

Pursuing Happiness:  
Prospects, Practices, and Prescriptions

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## **Pursuing Happiness: Prospects, Practices, and Prescriptions**

“Happiness depends upon ourselves.” – Aristotle

“The constitution only guarantees the American people the right to pursue happiness.

You have to catch it yourself.” – Benjamin Franklin

“How to gain, how to keep, how to recover happiness is in fact for most men at all times the secret motive of all they do and of all they are willing to endure.” – William James

Happiness is a central criterion of mental health (Keyes, 2005; Taylor & Brown, 1988) and has been found to be associated with numerous tangible benefits, such as enhanced physical health, reduced psychopathology, greater productivity, more fulfilling relationships, and even longer life (see Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005, for a review). Thus, an important goal for psychology is advancing knowledge about how to help people increase their levels of happiness, positive mental health, and personal thriving. During the last decade, researchers have made a great deal of progress investigating intentional ways to increase happiness – yielding both theory (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005) and empirical evidence (see Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009, for a meta-analysis) supporting the notion that happiness levels can be increased. Furthermore, growing research is pointing to the optimal conditions under which happiness-enhancing activities work to increase well-being, as well as the processes underlying these strategies’ success (Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013). Finally, preliminary studies suggest that increasing happiness through positive activities may lead to multiple favorable downstream effects on people’s health, work, and relationships (e.g., Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008).

Although the concept of happiness is widely understood by laypeople, it is important to define it scientifically. Our definition corresponds to the growing consensus that happiness (or subjective well-being) comprises a global feeling that life is going well (i.e., general satisfaction with life), as well as the frequent experience of positive emotions and infrequent experience of negative emotions (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). Notably, although our definition of happiness does not explicitly include meaning and purpose in life (concepts that laypeople typically

associate with overall well-being), research has shown that satisfaction with life, positive emotions, and (fewer) negative emotions are highly correlated with these constructs (Ryff, 1989).

Despite the growing body of evidence supporting the notion that happiness can be improved, some contemporary theories indicate that trying to increase one's happiness levels is futile – an endeavor doomed from the start. This pessimism is rooted in several assumptions about the nature of well-being, including the influence of genetics on happiness, the concept of hedonic adaptation, and the finding that well-being-related personality traits exhibit a great deal of longitudinal stability. All of these views imply that, although people might become happier or more satisfied in the short-term, they are destined to return to their original level in the long-term. However, evidence suggesting that researchers should be pessimistic about the intentional pursuit of happiness is countervailed by equally convincing evidence signaling optimism, leaving the possibility of sustainably increasing happiness open to scientific debate and inquiry. Below we briefly outline the evidence both for and against the “intentional happiness” proposition.

### **Pessimism (and Optimism) Regarding the Intentional Pursuit of Happiness**

Considerable behavioral-genetic research indicates that permanently changing one's happiness levels is very difficult, if not impossible. For example, evidence from a sample of monozygotic and dizygotic twins suggests that the heritability of well-being may be as high as 80% (Lykken & Tellegen, 1996), although a more widely accepted figure is 50% (Braungart, Plomin, DeFries, & Fulker, 1992; Tellegen et al., 1988; Røysamb, Harris, Magnus, Vittersø, & Tambs, 2002; cf. Diener et al., 1999). This suggests that each person has a built-in “attractor” for happiness, which he or she can orbit around, but never leave behind (Vallacher & Nowak, 2002). In other words, a person may have a “set range” that includes the most likely or expected value in his or her temporal distribution of happiness across the life span (see Headey, 2010). Consistent

with this idea, Headey and Wearing (1989) found, in a 4-wave panel study, that participants tended to keep returning to their own baselines over time (see also Suh, Diener, & Fujita, 1996).

A related source of pessimism comes from research on personality traits. Traits are cognitive, affective, and behavioral complexes that are, by definition, consistent across situations and across the lifespan (Allport, 1955). Therefore, they may account for part of the stability of well-being. For example, neuroticism and extraversion, the two “Big Five” traits most closely related to well-being, have shown impressive long-term stability (McCrae & Costa, 1990). For example, teacher-ratings of students’ adaptability predict adult cheerfulness 40 years later (Nave, Sherman, Funder, Hampson, & Goldberg, 2011). Given the relation of extraversion and neuroticism to happiness, these data suggest that people would also maintain the same relative level of happiness over time (see also Costa, McCrae, & Zonderman, 1987; Diener & Lucas, 1999).

Despite research suggesting that happiness is biologically influenced and consistent across the lifespan, convincing evidence also suggests that genes and personality are only part of the happiness puzzle. First, recent work from behavioral genetics indicates that the degree to which happiness can be explained by genetics may not be as high as originally thought (Stubbe, Posthuma, Boomsma, & de Geus, 2005). Second, genes influence happiness only indirectly—that is, by shaping the kinds of experiences and environments one has or seeks to have. Thus, unwanted effects of genes could be minimized by active efforts to steer oneself away from problematic situations or to avoid maladaptive behaviors (Lykken, 2000). Furthermore, genetic and environmental factors interact with one another in a dynamic process such that environmental factors can shape gene expression (Plomin, 2004). Lastly, it is worth noting that heritability coefficients describe individual differences within a population, not mean levels. Thus, even a high heritability coefficient for a particular trait (such as happiness) does not rule out the possibility that

the mean level of that trait for a specific population can be elevated. Under the right conditions, everyone might become happier than they were before, even if their rank ordering relative to others remains stable.

Another source of pessimism arises from the concept of hedonic adaptation (Frederick & Loewenstein, 1999; Lyubomirsky, 2011) or the hedonic treadmill (Brickman & Campbell, 1971). These concepts state that humans have a remarkable ability to adapt to changes, positive and negative (Boswell, Boudreau, & Tichy, 2005; Frederick & Loewenstein, 1999; Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2003; Lyubomirsky, 2011; Luhmann, Hofmann, Eid, & Lucas, 2012). Thus, although new circumstances may temporarily cause people to become happier or sadder, the effect of these new circumstances on happiness diminishes quickly or even disappears entirely, once people habituate to it, suggesting that “what goes up must come down.” In support of this idea, a longitudinal study showed that newlyweds experience increases in life satisfaction preceding their marriage, and then gradually return to their previous levels within an average of 2 years (Clark, Diener, Georgellis, & Lucas, 2008; Lucas et al., 2003; but see Zimmermann & Easterlin, 2006). Employees who received a voluntary promotion showed the same pattern as the newlyweds, gaining in job satisfaction immediately after the promotion, and then dipping back to baseline levels within a year (Boswell et al, 2005). The notion of adaptation brings to mind the image of a person walking up a descending escalator; although the improving circumstances of her life may propel her upward towards greater happiness, the process of adaptation eventually forces her back to her initial state.

Although studies show that, on average, people adapt to positive experiences, researchers have noted that adaptation is not inevitable (Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006). Specifically, people who experience unemployment (Clark et al., 2008; Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2004, but see Luhman et al., 2012) or become disabled (Lucas, 2007) do not, on average, return to their pre-

event levels of well-being. Furthermore, within studies, considerable variation is evident in individual patterns of adaptation (Diener et al., 2006). That is, some people adapt more rapidly than average, some people adapt more slowly than average, and still others do not adapt at all. Indeed, in the study of newlyweds, some participants experienced lasting increases in life satisfaction and some experienced lasting decreases, thus making the “average” effect potentially misleading (Lucas et al., 2003; Lucas, Dyrenforth, & Diener, 2008).

Theory and empirical evidence suggest that people can slow their adaptation to positive experiences if they continue to generate potentially novel, varied, and surprising experiences from an initial positive change (e.g., taking new and beautiful routes while they engage in their new running hobby or buying new flavors of coffee to make in their Keurig; Lyubomirsky, 2011; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2012). For example, participants randomly assigned to receive unexpected feedback about their biggest personal strengths showed slower adaptation to the positive news than participants who received unsurprising feedback or no feedback (Jacobs Bao, Boehm, & Lyubomirsky, 2013), thus supporting the role of surprise in forestalling adaptation to positive experiences. In addition, people can thwart adaptation by fostering appreciation of the initial positive experience and the subsequent positive changes that occurred as a result of it (Lyubomirsky, 2011; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2012).

For example, consciously thinking about what you appreciate about your life partner might help you to continue to obtain positive emotional boosts from your marriage long after the 2-year average adaptation period is over. So, although research suggests that people adapt to positive experiences more quickly and more frequently than to negative experiences, hedonic adaptation to positive changes is not inevitable. Indeed, several strategies are available to help individuals garner pleasant emotions from positive life changes (Lyubomirsky, 2011; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2012).

### **Putting the Evidence Together: Happiness Can Be Increased**

Which arguments regarding the feasibility of increasing happiness are more compelling? Are sustainable gains in well-being possible or are they impossible? We believe that recent theory and research both persuasively suggest that increasing happiness is possible through intentional positive activities.

### Theoretical Perspectives

When we discuss meaningful increases in happiness, we are referring to a person's characteristic level of happiness during a particular period in his or her life, which we term the current happiness level. We define happiness this way because we wish to identify a quantity that is more enduring than momentary or daily happiness, but that is also somewhat malleable over time, and thus amenable to meaningful pursuit. Operationally, one might define a person's current happiness level in terms of his or her retrospective summary judgments regarding some recent period (such as the last 2, 6, or 12 months), or as the average of momentary judgments of happiness generated at multiple times during that period.

To consider whether happiness can be increased, we must first identify what influences it. As discussed earlier, genetics influence about 50% of individual differences in people's happiness levels (Røysamb et al., 2003), although not as deterministically as some interpretations suggest. In addition, in part because people show a tendency to adapt to their life circumstances (Lyubomirsky, 2011), such circumstances explain only about 10% of individual differences in happiness (Diener, et al., 1999). Notably, however, after accounting for the genetic and circumstantial influences on people's happiness, a large proportion of people's happiness remains unexplained. Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade (2005) reasoned that this remaining portion of happiness can be accounted for by the behaviors people choose to engage in and how they decide to respond to and interpret the experiences in their lives – that is, by people's intentional activities.

Happiness-increasing intentional activities may be cognitive (i.e., one regularly adopts an optimistic or positive attitude) or behavioral (i.e., one is regularly kind to others or habitually engages in physical exercise). Common to all of these practices is the notion of intentional effort and commitment in service of particular desired objectives or experiences. Because of their intentional character, activities are more resistant to the effects of adaptation than are life changes involving new circumstances or possessions. In other words, one can deliberately vary one's activities, such that they continually provide new experiences and results. Indeed, some intentional activities (such as meditation or pausing to count one's blessings) can serve to directly counteract adaptation. Furthermore, intentional activities can create a self-sustaining cycle of positive change, in which invested effort leads the person to further opportunities for satisfying actions and accomplishments. Of course, one can also perform an activity robotically, without variation, or can fail to sensitively apply or enact the strategy. In such cases (described in more detail below), the benefits of the activity are likely to fade over time, just as the impact of positive circumstantial changes dampens. Still, activities have the potential to create sustained positive change, because of their relatively more dynamic and varying nature and because of their capacity to produce a steady stream of positive and rich experiences.

Of course, the boundary between activity changes and circumstantial changes is somewhat fuzzy. For example, bringing about many circumstantial changes (e.g., moving to a new job or city) undoubtedly takes intentional effort, and, conversely, circumstantial changes may enable or afford new types of activity. Furthermore, some kinds of circumstances (i.e., one's marital status) doubtless involve activity (i.e., one acts within the marital relationship). Nevertheless, the data we describe below suggest that the basic distinction between the two types of factors is meaningful and important.

### Empirical Evidence



*Circumstances versus intentional activities.*

Sheldon and Lyubomirsky (2006a) conducted a three-wave longitudinal study of 666 undergraduates. Students rated their well-being at the beginning of an academic semester, using a variety of standard measures. Midway through the semester, they rated the extent to which they had experienced both positive activity and positive circumstantial changes since the beginning of the semester, and also rated their well-being again. They then rated their well-being a final time at the end of the semester. Sheldon and Lyubomirsky (2006a) predicted that both positive activity changes and positive circumstantial changes would predict enhanced well-being from Time 1 to Time 2, but that only activity changes would predict maintained gains at Time 3.

The activity and circumstance measures each consisted of a single item, with which participants rated their agreement. The circumstances item read: "Please rate the extent to which there has been some significant positive change in the circumstances of your life since the beginning of the semester, which has given you a boost since it occurred. 'Circumstances' means 'facts' about your life, such as living arrangement, monetary situation, or course load. For example, you may have moved to a better dorm or better roommate, received an increase in financial support so you can have more fun, or dropped a course that you were really going to have trouble with." The activity item read: "Please rate the extent you have adopted some significant positive new *goal or activity* since the beginning of the semester, which has given you a boost since it occurred. 'Goal/activity' means something you chose to do or get involved in, which takes effort on your part. For example, you may have joined a rewarding new group, club, or sports team, decided on a major or career direction which makes it clear what to focus on, or taken on some other important new project or goal in your life."

As expected, both positive activity and circumstantial changes predicted increased happiness at Time 2. However, only activity changes predicted happiness at Time 3, indicating that

the earlier activity-based gains had been maintained, whereas the earlier circumstance-based gains had been attenuated. Parenthetically, the two change variables correlated .34 with each other, suggesting that some overlap does indeed exist between the two categories. Again, however, only the activity change variable accounted for maintained change in well-being. These results suggest that, at least in the short-term, it is possible to increase one's well-being above the set point, and then to maintain it there.

Two other findings from this research program deserve mention. First, Sheldon and Lyubomirsky (2006a) found, in a separate study using the same two change measures, that activity changes are associated with more varied experiences and less of a sense of "getting used to" (i.e., adapting to) the change, compared to circumstantial changes. This finding supports an important premise of our longitudinal model – namely, that activity changes induce more varied experiences and less hedonic adaptation, relative to circumstantial changes. Again, we believe these characteristics of activity help account for its potential long-term effect on happiness.

Second, Sheldon and Lyubomirsky found, in the longitudinal study, that competence and relatedness need-satisfaction (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, & Kasser, 2001) mediated the sustained activity effects. In other words, the reason why newly-adopted activities at Time 1 produced sustained gains in well-being at Time 3 is that participants felt more competent in their daily lives during the semester, and felt more related to others during the semester. In contrast, circumstantial changes tend to be more superficial, and bring less opportunity to fulfill deeper psychological needs. To illustrate, consider some typical circumstantial changes people listed: "I learned that I won't have to be in a lottery in order to get in my Broadcast 1 class (which is required)," "My roommate at the beginning of the semester was a cocaine addict. She is no longer my roommate," and "I was recently initiated into my fraternity. The stress level of my life has now decreased because I no longer have to worry about initiation requirements." In short, the limited

relevance of circumstantial changes for psychological need-satisfaction may be another reason such changes have limited influence on well-being, in addition to the reason that people more quickly habituate to altered circumstances.

In a subsequent study, Sheldon and colleagues (2010) randomly assigned participants to focus on making a positive circumstantial change in their lives or to intentionally focus on increasing their levels of need satisfaction (either autonomy, competence, or relatedness). As predicted, people who focused on increasing their levels of need satisfaction showed sustained increases in happiness relative to people who focused on changing their circumstances, thus again suggesting that intentional positive activities are a fruitful path to sustained increases in well-being. *Intentional positive activities.*

Sheldon and colleagues (2010) did not give participants exact instructions for how to increase their need satisfaction, but, on average, participants successfully did so. What if, however, particular defined activities existed that could satisfy needs and increase well-being? Indeed, many behaviors are associated with greater happiness. For example, happier people tend to be more grateful (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002), optimistic (Scheier & Carver, 1993), and prosocial (Krueger, Hicks, & McGue, 2001) than their less happy peers. If individuals who wanted to become happier were encouraged to think more gratefully and optimistically and to behave more prosocially, could they also increase their levels of well-being? Substantial research has now been conducted to suggest that they can (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Specifically, if people intentionally engage in the thoughts and behaviors associated with dispositionally happy people (e.g., expressing gratitude, thinking positively about their future, or doing kind acts for others) – we call them “positive activities” – they can increase their happiness.

Positive activities can take many different forms. They include (but are not limited to) activities such as writing letters of gratitude (Boehm, Lyubomirsky, & Sheldon, 2011; Layous, Lee, Choi, &

Lyubomirsky, in press; Lyubomirsky, Dickerhoof, Boehm, & Sheldon, 2011; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005), counting one's blessings (Chancellor, Layous, & Lyubomirsky, 2012; Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, et al., 2005; Seligman et al., 2005), practicing optimism (Boehm et al., 2011; King, 2001; Layous, Nelson, & Lyubomirsky, 2012; Lyubomirsky et al., 2011; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006b), performing acts of kindness (Chancellor, Jacobs Bao, & Lyubomirsky, 2013; Della Porta, Jacobs Bao, & Lyubomirsky, 2012; Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008; Layous, Nelson, Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, & Lyubomirsky, 2012; Sheldon, Boehm, & Lyubomirsky, 2012; Study 2), using one's strengths in a new way (Seligman et al., 2005), affirming one's most important values (Nelson, Fuller, Choi, & Lyubomirsky, 2013), and meditating on positive feelings towards self and others (Fredrickson et al., 2008).

Importantly, positive activities may not only increase well-being but also alleviate symptoms of depression (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). A natural question might be, how do positive activities compare to “treatment-as-usual” (i.e., talk therapy)? In contrast to traditional psychotherapy approaches, these activities are all relatively brief, self-administered, and non-stigmatizing actions that promote positive affect, positive thoughts, and positive behaviors, rather than directly aiming to address negative affect, negative thoughts, or negative behaviors. For example, in one positive activity, people are instructed to do kind acts for others during one particular day each week. The person for whom the kind act is being done can be aware of the act or the act can be kept anonymous. This simple focus on prosocial behavior has been shown to increase well-being in adults (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon et al., 2005) and to promote liking among classmates in a middle school-based study (Layous, Nelson, Oberle et al., 2012).

A recent meta-analysis by Sin and Lyubomirsky (2009) showed that positive interventions yielded impressive (medium-sized) effects for improvement of well-being and alleviation of depressive symptoms – effect sizes nearly identical to the classic Smith and Glass (1977) meta-

analysis of the effect of psychotherapy. In further support of the comparability of positive activities to more traditional, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) techniques, people who identified as being dissatisfied with their bodies showed as much improvement in body satisfaction in a gratitude diary condition (positive activity approach) as they did in a thought monitoring and restructuring condition (CBT approach; Geraghty, Wood, & Hyland, 2010). Interestingly, people in the gratitude diary condition showed half the dropout rate of people in the CBT based condition.

In a different study, moderately depressed college freshmen were randomly assigned to read *The How of Happiness* (a book describing the empirical basis of positive activities; Lyubomirsky, 2008), *Control Your Depression* (a book describing CBT approaches to alleviating depression; Lewinsohn, Muñoz, Youngren & Zeiss, 1992), or a waitlist control group (Parks & Szanto, 2009). Students assigned to bibliotherapy showed similar decreases in depression at post-test, but those assigned to read about positive activities showed larger increases in life satisfaction at a 6-month follow-up than those assigned to read about CBT. Also, participants reported finding the activities in *The How of Happiness* to be more meaningful and enjoyable, and they engaged in them more frequently. We are not suggesting that positive interventions should replace more tried and true techniques for improving people's lives, but, potentially, positive activities could serve as a complement to traditional approaches or as a supplement if the traditional drug and talk therapies fail to show improvements for particular individuals (Layous, Chancellor, Lyubomirsky, Wang, & Doraiswamy, 2011).

### **Optimal Conditions for Positive Activity Success**

Empirical research over the past decade has not only shown that positive activities can increase well-being but has suggested the conditions under which they are optimally effective (Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013; Layous & Lyubomirsky, in press). Specifically, features of the positive activity itself (e.g., exactly how one goes about expressing gratitude or practicing

meditation), features of the person or happiness seeker, and, perhaps most important, the match between the person and activity all need to be considered when making recommendations for successful positive activity practice. Figure 1 illustrates the factors contributing to the success of positive activities and the mechanisms by which they work to increase well-being. In the following sections, we highlight a few of these factors in greater detail.

### Choosing An Activity: The Role of Person-Activity Fit

Not all activities will help a particular person become happier. People have enduring strengths, interests, values, and inclinations, which predispose them to benefit more from some activities than others. This general “matching” hypothesis (Harackiewicz & Sansone, 1991; Snyder & Cantor, 1998) is supported by much work showing that the positive effects of goal-attainment on subjective well-being are moderated by goal-person fit (Brunstein, Schultheiss, & Grassman, 1998; Diener & Fujita, 1995; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999; Sheldon & Kasser, 1998). It is also supported by past well-being intervention research. For example, in several studies that instructed participants to apply 14 different techniques to raise their personal happiness, the most effective happiness-increasing strategies varied greatly from one individual to another, and appeared to be determined by each participant’s needs and specific areas of weakness (Fordyce, 1977, 1983).

Indeed, people who report that performing a particular positive activity feels natural and enjoyable to them are relatively more likely to continue engaging in it after a prescribed intervention period and show larger increases in well-being (Dickerhoof, 2007). Similarly, in a 1-week positive intervention, people who reported that their positive activities were relatively simple, seemingly beneficial, and enjoyable adhered to practicing such activities at a higher rate and reported bigger improvements in well-being (Schueller, 2010).

Research also suggests that what types of positive activities will work for what types of individuals might be predictable. For example, if a person prefers present-oriented positive activities

(e.g., appreciating the moment), he or she will likely prefer and potentially benefit from other present-oriented positive activities (e.g., performing kind acts for others), more than past-oriented (e.g., reflecting on a positive experience) or future-oriented (e.g., visualizing his or her best possible self) ones (Schueller, 2010). Indeed, when people were assigned to perform a positive activity similar to one for which they had previously indicated a preference, they showed marginally larger increases in well-being than those assigned to perform an activity dissimilar to their previous preference (Schueller, 2011).

### Person Feature: Motivation and Effort

We assume that performing an activity requires the motivation to initiate the activity and the effort to actually carry it out and maintain it. Motivation refers to the difficulty of “overcoming inertia” or “getting over the hump,” such that one starts doing an activity. For example, meditating in the morning, making time to work on at least one important project during the day, or dropping by the gym at the end of the day can have significant benefits, but only if one can remember to do them and overcome any obstacles to initiating them.

In addition, even a positive activity that has been shown to increase well-being in the average person will not work for an individual if he or she fails to put sufficient effort into performing it. In a test of the motivation and effort hypotheses, one 8-week positive intervention study recruited participants by advertising itself as either involving cognitive exercises or activities designed to make people happier (Lyubomirsky et al., 2011). Participants who signed up for the ostensible happiness-increasing activities were considered “motivated” relative to those who signed up for the cognitive exercises. As predicted, the relatively more motivated participants reported the greatest increases in well-being from performing positive activities. Furthermore, those who exhibited the highest amount of effort (as rated by independent coders) reaped the greatest well-being benefits. Further supporting the importance of motivation when engaging in

happiness-increasing activities, across 51 studies, participants who self-selected into positive interventions were found to show greater gains in well-being than those who had not self-selected themselves (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009).

Of course, some activities will be intrinsically more appealing, and will be easier to jump-start – indeed, this is undoubtedly one advantage of selecting an activity that fits one’s personality. For example, rather than jogging around the block, a fitness-seeking wilderness-lover might instead choose to run on a trail through the woods, thereby feeling much less initial resistance to beginning the activity. Rather than expressing one’s gratitude and appreciation in a diary, a visually-oriented individual might instead choose to express herself through painting and a musical individual might instead choose to write a song. Such choices would enhance the intrinsic appeal of sitting down to engage in the activity. As these examples illustrate, finding intrinsically-motivated activities may be crucial not only for one’s ability to initiate the activity, but also, for one’s ability to keep doing the activity in the long term. If the activity becomes boring, then the person may stop doing it.

#### Person Feature: Culture

Another potential moderator of activity effects on happiness may be the norms and traditions of the culture in which the individual resides. There is little doubt that the “pursuit of happiness” is an important and well-supported element of U.S. culture. However, in cultural settings that de-emphasize individual happiness or striving, or perhaps actively disapprove of them, it may be more difficult to take action to increase one’s happiness level. For example, in one experiment, Anglo Americans and foreign-born Asian Americans were assigned to practice a positive activity or a control activity. Although all participants who engaged in positive activities showed gains in well-being, these gains were significantly larger for Anglo Americans than for Asian Americans (Boehm et al., 2011).



Another potential source of cross-cultural differences is that, in collectivist cultures, happiness-relevant activities may merely require a somewhat different focus. In these settings, for example, it may be more effective to act in service of others rather than acting in service of personal achievements and goals. In a recent cross-cultural study, participants from the U.S. increased in well-being the most when they started a 6-week intervention by writing gratitude letters, whereas participants from South Korea benefitted more when they started by performing acts of kindness (Layous et al., in press). The researchers speculated that, given the tendency of Asians to feel uncomfortable seeking social support (Kim, Sherman, Ko, & Taylor, 2006), the gratitude exercise may have made South Koreans feel guilty or uncomfortable. Future research should focus on which positive activities work best in certain cultures, as well as on whether certain positive activities could prove detrimental to people from certain cultures.

#### Person and Activity Feature: Social Support

Social support is believed to be another important factor in enacting happiness changes. Following through on one's volitional intentions can be tough, and the task can be made easier if others are "in the same boat." Indeed, many groups and organizations, such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Weight-Watchers, emphasize the import of having "teammates" during one's abstinence attempts. Thus, we assume that interpersonal support can aid an individual both in initiating a potential happiness-increasing activity and in maintaining it. In addition, because social support is an important correlate of well-being in its own right (e.g., Baldassare, Rosenfield, & Rook, 1984; Henderson & Brown, 1988), performing an intentional activity as a group or with the support of close others is likely to promote greater and more sustained happiness change than "bowling alone" (Putnam, 2000).

Although, to our knowledge, no research has yet investigated the effect of individuals' pre-existing social support networks on their abilities to benefit from the practice of a positive activity,

researchers have experimentally manipulated the amount of support provided within a particular positive activity. In one study, college students were randomly assigned to write about their best possible future selves or to engage in a neutral writing task (Layous, Nelson, & Lyubomirsky, 2012). Students writing about their best possible selves were either provided with weekly testimonials from ostensible peers, providing encouragement and advice about how to reach their goals, or with neutral information about campus resources. Participants who received supportive information from their peers showed larger increases in positive affect than those who received neutral information or those in the control condition. In another study, participants who received autonomy-supportive messages while they performed a positive activity (e.g., “the way you complete this activity is entirely up to you”) increased in perceived autonomy or choice to a greater degree than participants who did not receive the supportive messages (Della Porta et al., 2012). The increase in perceived choice, in turn, predicted relatively greater increases in well-being.

### Activity Feature: Variety

Another important factor influencing positive activities’ effects on happiness likely concerns how one varies such activities. For example, by shifting attention among several projects at work, by meeting new people, or by focusing one’s gratitude on different aspects of one’s life, a person’s activities should remain intrinsically enjoyable and conducive to many rewarding “flow” experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Indeed, participants who were asked to vary the acts of kindness they performed from week to week during a 10-week intervention showed larger gains in well-being than those who were asked to perform the very same acts each week (Sheldon et al., 2012). Possibly, varying the acts of kindness helped keep the activity fresh and meaningful over the course of the intervention. Also highlighting the importance of variety, people who reported that a recent positive life change was associated with variable and surprising experiences showed greater

sustained increases in well-being than people who reported that their positive life change was static (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2012).

### Activity Feature: Dosage/Timing

Another critical factor may be the dosage or timing of an activity; if one does the activity too often, or not often enough, or at the wrong times, then it may lose its efficacy. For example, people who performed five acts of kindness all during one day of the week gained in well-being more than those who spread their five kind acts throughout the week (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon et al., 2005), indicating that there might be an optimal packaging of positive activities to make them most effective. In a different study, students who counted their blessings once per week over 6 weeks showed larger increases in well-being than those who counted their blessings three times per week (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon et al., 2005). This suggests that the activity may have become burdensome or ineffective when performed too frequently.

Some research indicates, however, that when people choose their own happiness-increasing activities (i.e., outside of the confines of an experiment), they perform these activities quite often—namely, several times per week for about an hour each time (Parks, Della Porta, Pierce, Zilca, & Lyubomirsky, 2012, Study 2). Similarly, participants who logged in more frequently to an iPhone application that allowed them to try various positive activities showed larger increases in well-being than those who logged in less frequently (Parks et al., 2012, Study 3). This recent evidence suggests that the optimum timing and dosage may vary depending on whether people are intrinsically motivated to engage in specific happiness-enhancing activities (i.e., if an ideal person-activity fit exists).

### Other Factors Influencing the Success of Positive Activities

The previous section described several specific features of positive activities and features of the person that may influence the extent to which the pursuit of happiness is successful. In this

section, we consider some potentially important overarching factors that may influence how researchers should frame and test happiness-increasing strategies.

One consideration is how to properly test the happiness-inducing potential of a particular program or intervention. Ideally, double-blind procedures should be used, in which neither the participant nor the experimenter is aware of the “treatment” being given, and in which the participant is unaware of the experimental hypothesis. But is this reasonable or desirable, when the intervention concerns encouraging people to take intentional action that may enhance their personal well-being? Perhaps such interventions can only work if the participant is fully aware of what the research is about. Although this possibility raises potential methodological problems concerning placebo and demand effects, such problems may be surmounted with appropriate control groups. In addition, the issue of person-activity fit suggests that some studies should allow participants to choose what intervention to enact, rather than always randomly assigning them to specific positive activities. Such self-selection procedures may challenge conventional methodological standards, but again, the problem may perhaps be offset by careful experimental design. A related issue is how happiness-enhancing programs or practices should be labeled. Should their potential relation to happiness be acknowledged directly, or should they simply be introduced as “positive life practices” involving “kindness,” “gratitude,” “physical exercise,” etc.? The latter content-based approach may be preferable, for several reasons. First, as discussed above, using explicit happiness labels may create demand effects that may obscure whatever real changes are occurring for participants. Second, inducements like “Do you want to be happy?” may not appeal to a segment of potential participants, who might object to associations with self-help gurus and popular psychology “how-to” books, or for whom the term “happiness” denotes unrealistic and wrongheaded positivity and optimism. Third, content-based (rather than happiness-based) labeling may sidestep another possible barrier to intervention efficacy—namely, that active and conscious

attempts to increase happiness might backfire altogether if the person becomes too focused on this goal and monitors his or her progress too frequently (e.g., “Am I happy yet? Am I happy yet?”; Ford & Mauss, in press; Mauss, Tamir, Anderson, & Savino, 2011; Schooler, Ariely, & Loewenstein; 2003, but see Ferguson & Sheldon, 2013). In other words, it is probably better to be fully engaged in the activities of one’s life, without frequently pausing to dwell on when one’s long-desired happiness will finally be achieved. In this case, happiness may come as a natural by-product of a life well-lived.

### **Positive Activities and Health**

Positive activities designed to increase people’s happiness might also have favorable downstream consequences on numerous other aspects of people’s lives. Indeed, both overall happiness and positive affect in particular have been associated with positive health outcomes (e.g., stronger immune system, lower risk of mortality, etc.; Howell, Kern, & Lyubomirsky, 2007; Pressman & Cohen, 2005). Positive affect is not only associated with a reductions in the likelihood of catching the common cold (Cohen, Alper, Doyle, Treanor, & Turner, 2006; Cohen, Doyle, Turner, Alper, & Skoner, 2003), but has also been identified as an important ingredient for coping with chronic illness (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000) and has predicted lower risk of mortality for people suffering from AIDS (Moskowitz, 2003) and diabetes (Moskowitz, Epel, & Acree, 2008). Notably, even experimental inductions of positive affect have shown significant improvement in short-term health outcomes and marginally significant improvement in long-term health outcomes (Howell et al., 2007), thus suggesting the potential of positive activities to promote better health via increased positive affect.

Growing evidence in the positive intervention literature supports the notion that positive activities can improve physical health outcomes. For example, participants randomly assigned to express gratitude reported fewer physical symptoms of illness and more hours of exercise than participants who recounted daily hassles or reported neutral life events (Emmons & McCullough,

2003). Similarly, chronic pain patients randomly assigned to engage in loving-kindness meditation (a meditative practice focused on promoting positive feelings toward self and others) reported less pain, anger, and psychological distress than patients receiving standard care (Carson et al., 2005). In a subsequent investigation of the effects of loving-kindness meditation, relatively healthy adults who engaged in the activity (versus a waitlist control group) experienced more positive emotions over time, which, in turn, predicted fewer general symptoms of illness (e.g., headaches, congestion, weakness; Fredrickson et al, 2008). In sum, intentional improvements in people's mental health predict positive physical health outcomes. Because the positive activities described in this chapter are brief, easily implemented, and effective in increasing happiness, health care organizations (including the doctors, nurses, and other practitioners that staff them) might consider providing information to patients about these practices. At the same time, future research would do well to continue exploring the effect of positive activities on physical health outcomes, adherence to medical treatment, and risk of mortality.

### **Positive Activities and Work**

Employee well-being should be a practical concern for organizations, as happiness at work predicts better supervisor evaluations (Cropanzano & Wright, 1999) and lower absenteeism (Pelled & Xin, 1999) and is associated with better job performance (Deluga & Mason, 2000; Wright & Cropanzano, 2000; Wright, 2010), better organizational citizenship (Donovan, 2000), and less turnover intention (Donovan, 2000; Wright, 2010). One possible mechanism for these associations between happiness and positive work outcomes is through greater job satisfaction. A recent meta-analysis showed a medium to large positive correlation between life satisfaction and job satisfaction and, through cross-lagged regression analyses of longitudinal data, revealed that life satisfaction was more predictive of job satisfaction than vice versa (Bowling, Eschleman, & Wang, 2010). These findings indicate that improving happiness among employees could help them become more satisfied with their jobs.

Fortunately, research suggests that simple, brief positive activities conducted at work can effectively increase employee happiness. In a 6-week study, employees at a Japanese engineering firm were randomly assigned to report three positive events that occurred each week at work (the positive activity condition) or to list three tasks they had completed each week (the comparison group; Chancellor et al., 2012). Relative to controls, employees who recounted positive work events increased in happiness over time, showed more energy upon arriving to work, and engaged in less office chit-chat.

In another study, employees at the Spanish headquarters of a multi-national beverage company were randomly assigned to perform kind acts (“Givers), to receive kind acts (“Receivers), or to simply fill out measures online (“Controls”) for 4 weeks (Chancellor et al., 2013). Relative to Controls, Givers showed fewer depressive symptoms and more flow at post-test and maintained this advantage at 1- and 3-month follow-ups. Receivers showed more immediate boosts in well-being than Givers, reporting higher weekly positive affect and life satisfaction than Controls merely 2 weeks into the intervention and at post-test. In addition, social network analyses revealed that, Controls who interacted with Givers and Receivers also reported doing more positive acts of their own, perhaps from having been inspired by the kind acts they witnessed (Chancellor et al., 2013). In sum, preliminary evidence suggests that simple positive activities can improve well-being and positive behaviors at work. Because of their accessibility and minimal cost, positive activities could be offered by employers from a variety of organizations as part of a menu of options for their employees to partake in during work time. The research suggests that rather than being a distraction from task-related duties, such activities represent time well-spent, leading to less absenteeism, less turnover, better job performance, and a more positive work environment. Future research would do well to focus on how increasing employee well-being might also

improve an organization's bottom line (e.g., through lower healthcare costs, better performance, lower turnover, etc.).

## **Positive Activities and Relationships**

Happiness is associated with current satisfaction with friends (Cooper, Okamura & Gurka, 1992; Diener & Seligman, 2002), marital partners (Headey, Veenhoven, & Wearing, 1991), and social activities (Cooper et al., 1992) and is also predictive of marital satisfaction (Harker & Keltner, 2001) and overall relationship closeness (Neyer & Asendorf, 2001) years later. If happiness is related to and predictive of healthy relationships, practicing positive activities should have positive effects on people's relationships. Indeed, compelling evidence supports the role of positive activities in improving relationships. For example, participants in a loving-kindness meditation study saw overall increases in positive emotions, yet, interestingly, these increases were most prominent while they were engaging with other people, suggesting that the mediation practice helped them extract positivity from their daily social interactions (Fredrickson et al., 2008). In addition, increases in positive emotions throughout the intervention period were also predictive of increases in perceived social support and positive relationships with others, demonstrating that boosts in positive emotions can cause a cascade of positive relational outcomes (Fredrickson et al., 2008).

In another example, a sample of women suffering from metastatic breast cancer were prompted to recall what others had done for them during the past month. Those who expressed gratitude for the instances of help reported greater perceived social support 3 months later (Algoe & Stanton, 2011). Lastly, in a 6-week intervention, expressing gratitude or optimism predicted increases in feelings of relatedness (Boehm, Sheldon, & Lyubomirsky, 2012), thus further bolstering our prediction that positive activities can make people feel more connected to others. More research is needed to explore how positive activities might be able to improve a variety of



types of relationships (e.g., marital, friendship, familial, work) and possibly how positive activities might help forestall adaptation to a positive relationship event such as marriage (see Lucas et al., 2003).

## **Conclusion**

More than two centuries ago, the U.S. Declaration of Independence proclaimed “the pursuit of happiness” as an unalienable right. Today, after decades of scientific research into subjective well-being, we finally have empirically-based suggestions for how to increase happiness. What are the general recommendations for increasing happiness suggested by the latest research? Simply, that happiness-seekers might be advised to find novel activities to become engaged in – preferably intrinsic activities that feel natural and enjoyable to them. Furthermore, people might be advised to avoid basing their happiness on the acquisition of particular circumstances or objects (e.g., buying a luxury car, arranging for cosmetic surgery, or moving to California), because they will tend to habituate to such stable factors. However, if one can remember to appreciate or actively engage with the object or circumstance (i.e., pause to savor one’s new Mercedes or take advantage of the California weather), then stable objects and circumstances may not be stable after all, from a phenomenological perspective. Finally, by practicing the thoughts and behaviors of naturally happy people, happiness seekers can improve their own well-being. Such improvements will be most likely if people perform their positive activities with the optimum dosage and timing, ensure that the activities are variable, put effort into them, and infuse them with social support.

Given the breadth of beneficial effects that follow from subjective well-being, for both the individual and those around him or her (Lyubomirsky, King et al., 2005), it seems vital to continue to investigate the conditions under which positive activities successfully increase well-being.. Fortunately, there are emerging reasons to believe that “the pursuit of happiness” is indeed a practical and attainable goal. In this chapter, we have described these reasons, and reviewed

theoretical and empirical evidence to suggest how individuals can optimally increase their happiness. We hope these ideas will stimulate people to make positive changes in their daily lives and ultimately experience greater happiness, flourishing, and growth.

## Summary

- Both theory and extensive empirical evidence demonstrate that happiness can be increased through the intentional practice of “positive activities.”
- Positive activities are simple, brief, intentional activities meant to mimic the myriad positive habits of naturally happy people (e.g., thinking gratefully and optimistically, behaving prosocially).
- Positive activities can be self-administered through the use of simple instructions or included as part of group or individual therapy.
- Because positive emotions predict positive health outcomes (e.g., longevity and stronger immune systems), positive activities could become an important component of integrative medicine practices.
- Similarly, because happiness has been linked to various positive work outcomes (e.g., organizational citizenship, job satisfaction), positive activities could contribute to employee-oriented mental and physical health programming in the workplace.
- Lastly, many positive activities, such as expressing gratitude and performing kind acts, promote positive relationships with others and increase the need satisfying feeling of relatedness. Therefore, positive activities are a valuable tool to strengthen relationships and increase social support in people’s lives.

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Figure 1. Model of Psychological Mediators and Moderators Underlying the Efficacy of Positive Activity Interventions. Reprinted from “How Do Simple Positive Activities Increase Well-Being” by S. Lyubomirsky & K. Layous (2013), *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 22, p. 58. Regarding Activity Features, items under “Across” concern all potential positive activities, and items under “Between” differentiate positive activities from one another.

