What's Your Passion?

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by Amy Spencer

One evening, my husband, Gus, came home, saw me sitting in the dark, and said, "What's with the lights?" You see, that afternoon, I'd started editing the videos I'd taken over a weekend at the beach into a short movie I could upload for family and friends. And I’d gotten so engrossed in the project, I didn’t notice the sun had set and the only light in the house was the glow of the computer screen.

I don't get paid for editing my little films, and, truthfully, I wouldn’t want to be. This is what I do for fun. I become so consumed by my movie-making, my mind doesn’t wander for even a second, and I feel joy the whole way through. By the time I press “play” (and, yeah, I watch my movie about five times in a row right then and there), I feel satisfied and can't wait to share what I made with my friends.

That I get deep and lasting satisfaction from my simple passion would not surprise the experts who make a living out of studying what helps us thrive. “Having a passion is one of the things that makes life worth living,” says Christopher Peterson, PhD, professor of psychology at the University of Michigan and author of A Primer in Positive Psychology. “Because it's invigorating and highly engaging, it's satisfying.”

Make no mistake: Losing yourself in a passion is not an indulgence. It's a fundamental part of achieving a kind of happiness known as eudaimonia, which is "the fulfillment of our potential," explains Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, PhD, professor of psychology at Claremont Graduate University in California. You achieve eudaimonia not through passive thrills like watching marathon reruns of House Hunters International, but through gratifying activities that challenge you and stick with you, from cooking a great marinara sauce to playing tennis.

Find Your 'Flow'

One of the clearest signs you've stumbled upon a passion is that you experience what's called "flow." "Flow is the feeling of total engagement in the activity so that you don't notice anything outside of what you're doing; you forget time and you forget yourself," explains Csikszentmihalyi, who famously coined this term. Flow has the power to decrease stress, increase happiness, and improve your overall mental health. This is because, Csikszent- mihalyi explains, "as you concentrate, you clear from your consciousness things that bother you. These things disappear because your mind can focus only on a few bits of information at any given time. So after 10 minutes of experiencing flow, you are refreshed."
Take A Look Back
If you can't come up with anything you can lose yourself in right now, think back to your younger days. Maybe your childhood love of horses will point you toward a riding stable, or a trip to France after college will rekindle your interest in travel—or spur you to take cooking classes. Case in point: Bonnie Russell of Del Mar, California, loved water-skiing as a teen. So when someone she knew mentioned being on a sailboat, Bonnie flashed back to her years of fun on the water and decided to try sailing for kicks. "As soon as I stepped on board, I felt right at home," Russell says. "I now sail every chance I get. I lose track of time and there's always something to learn, which I find energizing."

Think Small And Specific
Remember, finding that special something is about giving yourself "a little island of free time, not going and starting your own bakery," says life coach Martha Beck, PhD, author of Finding Your Way in a Wild New World. So if you have a big item on your bucket list, like climbing Mt. Everest, focus on the little elements (hiking or rock climbing) that make up the larger joy. The smaller the component, the more doable it is, and the sooner you can dive in. "My dream home will have a greenhouse," says Crystal Brown-Tatum, from Blanchard, Louisiana. But when Brown-Tatum first became a homeowner, she decided to start small: "I dedicated an area in my backyard to a garden full of vegetables and roses. When I wake up, taking care of my garden is the second thing I do after coffee, replacing logging on to Facebook!"

It's OK if you don't have a big all-consuming dream to lead the way. Simply looking at everyday things that give you satisfaction will help clue you in to your passions. "At the end of each day, write down the three things that made you feel really good and the three things you hated doing," Csikszentmihalyi suggests. "Do that for one week, and then go back and read your list." Cut what is dragging down your days and devote more energy to one or two things that emerged on top of your list. "Otherwise," he says, "your life will be full of habits that have emerged by chance or necessity, not because you wanted them." Life coach Cheryl Richardson says it comes down to giving ourselves permission to do what most excites us. "We have to claim what makes us feel deeply," she says, because "when we feel emotionally connected, our life gets better."