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Magazine



Christiane Northrup, M.D.,
Shares the Secret to
Vibrant Health: Joy!

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Listening in With ...



CHRISTIANE NORTHRUP

Rx for Joy

Christiane Northrup, M.D., a board-certified obstetrician/gynecologist, is a visionary and pioneer in the field of women's health, wellness, and empowerment. Her best-selling books *Women's Bodies*, *Women's Wisdom* (1994) and *The Wisdom of Menopause* (2001) broke new ground in teaching women how to tap into their own inner wisdom. Dr. Northrup's most recent work, including *The Secret Pleasures of Menopause* (2008), touts joy as the linchpin of vibrant health. Below, *Unity Magazine* editor **Katy Koontz** talks to Dr. Northrup about why we need joy in our lives—and how to get more of it.

Katy Koontz: You emphasize joy as a necessity, not merely a frivolous state that's fun to tap into when you can. Why is joy vital?

Christiane Northrup: First, I want to discuss why joy is so problematic for people, because if you don't acknowledge that resistance, it will hijack your joy every time. We live in a culture that has real difficulty with the concept of pleasure and joy. That mindset lives in the myths of Western culture, as far back as the idea that Eve's tempting Adam was what banished all of us from the Garden of Eden. The message we grow up with is, "Don't get too happy, because if you allow yourself to really feel that, you're going to suffer." We're taught that there's a ceiling on joy. If you get too close to the limit, something bad will happen—you'll get sick, have an accident, or suffer some other disaster. Because of that, parents actually think they are protecting their children from how tough life is by asking them to lower their expectations. But the truth is that sustainable joy is absolutely essential for health.

KK: How does joy keep us healthy?

CN: Our hormone balance, eyesight, hearing, flexibility, and bone density are all optimal in conditions of joy and pleasure. Joy also lowers blood pressure, enhances immunity, and helps protect us from heart disease and dementia. When you're experiencing pleasure, your blood vessels release a gas called nitric oxide (which is not the same as nitrous oxide, or laughing gas). Nitric oxide increases your circulation and boosts the production of many neurotransmitters that help your body work and feel better, including beta-endorphin (the euphoria hormone) and prolactin (the bonding hormone).

And when people can't access joy directly, they will use substances or processes to feel better in the short term—overeating, alcohol, and all that. Every single system in the body is awash in either the chemicals of joy or the chemicals of sadness, resentment,

and depression. Resentment is an absolute risk factor for cancer, heart disease, and the chronic degenerative disease so common now, such as arthritis. Joy is the prescription that prevents all of that.

KK: Just for the record, you're not talking about joy as unhealthy indulgence.

CN: When I speak of desire and pleasure, I'm not recommending that you do things that will embarrass you the next day or give up your family and your job to go live on some desert island. Avoiding responsibility and being physically, emotionally, or even financially reckless actually undermines sustainable joy.

KK: How do you personally bring joy into your life?

CN: That would be dancing Argentine tango with a really masterful leader where I can totally be myself and then give my pleasure back to my partner as the two of us dance as one to beautiful, soul-stirring music. Research shows Argentine tango helps with Parkinson's, mental illness, and other health challenges. But it's hard to learn—it takes three years before you can really land it and it feels comfortable. There's an enormous vulnerability and willingness in the very act of learning anything new, and that's all part of the benefit.

I believe it's the same with our relationship with God, by the way. Making a genuine connection requires vulnerability and willingness—and joy naturally springs from that. Our culture says, "Never let them see you sweat." But you will never learn anything new unless you are willing to look like a fool.

KK: So there's an element of letting go in joy then, isn't there?

CN: Absolutely. Think about little kids—they lose it regularly, right? And they're the most joyful creatures on the planet! Orgasm, of course, is a supreme letting go. No one ever reached an orgasm with their intellect.

KK: Is worthiness a hurdle for many people?

CN: To have any modicum of joy, you have to believe you deserve it. So many women in particular don't feel worthy—they're working their tails

off to feel worthy, and they end up suffering from adrenal exhaustion. The other thing that stops us dead in our tracks is the notion that feeling pleasure is selfish, when in truth, feeling joy is altruistic. This comes from an erroneous notion we have in Western culture called the Zero Sum

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Model, which says that there's only so much to go around. If I am happy and feeling pleasure, then there's less for you. You would be amazed at how many people feel this way.

KK: Probably without even being aware of it.

CN: Right. We've all heard of poverty consciousness; what I'm talking about here is *misery* consciousness. We believe that our sadness, our grief, and our pain buys us something—the key to the kingdom of heaven. If suffering is necessary to buy us the

key to heaven, then happiness and pleasure must send us straight to hell—so on some level, we can't trust them. Meanwhile, our bodies are desperate for joy.

KK: And isn't it true that joy is infectious—in other words, the more joy *you* feel, the easier it is for *me* to feel joy, as well, right?

CN: Yes, joy is *so* infectious, and the more pleasure you feel, the more attractive you become to your good. And the more generous you become, as well. At end of the day, what is the biggest kick on earth for most of us? Assisting someone in becoming the best that they can be. Nothing is more fun than watching someone bloom and grow. We are meant to be midwives to each other. We want to be of service, but the truth is that we shouldn't have to feel miserable to be of service to someone else.

Here's a good example of that. In my early days of learning tango, I put a tango floor in my home. And one year when September 11 was rolling around, I held a dance on that night as a way to honor those who died. It was the most potent memorial I could think of because nothing to me is more life-affirming than people dancing in close embrace to beautiful music. One guy came in late and danced with me, and at the end of the dance, he said, "Thank you so much for doing this." Then I found out that his brother died in the September 11 attacks. So this ability to come and dance and be held and celebrate life pleasurable in a physical body was very healing and it helped him enormously.

KK: So once we are convinced of the power of joy, how do we cultivate more of it in our lives—especially if we're not used to that?

CN: Energy follows thought and awareness. So if you see someone having a wonderful time, then bring that wonderful time into your own body. From this moment on, decide, *I am going to focus on what is joyful about this day.* And then ask yourself, *What's joyful, right here and now?* Then you begin to attract more and more joy into your life. I love Gay Hendricks's ultimate success mantra from his book, *The Big Leap*: "I expand in abundance, success, and love every day as I inspire others to do the same." You can say, "Every day I expand in love, success, and joy," or whatever words you want to use. Notice he's not saying helping others, he's saying inspiring others. You don't need to do anything to spread joy; you can inspire others to be joyful simply by being joyful yourself.

KK: We're talking about attracting more and expanding, but I remember in *The Secret Pleasures of Menopause*, you also spoke of the importance of pruning.

CN: Right, I made the point in that book that a big part of the midlife transition for women is letting go of whatever we've outgrown that no longer serves us. This includes the roles and relationships that hold us back and take more energy than they give in return, even if we've had them for a long time. Whatever doesn't feed our souls and doesn't make us feel vibrantly alive needs to fall by the wayside. We can't afford to make room for such things in our lives anymore because everything we think, say, and do either keeps us actively engaged in living passionately and joyfully, or it

brings on degeneration, increasing our chances of poor health and disease. Which choice would *you* rather make?

KK: When you put it that way, it's pretty hard to ignore.

CN: I hope so! I'm not against working hard, by the way. But there has to be balance—too much of anything isn't good for you. When we push ourselves too far and get stressed out over all the things we think we *have* to do—rather than really listening to what our hearts are *longing* to do—then we're cutting ourselves off from our guidance and doing ourselves a major disservice.

KK: Do you see joy as holy?

CN: Your desires are how God comes through you—they are the leading edge of creation.

KK: So joy is our connection to the divine?

CN: That's exactly it. Joy is our connection to the divine. When we lift up our vibration in joy, then the entire universe is lifted up along with us. I believe that's actually our job, to come here in the densest place in the universe, Earth, and lift it up by raising our own vibration while we are still in a body.

KK: Sounds as though we can see joy as a key for realizing our own divinity.

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CN: Yes. Frankly, the Unity message and the work of Catherine Ponder have been a "go to" message for me for pretty much my whole life. Catherine Ponder once wrote, "If people only knew the healing power of laughter and joy, many of our fine doctors would be out of business. Joy is one of nature's greatest medicines."

KK: Some of us have spent decades in the dark about the power of joy. Is it ever too late to change?

CN: No, because we're immortal creatures anyway. My feeling always is do it now. It's never, ever too late—not even on our deathbeds. One of the biggest impediments to joy is this idea that, "Oh, now that I'm of retirement age, it's too late for me to [fill in the blank]," or "Now that I'm 50, no men will ever want me because they all want women 20 years younger." These thoughts are simply beliefs that inform our biology, but none of them need to be true. We stay healthy

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and joyful to the degree that we stay in touch with the life force that is coming through us all the time. So many cultural norms encourage us to pinch that off, and one is the term “senior citizens.” Neuropsychologist Mario Martinez says don’t ever ask for the senior citizens’ discount, because then people will treat you as a senior citizen. I can guarantee you that will simply add to your psychiatric and medical bills!

KK: Changing that mindset can take work, even though it sounds like it’s certainly worth the effort.

CN: It really is. And let me be clear, living joyfully is not a path for the faint of heart, because misery loves company. If you have miserable people in your life, you need to

protect yourself from their influence. They will try to drag you down to their level because your joy and your ecstatic emotions can be very uncomfortable—and threatening—to someone who is not there. It’s a vibrational difference, actually. But here’s the good news: You can create a joyful and supportive subculture of your own that may or may not contain members of your blood family.

KK: So cultivating joy takes discipline?

CN: Joy takes discipline. It’s not for sissies. I’ll tell you what’s easy—complaining and being part of the everyday misery. That’s a slam dunk! Some of that is biologic because for most of human history,

we have spent the majority of our time just surviving. Starvation was a real threat. Now we’ve been highly successful. Obesity is a huge problem these days, not starvation. So the old “fight or flight” nervous system responses are not serving us anymore. Instead, we are learning that cooperation is the most important function of humanity now, and I think we’re shifting as a species. We are moving away from the “kill or be killed” mentality into a time of being motivated by cocreation and cooperation. Joy, cooperation, and community will be the new values.

KK: That sounds wonderful—sign me up!

CN: You got it! 🌍

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