- Habit / Lifestyles

No, not sugary munchies – we're talking small moments of pleasure that can transform your mood, says Clover Stroud. So, save that biscuit for later and pick up one of these 'snacks' instead.

THE ART OF JOY SNACKING



Lately, my mornings have taken on a different rhythm. I notice the flashes of colour in my neighbour's garden as I walk by –cyclamen and camellia swaying in the breeze – and find myself smiling without thinking. By the time I get home, I'm already looking forward to the first coffee of the day, the quiet moment before the screen lights up and work begins. Mid-morning, I pause to call a friend – just a quick hello and a shared laugh. And later, I might simmer a favourite soup or a fragrant lentil dahl, filling the kitchen with warmth and anticipation. These tiny moments feel like little gifts. They don't take much time or effort, but they lift my mood in a lasting way.

These small moments of pleasure have become an intentional part of how I move through the day. As American writer Annie Dillard once said: "How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives." That sentiment stays with me. We're often reminded not to sweat the small stuff, but what if true contentment lies in treasuring the small stuff instead?

It wasn't long ago that the idea of improving your life meant making dramatic changes: new year, new job, new body, new identity. But, over time, I've come to believe that real transformation is gentler – and often quieter. It happens in the unremarkable, beautiful ordinariness of daily life.

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BUY SOME POTTED BULBS

Choose your favourite flowers – just repot them into a pretty bowl. This joy snack is more powerful than it seems. "Soil contains millions of microorganisms, which, when we inhale, activate neurons in our brain to release serotonin, which is a key hormone to stabilise mood. This boost is thought to make us feel better by acting in a similar way to antidepressants," says gardener and horticultural designer Lara Cowan. "Soil can behave like pharmaceuticals, so the process of getting your hands dirty by repotting the bulbs in a mix of garden soil, compost and grit, and bringing them on to the kitchen table, tucked in with a bit of moss, is a true natural medicine." Lara takes this particular joy snack a stage further, adding a layer of hope, too. "The hope the bulbs promise is a mood lifter, and looking a little to the future shifts our perspective," she says. "Of course, the cherry on top – the scent and colour of the blooms – are gifts of sensory soft focus that bring us down to earth and calm the nervous system, lowering cortisol levels."

This idea has a name: joy snacking. Coined by neuroscientist and award-winning science writer Dr Richard Sima, it describes the habit of noticing and indulging in small bursts of joy throughout the day. And it's not just a feel-good concept – research supports it. A recent study in *Nature Human Behaviour* found that these brief, positive moments contribute significantly to our overall wellbeing and happiness.

In fact, the benefits go beyond mood. Joy snacking has been linked to improved health, including a lower risk of heart issues and longer life expectancy, thanks to the release of serotonin, oxytocin and dopamine – those powerful 'happy hormones' that enhance feelings of contentment, connection and awe.

"Many of us believe joy lies in things such as holidays, promotions or a new home," says joy coach and positive psychology practitioner Sophie Cliff, author of *Choose Joy*. "But research shows we adapt quickly to big changes. The real key to happiness is noticing and savouring the little moments that spark joy."

The beauty of joy snacking is that it's accessible to everyone. It costs nothing, can brighten someone else's day as well as your own, and can be done anytime, anywhere – even at work. Starting at the top of this page, I share some of my favourite joy snacks. What will be yours? ►

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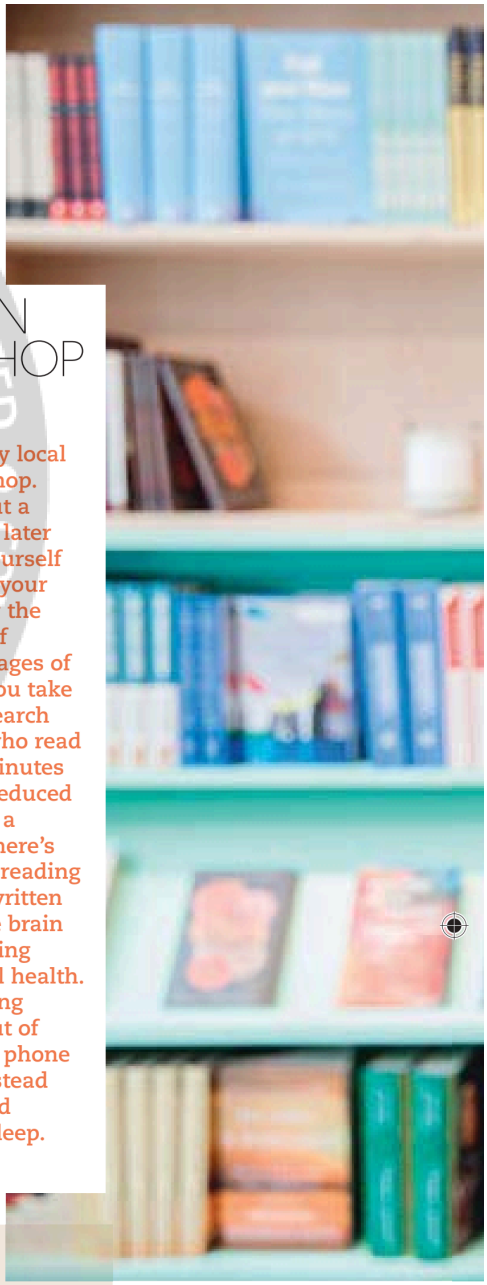
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Reap the benefits of hellos and goodbyes

In the busyness of life, rituals around separations from our partners can get lost, yet the moment we say hello or goodbye to someone is a wonderful moment to reconnect, sparking joy in our hearts (literally!) and our bodies. "Research shows that hugging or having a short moment of warm physical contact with your partner lowers blood pressure and increases oxytocin," says Joanna Harrison, couple therapist and author of *Five Arguments All Couples (Need To) Have: And Why The Washing-Up Matters*. "So, when someone you love walks in (or out) the door, make the most of it!"

BROWSE IN A BOOKSHOP

One of my favourite uplifting treats is to spend an hour in my local independent bookshop. Take time to pick out a favourite read then, later that evening, run yourself a deep bath, switch your phone off and enjoy the sensory pleasures of cracking open the pages of your new book as you take a long soak. UK research found that people who read for as little as six minutes a day experienced reduced muscle tension and a slower heart rate. There's also a link between reading and longevity; the written word challenges the brain to be active, promoting mental and physical health. It goes without saying that once you get out of the bath, leave your phone switched off and instead snuggle into bed and enjoy a scroll-free sleep.



PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES; ISTOCK

TAKE 10 MINUTES TO TALK

When was the last time you called a friend or loved one simply to let them know you're thinking of them? We often fire off a text, but making an actual call holds its own magic. Drop that resistance and you'll find hearing the voice of someone you love is an easy way to create a real, rather than virtual, human connection (not forgetting that studies suggest the happiest people are those with the strongest relationships). "What we're seeking is connection, but in our tech-heavy lives, we're more disconnected than ever," says self-development coach Wendy O'Beirne.

"But communication with people you care for can help your nervous system shift, so that life feels more abundant and joyful." Next time you're thinking of texting a friend, turn it into a joy snack by picking up the phone and actually telling that person you care for them.



GO FOR AN 'AWE WALK'

It could be around your local park, through a favourite bush track or along a street you love. But whatever the location, rather than rushing along worrying about a work deadline or what you'll cook for dinner, take time to consciously pay attention to anything that creates a feeling of awe or amazement. "Nature is full of wonder, and you see it the moment sunlight breaks behind clouds or birds fly overhead in magical unison," says Lara. "This triggers a dopamine release, so that every little walk is an opportunity to spark awe and help our nervous system top up the positive, life-enhancing hormonal influences that we all need."

WRITE ONE SENTENCE RECORDING YOUR JOY

Acknowledging pleasure is an important part of really feeling it, rather than letting it rush away as you move on to the next challenge. So much of our lives can feel superficial or rushed, so taking time to write down a detail from the day that's been pleasurable can increase your capacity to experience joy. You don't need to set yourself a challenging journalling habit – instead, taking time to write down one sentence about something you've enjoyed will mean you'll gradually build a record of all the joy snacks that have really changed your life. P

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