

MAKING CHOICES FOR A HAPPIER YOU

The cover of *The Myths of Happiness* says it all: An attractive brunette stands on her slightly browning lawn and peers over at her neighbors' emerald-green grass and luscious flower bed.

What is it about our culture—and our very nature—that makes us place such importance on happiness? Why are we programmed to expect happiness only if we check certain boxes, such as marriage and wealth—and a perfectly green lawn?

Sonja Lyubomirsky, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Riverside, has been researching happiness for more than two decades. In a new book, she offers a fresh way of thinking about happiness, and smart tips on how to get it.

You write about the links between money and happiness and suggest that people embrace thrifty habits. Is that feasible in our society?

It is absolutely feasible to become more thrifty. Indeed, although overconsumption is highlighted by the media and ubiquitous in some social circles, I believe that many, many people in the West are repelled (or at least not attracted) by materialism, and, instead, practice a very experience-focused and family-focused approach to life. If you are not one of those people, then my and others' research suggests ways that you can thwart poor consumer decision-making and curtail overspending—for example, by spending your money on experiences (a dinner with friends) rather than possessions (e.g., a nicer stereo).

You offer great advice on choices

that will lead to happiness. Which of those tips do you find most personally difficult to follow?

A recurring theme in the book is the importance of trying to appreciate what you have and see “the big picture.” One of the strategies that I use is to ask myself after a crisis or a really bad day, “Will it matter in a year?” Yet this is not always easy to follow. My favorite anecdote is one day when I was telling my husband, Pete, about what a great strategy this is and how well it works. Just when I finished talking, my daughter, who was then 7, walked in and her long, beautiful hair was completely entangled with gum. I just lost it! I started yelling at her: “How could you do such a thing?!” And Pete started laughing. “What were you just telling me? Will this matter in a year?” “But it *will* matter in a year!” I cried. “I’m going to have to cut her hair off and it’s still going to be short a whole year later!” Though that was clearly not an occasion in which I used the strategy effectively, I still try to practice it as often as I can.

You write that “the effects of sharing troubles and obtaining help from a friend, companion, lover, family member, or even a pet are almost magical in their power.” Why is that?

I allude to an occasion in the book when I was heartbroken over a break-up and I was crying for hours; then I picked up the phone and talked to a close friend about what happened and my despair dropped from about a 10 to a 2 or 3. I wasn't suddenly joyful, but I was no longer so distressed. It really shocked me how just one social interaction—the act of sharing with a close other—would have such a powerful effect. Of course, a great deal of research confirms my experience. When we have social support, we experience pain less intensely, we bounce back quicker from adversity, and we even judge hills to be less steep.

If you were to give a family member or friend one piece of advice about being happy, what would it be?



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If I had to give one general piece of advice to anyone about how to attain and sustain happiness, it would be to nurture their interpersonal relationships—expressing gratitude, doing kindness, trying to be empathetic, and staying positive and supportive—will probably contribute to your happiness and health more than anything else. (But work is a close second!)

What is the greatest misconception that most people have about happiness?

My book describes several misconceptions about happiness, but I think the biggest is the one that I call “I’ll be happy when_____.” That is, we believe that we may not be happy now, but we’ll be happy when Mr. Right comes along or we get a new boss or we have a baby. The problem with these beliefs is not that they’re wrong—they’re right, but only in part. We likely *will* be happy when or if those events come to pass, but that boost in happiness is likely to be short-lived.

Do you think people can overthink happiness?

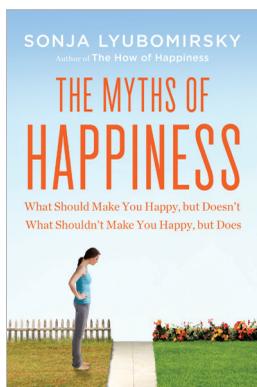
People can definitely become too focused on happiness and its pursuit. New research shows that if we are wrapped up in trying to become happy to the exclusion of other goals and if we are constantly monitoring our happiness (“Am I happy yet? Am I happy yet?”), then such efforts may seriously backfire. My recommendation is to keep the pursuit of happiness in the back of your mind but to focus primarily on those goals that will get you there—e.g., absorbing yourself in meaningful goals, investing in relationships, expressing gratitude, etc.

What makes you happy?

Freud suggested that *lieben und arbeiten*—“to love and to work”—are the secrets to well-being, and that has certainly been true for me.

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THE MYTHS OF HAPPINESS



By Sonja Lyubomirsky

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