

UNITED WISDOM

Why an Important Event May Not Bring the Joy You Expected

The Person and the Inner World

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

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@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

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Epigraph

“The end of action.”

Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, I.7, 1097b; a short fragment of his formulation about happiness, in W. D. Ross's English translation. This defines an end; it does not promise a pleasant state after success. The Russian edition uses an editorial translation of this fragment.

What this article is about

Imagine this hypothetical scene: the promotion email has finally arrived. You read the sentence several times, tell someone close to you, and accept congratulations. By evening, there is little joy. There is fatigue, awkwardness, and a new list of responsibilities. On the outside, exactly what you wanted has happened; on the inside, the feeling for which you seemed to be doing it has not switched on. An uncomfortable question arises: if even this does not make me happy, what is worth wanting at all?

An important event and an expected feeling belong to different levels of experience. The outcome may be good, your forecast about experiencing it inaccurate, and the circumstances of achieving it difficult. Sometimes one goal conceals several promises: security, recognition, closeness, freedom from shame. This article helps distinguish those promises without devaluing the achievement or demanding a celebratory response. It is not a gratitude test or a diagnosis based on one evening. It asks a more precise question: what has changed in your life, what remains the same, and what feeling did you actually expect to receive along with the outcome?

I. An event is not obliged to match your experience

A graduation certificate and a sense of completion are different things. The certificate confirms an outcome that can be named, shown, and checked. The feeling is shaped by how you arrived at that day, what was happening around you, and what mattered to you personally. You can finish difficult work without yet feeling that it is finished. You can enjoy a small conversation more than an award. This does not mean that outcomes are useless or feelings deceptive. These two ways of describing experience simply do not replace one another.

In a hypothetical example, someone has spent years seeking professional recognition. On obtaining a new position, they discover that their fear of seeming inadequate remains. The position has changed their place in the organization; it has not signed a separate agreement declaring that doubt is now forbidden. Just such an agreement may have quietly accompanied the original goal. The mistake begins when the absence of the promised feeling becomes proof of personal ingratitude. Instead of examining a hidden expectation, the person gains another reason to criticize themselves. Success must now be both success and protection against accusations of responding to it incorrectly.

It helps to let two statements coexist: “This is an important outcome” and “Right now, I do not feel the joy I expected.” They are not logically contradictory. A contradiction appears only after adding a rule: every important outcome must immediately feel like happiness. That rule can be examined. Who formulated it? Does it always work in your life? What counts as joy: elation, relief, calm, a wish to celebrate? Clarifying the word already changes the question. Perhaps you are waiting for a loud feeling while the available experience is still quiet. Perhaps even that is absent. Both possibilities call for attention, not immediate justification.

Someone for whom the event primarily changes the conditions of survival deserves particular attention. Obtaining housing, a stable income, or a safe place can have great value whether or not a celebration follows. It would be cruel here to say that everything depends on attitude. Conditions really do differ, and some changes are necessary without beautiful emotional confirmation. You can call them good, notice the absence of joy, and still protect what you have achieved. This does not take away your right to want more. It simply does not give a feeling sole authority to decide whether the security you have gained is real enough, or require someone to prove gratitude for basic living conditions.

II. We imagine our future life as one large frame

When someone imagines a desired outcome, the outcome itself usually occupies the center. Here are the apartment keys, here is the discussion about a raise, here is the end of the exams. Ordinary matters remain outside the frame: sleep, travel, relationships, health, bills, weather, caring for loved ones. In the future, those matters will take up space again. The significant event will enter life rather than replace it entirely. The picture of “everything will be different after this” may therefore be accurate in one detail and exaggerated in everything else.

Timothy Wilson and Daniel Gilbert's 2005 review describes errors in forecasting future feelings, including overestimating the intensity and duration of a reaction. One proposed cause is excessive attention to a single event while underestimating other future circumstances. This is a general research distinction; it does not automatically explain your particular response or prove that important events always have little influence. The publisher's abstract was read for this article, so individual experiments and their numerical results are not recounted here.

Let us examine the frame through a hypothetical move. Someone imagines a spacious room and freedom from their old routine. But the new life also involves finding a shop, an unfamiliar commute, organizing work, and having no familiar people nearby. Disappointment may concern this combination even though they say, “The move was a mistake.” To distinguish the outcome from its surroundings, it is more useful to ask which expectation was fulfilled. Is there more space? More freedom? Less closeness? A composite picture emerges instead of a single verdict. It allows particular conditions to be adjusted without requiring immediate rejection of the entire intention.

It also matters to compare similar spans of time. An imagined future day often consists of its best ten minutes, while the real one includes the whole day. The way the comparison is made then creates a gap. You can try imagining an ordinary Tuesday a month after the award rather than the ceremony itself: what do you do in the morning, whom do you talk to, what work remains in the evening? This is an editorial thought experiment, not a scientifically verified method of guaranteeing accurate forecasts. Its usefulness is limited: it makes an expectation more detailed. Detail sometimes reveals matters worth discussing before the event, but does not make the future completely predictable or remove the risk of a mistaken choice.

III. Different promises may stand behind a single achievement

A goal often has both an official and a personal formulation. Officially: finish the project. Personally: prove that I deserve a place among these people. Officially: save a particular amount. Personally: never fear the future again. Officially: start a family. Personally: stop feeling lonely. The personal formulation is not necessarily absurd. But it cannot be regarded as automatically fulfilled along with the external one. Money provides certain opportunities, family status describes relationships, and a finished project confirms work. None of them, by itself, establishes the entire internal effect.

Another hypothetical scene is possible. You buy something you have thought about for a long time and really enjoy its quality. At the same time, the feeling that nobody notices your life persists. The purchase was not entirely meaningless: it addressed comfort or beauty. But it was given an additional role—providing evidence of your worth. That role may exceed the object's capabilities. It then helps to distinguish satisfying a particular desire from expecting broader recognition. The distinction does not require contempt for possessions. It restores each means to its actual scale and lets a different means be sought for a different task.

A hidden promise can be found by completing the sentence: “When this happens, I will finally be able to...” Rest peacefully? Stop explaining myself to relatives? Regard myself as capable? Feel loved? The answer is not a final explanation of your personality. It is a working description of one stake you may have placed on the event. It is worth comparing with what the outcome can actually change. Sometimes there is a precise match; sometimes a gap. The question then

becomes practical: is another step needed, a revision of the expectation, or simply time to grow into a new position? None of these possibilities has to declare the original effort a mistake.

IV. The cost of achievement enters the moment of receiving it

The finish may arrive before recovery. If recent weeks involved difficult work, conflict, or insufficient rest, the day of the outcome still belongs to that history. In a hypothetical scene, someone passes an important exam after intensive preparation. They expected to meet friends happily but want only silence. This does not prove that their education was someone else's project. Perhaps the evening's immediate task is to stop meeting demands. “Perhaps” matters here: an explanation must be checked against circumstances rather than assigning every sense of emptiness the same convenient cause.

There is also a cost nobody included in advance. Promotion can bring new responsibility; moving can mean losing familiar support; successfully finishing something can end contact with the team. Expected joy then meets actual losses. Someone can value a new stage and regret the old one. Satisfaction and sadness need not displace each other. If a celebration permits only one emotion, all the others become problems. But an outcome often rearranges several parts of life, and experience is entitled to reflect that complexity without an obligatory positive overall score.

Calculating the cost does not mean declaring every goal too expensive. It helps distinguish the outcome from the way you reached it. If what you wanted was purchased through constantly disrupted sleep, that is a reason to investigate working conditions in the next stage, not necessarily to abandon the profession. If recognition was achieved by humiliating others, responsibility and repairing relationships also matter. A pleasant feeling cannot retrospectively make every means acceptable. Conversely, its absence does not cancel a worthy effort. Assessing the outcome, the means, and the experience remains a three-part task.

V. Celebration can turn into a performance

Sometimes what interferes with joy is not the event but the demand to display the correct reaction. People look at you, expect a smile, take photographs, and remind you how much was done for this day. “You must be happy” turns internal experience into a public examination. Someone begins monitoring their facial expression instead of noticing what is happening. In a hypothetical scene, a graduate thanks their parents and friends but is chiefly occupied by the fear of disappointing them through insufficient elation. Their outward gratitude may be sincere while the required feeling is absent. Those facts are compatible.

You can recognize others' contribution without promising a particular emotion. “I understand why this day matters to us” is one statement. “I am obliged to experience exactly what you expect” is another. The first communicates connection and meaning; the second gives others authority over your response. This distinction does not license rudeness or contempt for someone else's joy. It allows a state to be explained without attack: “Thank you; for now, I feel more tired than festive.” Sometimes such a conversation is possible; sometimes it is not. Even the internal freedom not to grade your facial expression can then change the situation.

Public photographs reinforce an abbreviated account of an event: a smile means happiness; a celebration means no doubts. Yet a photograph records a visible moment, not someone's whole experience. Comparing your evening with another person's image may mean comparing different objects. What matters is not an abstract rule about the harm of social media but the specific limit of an image: it cannot show what remained outside the frame. You can use photographs, share outcomes, and simultaneously decline to require equal simplicity from your inner life. Joy is entitled not to become a performance even on a day you want to preserve.

VI. A good life is wider than a pleasant emotional peak

Success is often promised as a feeling, although part of its meaning appears in activity. A new qualification enables work; savings make it possible to reject unacceptable conditions; completing a difficult conversation creates room for another one. Those consequences can matter before elation arrives. A pleasant reaction remains desirable, but ceases to be the only criterion. The opposite move should not devalue pleasure either, as though a meaningful life had to be difficult by definition. The point is to broaden the ways of assessing life, not to glorify unhappiness.

In the first book of the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle discusses happiness as an end and an activity, connects it with virtue, and recognizes the role of external goods. This is a philosophical conception of a good life, not a modern measurement of emotional well-being. It helps illuminate the difference between a whole life and a particular pleasant state, but its normative account cannot simply be declared scientifically proven or universally accepted. Applying it to an achievement today is our comparison, not an ancient author's concealed advice to a modern graduate.

In a hypothetical example, a small workshop finally becomes financially stable. Its owner feels no celebration but no longer accepts every order out of fear. Seen only through an emotional peak, the outcome seems empty. Seen through the new possibilities, its value becomes concrete. The reverse example exists too: an event brings powerful elation but changes little of what it was meant to address. Neither calm nor intensity alone guarantees a suitable choice. A more precise assessment connects experience with consequences: what has become

possible, which limitation has diminished, and which new obligations have arisen? The feeling then provides an important part of the picture while retaining its actual scale.

VII. Other people's assessment does not determine your entire worth

Expecting recognition can make joy especially fragile. The event seems to have happened, but someone fails to congratulate you, qualifies their praise, or immediately names the next goal. The desired feeling then depends on an additional event the original plan did not mention. Someone expected not merely an outcome but final agreement from significant people that they are good enough. Such agreement is difficult to secure forever. Completed work can be checked; one document cannot make everyone see you in a particular way. That is a limit of control, not proof that relationships and recognition are unnecessary.

In the Enchiridion, §44, Epictetus challenges the inference from greater wealth or eloquence to the claim that someone is a better person. The Stoic assessment grounds worth differently from external superiority. We use a narrow logical distinction here; we do not impose the entire Stoic ideal of indifference to external things on the reader. Need, dependence, and unjust conditions remain real. Refusing to measure human worth by one achievement does not mean refusing to defend rights, receive payment, or seek respectful treatment.

In practice, this allows you to name more precisely what you expected from congratulations. Confirmation of work quality? A sign of closeness? Recognition of what you went through? Each request has its own recipient. A manager may assess a project without having to become the source of your entire value in life. Someone close can share the day's significance even if they do not understand its professional outcome. Different forms of recognition should not be combined into one unattainable certificate of adequacy. Sometimes clarification makes the necessary conversation possible. Sometimes a painful limit of the relationship becomes visible. That is significant information, but does not annul everything you have done.

A difficult objection arises: surely an external assessment affects real life? It does, sometimes greatly. Access, income, and future opportunities may depend on a committee, employer, or another person. Distinguishing dignity from assessment does not cancel that dependence. It rules out only the additional inference: because I was rejected or congratulated coldly, my entire person is worth less. You can challenge a decision, improve the work, or seek another environment without turning every procedure into a trial of your existence. This response preserves both the practical seriousness of the external outcome and the limit of what it can assert about a human being.

VIII. A quiet change also needs time and participation

Some outcomes must be grown into. After moving, you know the new address but not yet your habits in the space. After completing training, you are entitled to work independently but have no ready-made sense of professional belonging. You can call this a transition while remaining cautious: not every absence of joy is a transitional state. No deadline can be prescribed after which the feeling must appear. Still, it helps to distinguish expecting an instantaneous reward from gradually discovering new possibilities. The second task requires participating in life after the event, not only analyzing why the festive response did not switch on immediately.

In a hypothetical example, someone expected that receiving the keys would instantly turn an unfamiliar apartment into a home. The first evenings felt empty. Then specific things emerged: a comfortable work spot, a neighbor to greet, their own way of preparing meals. This is not a happiness recipe for everyone who moves. It illustrates how an outcome's meaning can emerge through particular relationships and actions. The important event opened an opportunity; its content was not included in the package. Distinguishing opportunity from lived life helps prevent delayed settling-in from being mistaken for a definitive failure.

Participation must not become another examination: “If I do everything correctly, I must feel something.” You can try and observe without prescribing an outcome. Sometimes a new condition is comfortable; sometimes it is unsuitable. If the original choice turns out to have been based on an inaccurate picture, that is a reason to reconsider a particular decision. Reassessment does not make your past self stupid. The earlier choice relied on the information and constraints available then. Responsibility means taking new evidence into account rather than endlessly defending the old forecast or, conversely, destroying it to gain a sense of final clarity.

IX. A particular disappointment differs from a broad loss of pleasure

Not enjoying one event and ceasing to enjoy most familiar activities are different situations. In the first, the question may concern an expectation, the cost of the outcome, or its meaning. In the second, it helps to consider a wider picture of your condition. An explanation should not be chosen merely because a philosophical story fits the headline nicely. A reader may recognize their experience here and also need help the text cannot provide. This does not create a conflict between reflection and professional support: they have different tasks and capabilities.

The US National Institute of Mental Health lists persistent loss of interest or pleasure among possible signs of depression and recommends discussing continuing symptoms with a health

care provider. This guidance does not permit diagnosis through an article: assessment must consider other symptoms, duration, effects on daily life, and possible medical causes. If difficulties persist or interfere with everyday life, talking to a doctor or qualified mental health professional is more appropriate than explaining them to yourself as ingratitude. An immediate threat to life calls for local emergency services; help numbers depend on the country.

Even outside such a situation, an absence of joy need not become a solitary research project. You can tell a trusted person what happened and what you feel instead of the expected emotion. It helps to name the kind of conversation you want: not persuasion to be happy, but help holding onto facts and distinctions. Support need not take the form of advice. Sometimes what matters is someone who does not demand immediate repair of your experience. If that conversation is unavailable in your surroundings, this is an environmental limitation, not another defect of character. Finding suitable support remains a separate task, not something guaranteed by reading one text.

X. You can keep the event while revising its promise

Joy that failed to arrive does not force a choice between two extremes: declare the outcome worthless or make yourself celebrate. A third move is possible—retain the fact of the achievement while reducing the promise attached to it. Not “Now I will never doubt myself,” but “Now I have demonstrated experience of this work.” Not “My new life is completely free,” but “One earlier limitation has become smaller.” The formulation sounds more modest but shows more accurately what can be used next. It does not prohibit a large desire; it distinguishes desire from an outcome already received.

In the opening hypothetical scene, promotion ceases to be final proof of personal worth. It becomes a new role with particular opportunities, responsibilities, and matters to negotiate. The person can find out what support will be needed, which tasks really interest them, and what working conditions need clarification. There is also room for a conversation about recognition or for rest. Those are different steps, which should not all be assigned to one event. If the new position proves unsuitable, it can be assessed through specific conditions. The absence of elation then begins an inquiry rather than providing a ready-made decision to resign.

The main shift concerns the question itself. “Why do I feel incorrectly?” presupposes an established norm and an accused person. “What did I expect to receive, and what happened?” leaves room for information. Sometimes the answer is simple: I have not recovered yet. Sometimes it is more complicated: I got what I wanted, but it does not address another important task. Sometimes there is no answer yet. The lack of a final explanation is acceptable. Not every change in life must immediately become a clear story. It is enough not to confuse a

current feeling with the overall value of your life, or lose the real possibilities the outcome has already opened.

What this means in practice

For one particular event, you can voluntarily make a short note. First describe the external outcome without evaluation: what was obtained, completed, or changed. Then name your expectation about a feeling as precisely as you can. Were you counting on elation, relief, calm, pride, or a sign of closeness? Next write what you experience now. Do not replace “I do not know” with a convenient account or turn a feeling scale into an examination. What matters is that the three lines remain distinct: the event, the forecast, and current experience.

Next try to see two ordinary days after the outcome. Which responsibilities, relationships, and limitations remained? What was added? Include useful consequences and the actual cost. If you expected “everything will change,” compare that with particular changes. Sometimes this reveals an overly broad promise; sometimes it shows that the significant outcome really did little to improve the relevant part of life. In the second case, there is no need to convince yourself that every success must be useful. Its specific consequences need assessment.

You can now ask about the hidden promise: “What was this event supposed finally to allow me to feel or do?” If the answer concerns recognition, security, or closeness, look for the link between that task and the outcome's actual possibilities. You do not need to develop a new project immediately. You can first notice a mismatch. If writing increases self-blame or turns into hours spent checking every emotion, you may stop. The purpose is to clarify one situation, not achieve complete control over your internal state.

Choose only one manageable step, if you need one now. It might be rest without an obligation to celebrate, discussing new working conditions, a calm conversation with someone close, trying a specific possibility, or seeking professional help for continuing difficulties. Name what that step can examine; do not promise that it will restore joy. Afterwards, you can return to the note and see what changed in conditions or understanding. Your right not to make an immediate decision remains.

Finally, try a sentence that devalues neither the outcome nor the experience: “This is an important day; I am still discovering what it means to me.” It may fit a conversation or remain an internal formulation. Its meaning is not a postponed demand to become happy. It acknowledges that the event has happened while its place in life is still developing. If joy arrives, it will not have to prove that you are a correct kind of person. If it does not, meaning and the next choice will still remain open to honest inquiry.

Key quotation

> *“Neither property nor style.”*

Epictetus, Enchiridion, §44; a fragment from Elizabeth Carter's English translation. The Russian edition renders it editorially as “You are neither property nor style.” Its context challenges the inference of human superiority from wealth or eloquence; it does not deny material needs.

Connections between traditions

Comparison	Similarity and boundary
Research on emotional forecasts ↔ everyday anticipation of reward	Forecast and experience can differ. The review does not establish the cause of any particular person's reaction.
Aristotle ↔ distinguishing outcome from experience	A whole life cannot be reduced to one emotional peak. The doctrine of virtue remains normative philosophy.
Epictetus ↔ recognition after achievement	External superiority does not prove personal superiority. The whole Stoic ideal concerning external goods is not adopted here.
Psychology ↔ philosophy ↔ medical assessment	These approaches ask different questions. Philosophical meaning does not exclude a medical cause; medical guidance does not prescribe life's meaning.

This is an editorial comparison of verified distinctions, not a claim of shared doctrine or proof of historical dependence between traditions.

Sources

1. Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics, Book I, translated by W. D. Ross. §§7–9 and directly related passages were read: ends, activity, external goods. A philosophical basis, not an empirical study.

2. Wilson T. D., Gilbert D. T. Affective Forecasting: Knowing What to Want, 2005. The publisher's abstract was read. Boundary: no account of unread experiments and no individual prediction.

3. Epictetus. The Enchiridion, translated by Elizabeth Carter, §44. The specified paragraph and nearby context were read. A narrow distinction between an external property and assessing a person.

4. NIMH. Depression. Sections on signs, diagnosis, and seeking help were read. An informational medical boundary, without diagnosing the reader.

Tags

joy, achievement, expectations, affective forecasting, recognition, promotion, change, disappointment, meaning of an event, cost of an outcome, fatigue, celebration, activity, external goods, dignity, Aristotle, Epictetus, Stoicism, self-observation, support, uncertainty, limits of inference, voluntary practice, meaning, consequences.

About the authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of United Wisdom. He explores inner transformation, the unity of traditions, intercultural dialogue, and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh.

Maria Evilkut is a co-author of United Wisdom. Alongside her research, she seeks to test these ideas in practice and observe how principles of unity and mutual understanding work in real life between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki.