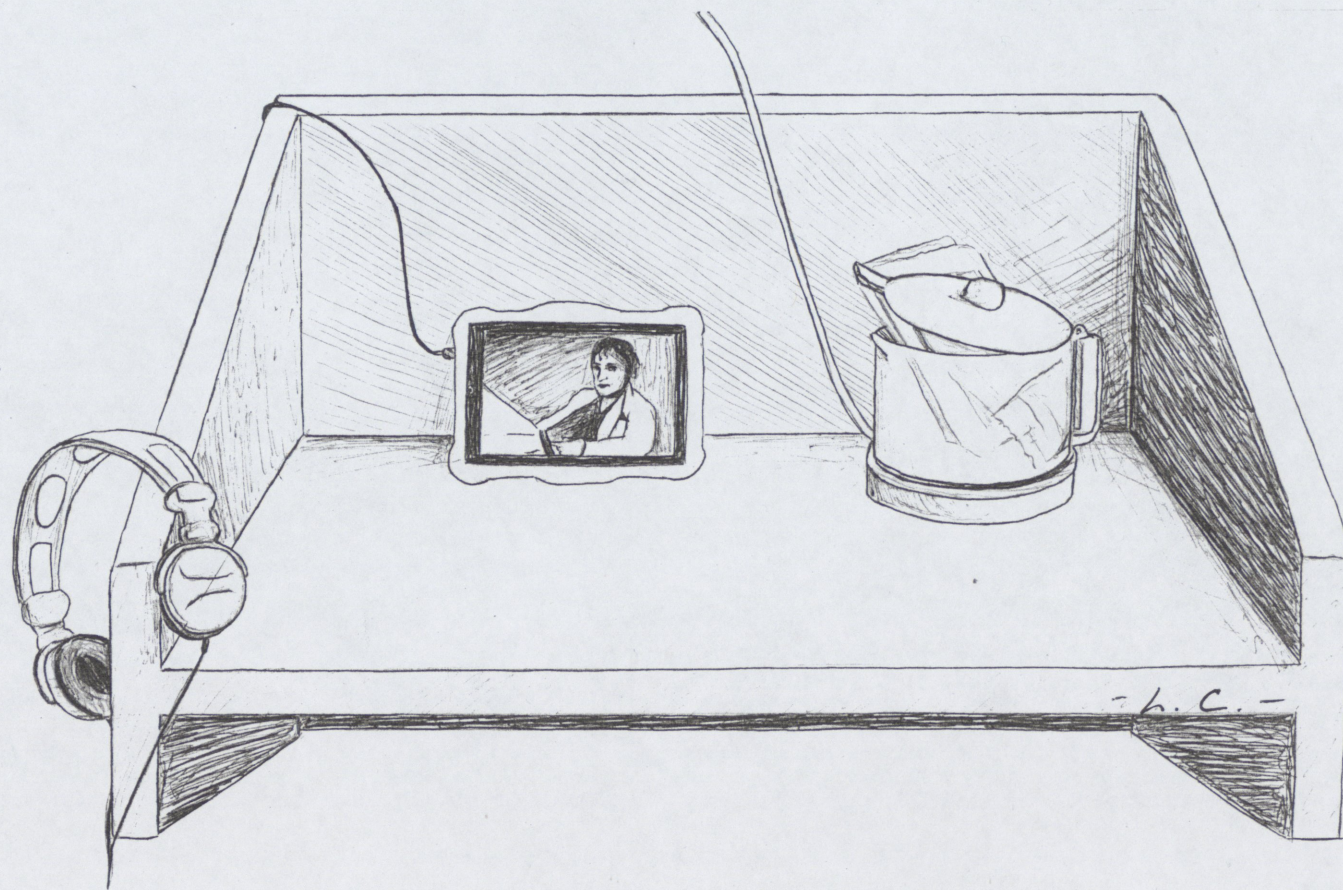
CONVICT CHRONICLES: Finding Happiness on the Inside

Approx. 500 words

Whenever I think about when I was happiest it's always when I was content with my life--even in prison. It's not so much about the adventures or parties, it's about the times when I was like, Yeah, I'm good. My needs are being met. Prison has taught me that. In here, we are forced to live in the present and we have to find joy and purpose otherwise we risk falling into a death spiral. It's not easy. We are separated from our loved ones and have very little control over any aspect of our lives. We learn quickly that life isn't about collecting stuff, it's about what fills us from the inside. We have so little that we're often ecstatic with even the smallest windfall: an extra yard, fruit at dinner, a good movie on TV. Or like when I am playing Scrabble with someone in the Dayroom, I am in a deeper level of happy (content) than I could be if I was out in the free world drinking with my friends. You know, it's crazy to think about, but some of my happiest moments have been in this place--away from my demons, addictions, and triggers, I've made deeper connections with my family and friends that I ever imagined possible; appreciating them in a whole new way. Even in an environment as violent and totalitarian as prison we can still find ways to find happiness, we can still think for ourselves, learn, grow, and thrive.

EDWICT CHRONICLES:

michael Jackson playing on my tablet



Happiness is a chemical reaction. You feel happy when you boost or elevate serotonin levels or produce dopamine and to a lesser degree when you release the "love hormone," oxytocin. You can hack your brain into releasing these hormones through various tricks and tips. Discover ten easy pleasure boosts.

1. **GIVE THANKS:** The simple act of recognizing what you have to be grateful for can re-wire your brain toward a more positive direction and improve overall life satisfaction. Try jotting down 5 things you're grateful for every morning. Mix them up and be creative.
2. **GO TO YARD:** Feeling connected to the outdoors (the sun, grass, sky) causes instant physiological changes, including lower blood pressure and a boost in serotonin. Take a moment to really feel the sun on your skin and breathe in the fresh air. Look around and try to focus on any greenery or nature available.
3. **JAM:** Upbeat music can produce up to a 9% increase in the reward neurotransmitter, dopamine. Bonus: listening to music while working out can help push you past your limits.
4. **TAKE A COLD SHOWER:** A cold water plunge can boost dopamine levels. You don't have to endure the whole shower; take a warm shower and end with a two minute ice cold rinse.
5. **PLAY A LITTLE TETRIS:** Studies show 30 minutes of video game play has up to a 50% decrease in depression, anger, and tension compared with nongamers. The concentration required to play can distract from stress while the positive feedback you receive may trigger the body's relaxation response. Caveat: Playing for over 30 minutes a day can start to have negative health benefits.
6. **TAKE A STROLL DOWN MEMORY LANE:** Go through any photos you may have of your family and friends. Recalling happier times can elevate serotonin by activating positive-memory centers in our brains.
7. **CALL YOUR MAMA:** Along the same lines as #1 & #6, calling your family to catch up and telling them how much you care and appreciate them will do you both good. If a call isn't possible, writing a letter works to a lesser degree.
8. **WALK TO CHOW:** Clear your mental state by taking a break to do something as simple as going for a walk to chow instead of making another burrito at your desk. The change of scenery along with the increased heart rate from movement will relax your body and ease your mind.
9. **DISCONNECT:** Turn off your TV, tablet, and radio at least an hour before going to sleep. Breathe deeply noticing your breathing and directing your attention to the present moment. Breathe in for a 4 second count, hold for a 4 second count, breathe out slowly for a 4 second count; repeat 10x. By focusing on breathing, you tap into the body's ability to self-regulate and heal. Also, it gives your body a chance to relax, recharge, refocus, and reenergize.
10. **BE GENEROUS:** Studies have found links between giving, volunteering, and happiness. Self-reporting studies claim those who give time or resources to the needy feel better about themselves and life in general. Try some kindness today; by helping others you may be helping yourself.