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 very experience-focused and family-focused, you will likely be less stressed and 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 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 liebe und arbeiten—“to love and to work”—are the secrets to well-being, and that has certainly been true for me.