

MOM life by design

Living Your Life's Dream

BY HEIDI SMITH LUEDTKE

➤ RESOURCES

Creating a life you love requires inspiration, introspection, and action. These resources will help with all three.

Be inspired by Randy Pausch's last lecture, "Really achieving your childhood dreams." www.cmu.edu/uls/journeys/randy-pausch/index.html or "The Last Lecture" (Jeffrey Zaslow and Randy Pausch, 2008)

Read memoirs of gritty high-achievers. Mary Kay Ash ("Mary Kay"; 1981), Lance Armstrong ("It's Not about the Bike;" 2000), and Abigail Thomas ("A Three Dog Life"; 2006) are inspirational.

Uncover your values, priorities, and traits using psychological tests. Curious? "Discover the Missing Ingredient to a Fulfilling Life" (Todd Kashdan, 2009) www.authentic happiness.com

Create life lists aided by exercises for reflection and refinement. "Creating Your Best Life: The Ultimate Life List Guide" (Caroline Adams Miller and Michael B. Frisch, 2009)

Author and share a bucket list online. www.superviva.com

Engineer and track your personal development with these cool tools. www.happinessprojecttoolbox.com



The fundamental truth of parenting is

that kids grow up fast. And so do parents. Days spent feeding babies and changing diapers give way to carpool and homework in the blink of an eye. Before you know it, you're mailing college care packages.

Time may pass slowly on any given day. It is the weeks, months, and years that whiz by.

The New Year offers a blank page in your book of time, brimming with all the promise and opportunity of what is yet to be. Now is the time to take stock,

re-energize, and forge ahead boldly. Your dream life is waiting for you to create it.

What's Stopping You?

How long has it been since you thought about what you really want in life, about what brings you joy, challenge, and satisfaction? "Parenting is all-consuming," says Todd Kashdan, PhD, Associate Professor of Psychology at George Mason University and author of *Curious? Discover the Missing Ingredient of a Fulfilling Life* (2009, Morrow). "We sometimes forget our own interests and focus exclusively on kids' needs and wants."

Mothers especially may struggle to find time for their own development. Studies show women have

MOM life by design

Living Your Life's Dream continued

only 41 minutes a day to pursue goals that matter, says Caroline Adams Miller, MAPP, a Bethesda, Maryland, life coach and author of *Creating Your Best Life: The Ultimate Life List Guide* (2009, Sterling). It's no wonder men surpass women in happiness by their late 40s. But it doesn't have to be that way.

One way to identify areas for growth is to envision your best possible self in great detail, suggests Miller. Imagine you are looking back on your life in your old age and everything has gone as well as possible. Where have you been? What have you done? What makes you proud? Indulge in "sky-is-the-limit" thinking and put pen to paper. Let your dreams come to life on the page.

The most fulfilling experiences are those that align with your deeply held personal values, says Kashdan. If you feel out of touch with what matters most or can't prioritize among many good things, don't bumble ahead without clarifying what you want. Identify your top values and priorities through some serious soul-searching or using psychological tests (see Resources). When you know what you care most about, it is easier to make

choices about how to spend your most valuable currency: time and energy.

Perhaps you know what you want but haven't made it happen...yet. Fear may have prevented you from setting bold goals and moving toward them in the past. Or maybe you put your dreams on hold until the kids are bigger. Delaying your dreams is a kind of denial. It keeps you from taking scary risks, but it may lead to regrets, cautions Miller. Studies show people are more likely to regret the things they did not do than to regret risks that didn't work out. Let yourself be drawn in by the energy of possibility. The biggest risks often bring the biggest rewards.

Making Dreams a Reality

Resolutions, goals, and personal mission statements can help you achieve your dreams. And you should express your intentions in writing, says Miller. Putting dreams in writing makes them real and pre-commits you to a course of action. That makes you accountable to yourself, so you will be less likely to forget your goals or push them aside when obstacles arise. Whether you choose to author a bucket list of "100 things you want to do before you die" or to commit to only a few truly audacious goals is up to you.

The best goals are challenging and specific, counsels Miller. A weak goal might be to "be more sociable." A stronger goal would be to "make twelve new friends in the next six months." Don't be tempted to set vague or easy goals. Achieving mediocre goals will only make you feel mediocre, says Miller.

Setting and attaining challenging goals builds self-efficacy – the belief that you have what it takes to accomplish your dreams. People with strong self-efficacy beliefs are more likely to take action and to be persistent when they encounter setbacks. They have learned from experience that hard work pays off. When challenges arise, they redouble their efforts or find alternate paths to their goals. They possess unwavering optimism and gritty determination. Think of these qualities (optimism, self-efficacy, and determination) as your mental

and emotional muscles – the more you exercise them, the stronger they become.

Seemingly impossible goals are achievable if you break them down into smaller sub-goals and then do something to achieve them. Identify specific actions you can take to move you closer to your goals. Schedule actions on the calendar so they don't take a back seat to everyday errands. As much as possible, do something every day to move closer to your goals. Keep a journal, spreadsheet, or star chart to track your progress. High achievers monitor their growth and change their approach if they aren't seeing results, says Miller.

Your Dream Life Starts Now

Don't wait until you achieve your dreams to start living fully. With the right attitude, you can fast-track feelings of fulfillment. Notice what is going right in your life and be grateful. Write a list of your blessings, express your appreciation out loud or send thank-you cards and letters. A grateful attitude boosts your mood and sets a positive tone for growth, says Miller. Practice grateful habits daily.

Be open to exploration, too. When you choose to approach life with a curious attitude, you are energized, attentive, and engaged, says Kashdan. If you are stuck in a rut, take a cue from your kids. Seek out new things. When you hear a song you love, download it. Listen to it over and over if you want. Put some new items in your grocery cart this week, even if you are unsure how you'll cook them. Go online to find recipes. Collect items that inspire you. Keep them in a special, secret place. The well-lived life is built from a series of well-lived moments, says Kashdan.

As you focus on living well, you may become impatient with distractions and impediments. You have to stop spending time with people who are energy vampires, Kashdan says. Emotions are contagious. Surround yourself with people who give you energy and self-confidence.

This year, set impossible goals. Take concrete action steps toward their fulfillment. Be afraid – on a regular basis, Miller encourages. Your dream life is right there, just beyond your comfort zone.

Heidi Smith Luedtke is a psychologist turned freelance writer whose blog about parenting as a leadership experience can be found at www.leadingmama.com

