

THE POWER OF CLEAN SHEETS AND A PERFECT FLAT WHITE.

By Alex Brennan McMahon

The new-in section of the Zara website. Coming home to clean sheets and a tidy bedroom. A flat white with my best friends. A great hair day, perfectly straight but not flat. You know exactly what I mean, right?

In the words of Julie Andrews, "these are a few of my favorite things." They are the things that make me happy. They're not big and they're not important compared to world events but, they do actually make me happy. These small things give me a boost and make me feel good. But why and how does this happen? Stand by for the science bit!

So, four chemicals in the brain are triggered once we have experienced something that brings us joy. They amplify our feelings and we feel good in the moment. However, happiness is much bigger than a new top from Zara or perfectly straight hair, it's actually a very complex emotion, one that has been studied and written about by experts from all kinds of scientific and medical backgrounds. Yet, these professionals all agree on a few key things. Happiness is not about being rich. If you strive to be happy all the time, it actually has the opposite effect. It becomes unattainable and therefore you won't be happy but end up disappointed. Events and experiences with the important people in your life bring happiness far more than 'things' do. The concept of paying it forward, the power of exercise, being optimistic and living a life of mindful behaviour. These are all factors that have been proven to increase and contribute to that magical feeling of happiness. So, bearing all that in mind, I started to think about why the Zara top or the clean bedroom trigger the four magic chemicals for me?

Everyone loves that feeling of getting into fresh sheets, the smell of a clean room, furniture polish mixed with Comfort fabric conditioner. I certainly feel like I even sleep better, but why? Stand by for the not so scientific bit!

It just makes me feel loved, and important and cared about. It is as simple as it sounds and no doctor or scientist is required to research and report on it. I feel like I matter. I've had a long commute to school, I've come home after a 13 hour day, homework to do, dinner to eat and I have limited free time. The fact that my mom takes time to tidy my room when I'm almost 18 years of age makes me feel like she acknowledges that my day is full. To optimize my chances of getting into university, I'm putting the hours in now and my mom cleaning my room says to me, "I see how busy you are. I see that you are doing your best. I see how limited your time is and I can help you." So, it's more than just a clean room and clean sheets, I know that I was thought and cared about through that action. Thanks mom!

The new top in Zara? That doesn't make me feel loved, or thought about, so what is its superpower? Why do the magic words 'add to basket' make me feel happy? Like most girls, I sometimes buy something new for an upcoming event. A party, a night out, a concert. These occasions are often planned months in advance. Ideas of how it will pan out, speculation of who will go and anticipation of the fun are excitedly discussed. All these prior chats happen with my friends, the other people going to the party or concert. It makes me feel like I belong, like I'm part of some special club; friendship. My

friends have the ability to release those magic chemicals. They make me laugh, bolster my confidence, make me feel loved, included and important. So not unlike the clean sheets, it's not about the new top, it's about what that item represents. Science bit or not, I feel happy.

But now? Amid Covid lockdown, as we deal with possibly the biggest challenge to our regular existence, I have to think of new ways of being happy. I'm not seeing my friends, my routine and daily structures have gone and no amount of clean sheets can compensate for that! I've had to take time, to process and to adapt. It goes without saying that I truly appreciate that my family is safe and healthy, there's food in the fridge and that my parents are not frontline workers so they have minimal exposure to the virus in work. But honestly, it sometimes hasn't been enough to make me happy. I've had days when I've actually felt the complete opposite, very very unhappy. Days when there has been no sign of those happy chemicals appearing at all. Yet, without realizing exactly why, and almost subconsciously, I have used my optimism and my mindfulness to find smaller moments of happiness. A zoom call with the girls? Obviously, it's not the same as human contact, sitting around a table or on the locker room floor but I'm learning that staying in contact, keeping the connection going, staying involved in each other's more mundane, but also newly challenging lives, is what actually matters. I've three younger brothers and generally they do their thing and I do mine. But making a Tiktok with my 11 year old brother can be fun (even if he thinks he is a cross between Justin Bieber and Michael Jackson). In fact, his lack of any self-consciousness has been one of my new ways experiencing happiness.

I've learned that one of the biggest factors in being happy is not what you have but who you have. I might still treat myself to something new for my first night out post Covid, I'll go to school with enthusiasm, I'll go to concerts, I'll drool over Instagram...I'm only human after all! But what I'll take from this, what I've learned, is that it's the people you share these events with that are the key. It's the people that you choose to surround yourself with that take a simple cup of coffee to a different level. That wonderful level where your world feels right, your heart sings with joy, your walk is full of bounce and magically, your hair is perfect!