CHAPTER 2

Toward a Durable Happiness

Jaime L. Kurtz and Sonja Lyubomirsky

When trying to envision a happy day, or a happy life, what images come to mind? For some people, it might be sharing a meal with good friends and family members while laughing together, telling stories, and feeling loved. For others, happiness may come from accomplishing an important goal and basking in the glory of a job well done. And for others still, happiness may be the byproduct of doing good deeds, helping others, and believing that the world is a better place because of it. Although people may vary a good deal in what they think will make them happy, an overwhelming majority of U.S. residents place "finding happiness" very high on their list of major life goals (Diener, Suh, Smith, & Shao, 1995).

How exactly *do* you "find happiness?" This question has been posed for thousands of years, and although many self-help books have attempted to offer answers, their authors have often based their conclusions, however well meaning, on their own personal, idiosyncratic experiences. Only recently has *scientific* evidence emerged to suggest a possible path to lasting happiness that is effective for the majority of people. By scientific, we mean that researchers have conducted rigorous experiments to determine whether particular strategies for increasing happiness actually work. The present chapter reviews this evidence and provides practical suggestions that you can use to create long-term, or sustainable, changes in your level of well-being.

IS HAPPINESS A WORTHWHILE GOAL?

Before we offer you suggestions on how to become a happier person, it is important to establish whether happiness is a desirable goal. Of course,

everyone knows that happiness feels good to the person who is experiencing it. But some may argue that happy people are prone to be lazy, shallow, or unmotivated. However, recent evidence suggests quite the opposite. Rather than being simple and complacent, happy people are energetic, creative, and productive in the workplace, cooperative, and motivated to help others. In the social realm, happy individuals have more friends, more satisfying social interactions, and a lower likelihood of divorce. And in terms of physical and mental health, happy people have stronger immune systems, cope more effectively with stress, and, most strikingly, even live longer (Fredrickson, 2001; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). In sum, happiness doesn't merely "feel good." It carries a wide variety of benefits for the individual, as well as for families, workplaces, and communities.

DEFINING HAPPINESS

When we talk about how happiness can be increased, we aren't just talking about creating the sorts of momentary bursts you may get when your favorite team wins an important game or when you find a dollar on the street. Psychologists are quite good at boosting people's moods over short periods of time. Techniques like giving people a piece of candy, playing pleasant music, or providing positive feedback all produce momentary increases in positive affect (Schwarz & Strack, 1999). The problem is that these increases don't last. As we'll explain below, people's moods respond to and fluctuate along with changes in their environments. When something wonderful happens, they report feeling happier. When something unfortunate happens, they feel sad. However, these changes are often short-lived, and people return to their baseline level of happiness fairly quickly (Brickman & Campbell, 1971). The purpose of the research described in this chapter is to create lasting, sustainable changes in people's *dispositional* level of happiness. This can be thought of as how happy a person feels, on average, over a fairly long period of time.

Most researchers define happiness as consisting of three components: frequent instances of positive affect, infrequent instances of negative affect, and a high level of life satisfaction (Diener et al., 1995). Positive and negative affect are simply experiences of good feelings (e.g., excited, joyful, pleased) and bad feelings (e.g., irritable, sad, tense), respectively. Life satisfaction, by contrast, is a more global, cognitive evaluation of how content a person is with the state of his or her life. Those with a high level of life satisfaction would agree with statements such as, "The conditions of my life are excellent" (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985).

It's important to add to our description of what we mean by happiness that it is thought of as a *subjective* state, meaning that self-reports are the standard way of determining how happy an individual is. Although a few researchers have assessed happiness by asking friends and family to give their impressions of how happy a particular person is (e.g., Sandvik, Diener, & Seidlitz, 1993), ultimately the final judge is "whoever lives inside [the] person's skin" (Myers & Diener, 1995, p. 11). Therefore, the term

"subjective well-being" (or simply "well-being") is often used as a synonym for happiness, as it will be throughout this chapter.

CAN HAPPINESS BE INCREASED? REASONS FOR PESSIMISM

Is it possible to actually become happier? You may be surprised to learn that, until fairly recently, there was very little scientific data to tell us whether or not people can lastingly boost their happiness. In fact, in previous years, researchers were doubtful about the possibility of becoming happier. Two reasons underlie their pessimism—first, happiness is partially determined by genetics, and, second, people tend to adapt (or get used to) most positive life experiences, and what initially brought them great pleasure gradually ceases to do so. Therefore, some say, any attempts to increase happiness would be futile, because people would simply return to their genetically determined happiness "baseline" following a pleasant experience. We describe the evidence for this perspective below.

The Roles of Heredity and Personality

The baseline level of happiness, or set point, is higher for some people than for others. In other words, some of you are naturally, or dispositionally, happier than others. Years of research on fraternal and identical twins has led psychologists to conclude that this baseline is determined by genetics (Lykken & Tellegen, 1996). In other words, if you had an identical twin, he or she would share your height, intelligence, and predisposition to hypertension, and your level of happiness as well.

The fact that happiness has a high heritability is also consistent with the finding that a person's level of happiness is strongly related to his or her standing on several personality traits (Diener & Lucas, 1999). For example, people who are highly neurotic tend to be less happy, and extraverts are inclined to be happier than introverts. Traits such as these are relatively fixed, meaning that, throughout the life span, people generally do not change much in where they stand on extraversion, neuroticism, and so forth (McCrae & Costa, 1994). Some researchers have used these findings to argue that happiness is yet another personality trait—stable and resistant to any kind of meaningful change (Costa, McCrae, & Zonderman, 1987).

Hedonic Adaptation

The theory of hedonic adaptation provides another source of pessimism about the possibility of lastingly increasing happiness. Simply put, this is the tendency for the emotional impact of both positive and negative events to diminish over time (Brickman & Campbell, 1971; Diener, Lucas, & Napa Scollon, 2006). To illustrate, think about a time in your life when something extremely good happened to you. It may be something you had daydreamed about and strove for, such as getting accepted into the college

of your choice, winning an important race in a track meet, or successfully asking your crush out on a date. How did you feel immediately after? Most likely, you felt exuberant. You probably thought about the event constantly, replaying it in your mind, telling your friends and family all about it, and feeling certain that the joy you were experiencing would last forever.

Of course, your joy did not last forever. Although thinking about your new life as a college student, your athletic prowess, or your upcoming date may have provided a burst of pleasure, later thoughts of the event gradually failed to reproduce the initial joy you felt. This is due to the process of *hedonic adaptation*, in which events that were initially laden with emotion gradually lose their intensity (Brickman & Campbell, 1971). From the life altering to the mundane, there is a wealth of evidence that people adapt to a variety of events. For example, people adapt to the outcome of a presidential election or a sporting event, the end of a romantic relationship, failing to receive a job promotion, being insulted, winning the lottery, becoming paralyzed, losing a loved one, being diagnosed with a serious illness, and so on (Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978; Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1997; Sieff, Dawes, & Loewenstein, 1999; Wortman, Silver, & Kessler, 1993).

To further illustrate, researchers Suh, Diener, and Fujita (1996) asked college students to report their level of subjective well-being and the number of positive and negative life experiences that they had experienced over the past 4 years. Although many students experienced major life events, such as the death of a family member, the beginning or end of a romantic relationship, becoming engaged or married, gaining admission to graduate school, and finding a job, there was no relationship between the number of recalled positive and negative events and students' reports of happiness, if the events had occurred more than 6 months in the past. These studies suggest that, despite the elation or heartbreak that an event may initially bring, the duration of these emotional reactions is often surprisingly short-lived. In other words, trying to become happier by changing the circumstances of your life—such as your relationship, job, health, or schooling—is not a strategy that is likely to succeed in the long-term.

Happiness Cannot Be Consciously Pursued

Finally, when people have the overt, conscious goal of making themselves happier, it sometimes backfires. Research by Schooler, Ariely, and Loewenstein (2003) has found that instructing people to try and feel as happy as they possibly could actually led to a decrease in momentary happy mood, relative to those who were not asked to try to be happy. Constantly assessing and monitoring happiness levels was similarly counterproductive. It seems that happiness is very often the byproduct of an enjoyable experience, but perhaps it cannot be a deliberate goal in and of itself. Or, as Nathaniel Hawthorne eloquently put it, "Happiness is as a butterfly which, when pursued, is always beyond our grasp, but which if you will sit down quietly, may alight upon you."

REASONS FOR OPTIMISM: THE SUSTAINABLE HAPPINESS MODEL

Some researchers have used the findings we have just described to support the claim that the quest to improve happiness is a fruitless effort (Lykken & Tellegen, 1996). Fortunately, both the fact that happiness has a genetic component and the fact that we adapt to positive life events does not mean that it is impossible to become happier. New research suggests that a person's level of happiness is not set in stone, and that he or she can raise this level by taking advantage of certain intentional activities.

As explained below, the sustainable happiness model (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005) proposes that happiness is determined by three factors: The genetically determined set point, life circumstances, and intentional activities (see Figure 2.1). The implication of this model is that a large percentage of your happiness is determined by your own conscious, effortful activities and, thus, that increases in happiness *can* be successfully achieved.

The Set Point

The largest piece of the pie is known as the set point—quite literally, the point at which one's happiness level is set, or fixed. People tend to have a level of happiness that they gravitate back to following a significant event, and this set point is higher for some people than for others. In other words, some are born happier than others. You probably know people who always seem to be in good spirits and are habitually looking on the bright side. As the saying goes, when life gives them lemons, they make lemonade. On the other hand, you are likely also familiar with people who are generally unhappy. They see the glass as half empty, and find it hard to derive much pleasure from their daily lives. Psychologists would say that these two sets of people have different set points for well-being. Years of research from a field called ''behavioral genetics'' has led psychologists to conclude that this set point for happiness is determined by genetics (Lykken &

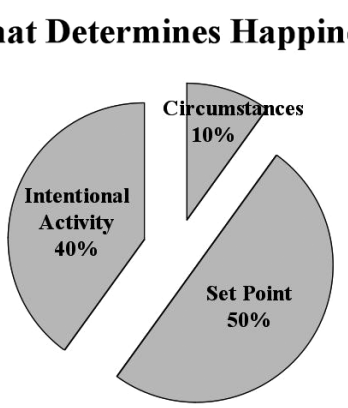

Figure 2.1. What Determines Happiness?

Tellegen, 1996). For example, identical twins are extremely similar in how generally happy (or unhappy) they are, even when raised thousands of miles apart, but fraternal twins (whether raised together or apart) are no more similar to one another than regular siblings. Thus, willfully trying to raise your set point by altering your genes is currently impossible. Clearly, the key to lasting increased happiness lies elsewhere.

Circumstances

You may be surprised to learn that life circumstances account for a mere 10% of people's happiness (Argyle, 1999; Diener et al., 1999). By circumstances, we mean factors that constitute the background of your life. For example, if you were to write a brief autobiography, it would include a great deal of information about your life circumstances. Examples include your demographics (e.g., gender, ethnicity), personal experiences (e.g., past traumas and triumphs), life status variables (e.g., marital status, education level, health, and income), your physical appearance, and the physical setting where you live.

Researchers argue that altering your life circumstances is not a promising way of increasing happiness. Although you may feel that you'd be happier if you had more money, lived in a warmer climate, or were better looking, this is generally not the case. Studies show that people adapt quickly to changes in income and marital status, to name just a few (Diener & Oishi, 2000; Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2003). Also, more attractive people are not happier (Diener, Wolsic, & Fujita, 1995), and—assuming basic needs are met—rich people are only slightly happier than their less wealthy counterparts (e.g., Diener, Horwitz, & Emmons, 1985). What accounts for these counterintuitive findings? Most likely, the reason that happiness is not strongly related to life circumstances is that such factors as income, beauty, and even marital status are particularly prone to adaptation and people generally don't dwell on them. Instead, these circumstantial factors tend to exist in the background of your emotional life.

This is actually good news. Imagine if the key to happiness *did* lie within the realm of your life circumstances. Because many of these circumstances are fairly constant and extremely difficult to change, successfully altering your happiness would be a very costly undertaking. Fortunately, you don't need to undergo plastic surgery, move to the beaches of California, promptly find a marital partner, or obtain a significant pay raise in order to be happier. As explained in the next section, the keys to lasting happiness are much less costly and much more accessible than you might imagine.

Intentional Activity

Even after accounting for the effects of heredity (i.e., the set point) and for the life circumstances that do not seem to make people happy for any significant period of time, a very large portion of the pie chart—40%, in fact—still remains. This portion of the sustainable happiness model, which

constitutes people's intentional activities, is what gives researchers hope about the possibility of lastingly increasing well-being. Broadly defined, intentional activities are actions or exercises that a person chooses to engage in. More specifically, they can be thoughts (e.g., counting your blessings) or behaviors (e.g., doing a random act of kindness) that alter your perspective on yourself, your life, and the world in general. Psychologists have found that by electing to engage in certain intentional activities, people can actually make themselves lastingly happier. This is great news, because it tells you that you could be a whole lot happier, if you commit to performing activities that are likely to produce happiness. And, fortunately, a growing amount of psychological research indicates what kinds of activities work best. The following sections describe several activities that have been found to effectively produce sustainable increases in happiness.

EXPRESSING GRATITUDE

Cultivating a grateful mindset, which can be thought of as "a felt sense of wonder, thankfulness, and appreciation for life" (Emmons & Shelton, 2002, p. 460), turns out to be conducive to lasting happiness. However, in using gratitude as a strategy to increase happiness, it must involve more than reflexively saying "thank you." To reap the benefits gratitude brings, you must focus your attention on the positive things in your life and truly savor them.

Empirical Evidence

Several recent studies have shown that focusing attention on the positive things in life—essentially, "counting your blessings"—leads to increases in both physical health and happiness (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). In one of the first studies on gratitude (Emmons & McCullough, 2003), one group of volunteers was asked to list five things for which they were thankful, once a week for 10 weeks in a row. Their "blessings" ranged from "my family" to "good health" to "The Rolling Stones." Other volunteers participated in two control groups—that is, instead of focusing on gratitude every week, these individuals were asked either to think about their five daily hassles or five major events that had occurred. Relative to these two groups, those who were asked to express gratitude felt more optimistic and more satisfied with their lives. Also, they reported fewer physical symptoms (such as headaches, coughing, or nausea) and more time spent exercising.

Subsequent studies have continued to examine the effect of expressing gratitude on happiness. Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade (2005) had participants list their "blessings" in gratitude journals. One group was asked to write in their journals once a week, and a second group was asked to write in them three times a week. A different group of participants was assigned to a control condition, which did not require them to do any exercise. It is interesting to note that compared with controls, participants who

expressed their gratitude did show increases in well-being over a 6-week time period, but only those who did the writing exercise only once a week. When writing three times a week, participants did not become lastingly happier, possibly because the exercise grew to be routine, frustrating, or boring.

Writing letters to express your appreciation is another way to create a grateful mind-set and thereby foster happiness. One study (Dickerhoof, Lyubomirsky, & Sheldon, 2007) found that writing gratitude letters to specific people, for 15 minutes once a week over the course of 8 weeks, produced boosts in happiness that persisted over the course of the study and were still apparent as long as 9 months after the study was over. This was true even for those individuals who did not share or deliver their letters. However, in real life, many people have the desire to actually tell the objects of their gratitude how much they are appreciated. This is also an effective strategy for increasing happiness and for fostering good relationships. In an online study, Seligman, Steen, Park, and Peterson (2005) instructed a group of participants to think of a person to whom they were grateful but had never properly thanked. Then this group was asked not only to write a gratitude letter but also to deliver it to the recipient. As a result, relative to a control group, these participants reported increases in their happiness that persisted for a full month.

Why Does It Work?

Why does expressing gratitude increase happiness? There are several likely reasons. First, feeling grateful for what you have helps to undo the effects of adaptation mentioned above, thereby changing the way you regard your life. To illustrate, think for a moment about the pleasant but constant things you encounter in your daily life, such as a beautiful tree outside your window, a good-natured and helpful coworker, your favorite local restaurant, or your best friend. However pleasant these things are, people have a tendency to stop appreciating them over time, or as mentioned previously, to *adapt* to them (Brickman & Campbell, 1971). But when you are in a grateful mind-set, which may be brought on by telling your best friend or coworker how much they mean to you, writing a detailed account of all the positive attributes of your favorite restaurant, or simply making a list of several pleasant aspects of your immediate environment, you are bringing these things to the forefront of your attention, relishing them, and appreciating them more fully. In other words, these activities aid in savoring and create a positive focus on present experience.

The happiest people are those who report having strong social support and close relationships (Myers, 2000). Thus, another reason why expressing gratitude is beneficial is that it can help foster these important social bonds. Specifically, when you are feeling grateful for the people in your life, you may feel motivated to spend more time with them and to treat them well (Emmons & Shelton, 2002). A "gratitude visit" exercise, such as the

one developed by Seligman and colleagues (2005), has obvious social benefits, strengthening the bonds between the writer of the letter and its recipient. One student delivered a gratitude letter to her best friend. She remarked, ''By the time she was done reading her letter, she was crying … her reaction made me cry as well. She hugged me. I had obviously made my best friend's day … whenever I would think about the incident it most definitely brought a smile to my face and even two days after when she and I would talk on the phone, she still mentioned it.''

VISUALIZING YOUR BEST POSSIBLE SELF

A second activity for increasing happiness works by creating a sense of optimism. It involves thinking about your life in the future and visualizing living it as your ''best possible self'' (BPS; King, 2001). For example, a college-aged woman might envision her ideal life 10 years down the road and write about having great success as a journalist, being married to a devoted and intelligent man, having two healthy children, living in a house in the country, owning horses, and traveling to exotic locations every summer.

It's important to point out that visualizing your BPS is more than a fantasy or a daydream and is it meant to be an exercise in self-deception. While it is vitally important to have goals and dreams, these should be attainable and feasible (Diener & Fujita, 1995). Otherwise, you may be setting yourself up for failure. For example, it would be rather improbable to conjure up a future as the next Bill Gates. And a man who is 5′4″ probably should not visualize a successful career in the NBA. The purpose of the activity is to lay out your life goals and to think optimistically—not fancifully—about how they might be realized.

Empirical Evidence

In one study (King, 2001), participants spent 20 minutes a day, for 4 days, writing about how they want their life to be in the future. Compared with those who wrote about more neutral topics, people who wrote about their best possible future selves experienced increases in positive mood both immediately after the writing exercises and several weeks later.

This study was recently replicated to examine the effects of engaging in this activity over a longer period of time—either 4 weeks (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006) or 8 weeks (Dickerhoof et al., 2007). For example, in the 4-week study, participants in the BPS condition were instructed to write about desirable images of their future selves, whereas those in a control condition were asked to recall daily events. As predicted, over the 4-week time period, those in the BPS condition reported experiencing increases in positive emotions after doing the writing exercises, compared with the control participants (see also Dickerhoof et al., 2007). Therefore, visualizing your best possible self on a regular basis seems to be another effective means of increasing happiness.

Why Does It Work?

Essentially, the BPS activity is fostering an optimistic mindset, because it involves assuming that you will achieve your most cherished future goals, thereby creating a positive image of your future self and an enhanced sense of efficacy, purpose, and meaning. To illustrate, as she completes the writing exercise, the hypothetical college-aged woman described above may be having thoughts like, ''Hey! I *am* a good writer. My journalism professor tells me I have the talent and drive to succeed, and I *can* make my career goals happen!'' The writing exercise reveals her goals as being more attainable, and this may foster a sense of self-determination and motivation.

Indeed, optimistic people are more likely to persist in the face of challenges, because they maintain the belief that their goals are within reach. Also, if a person truly believes that his or her long-term goals are realizable, which this exercise encourages, they may be better equipped to cope with minor setbacks (Scheier & Carver, 1993). After failing to secure a coveted journalism internship, for instance, the woman above would certainly be disappointed, but she has the newfound perspective to think of it as only a minor setback and to maintain the confidence that, if she keeps persisting, she will secure a similar opportunity down the road.

In addition, this exercise allows people to articulate and solidify their life goals *in writing*. The act of physically writing down your dreams for the future helps you structure and logically formulate the story, whereas simply thinking about your future life in your head may trigger a more nebulous, unstructured flow of ideas (Lyubomirsky, Sousa, & Dickerhoof, 2006; Pennebaker & Graybeal, 2001). When your ideal future is laid out with a sense of structure and coherence, the steps you need to take to achieve it may appear to be clearer and more under your control.

PERFORMING ACTS OF KINDNESS

A third strategy that produces lasting changes in well-being involves doing acts of kindness. This may be surprising, because helpful (or ''prosocial'') behavior can easily be construed as a self-sacrifice. Whether it is done on an individual basis, or through a formal volunteer organization, helping others is often thought of as time-consuming, tiring, and thankless. However, mounting evidence suggests that prosocial behavior actually has positive outcomes for both the recipient (the person who is benefiting from a kind act) *and* for the benefactor (the person doing the kind act; Piliavin, 2003).

Empirical Evidence

Recent research (Tkach, 2005) systematically examined the effects of doing acts of kindness over the course of several weeks. In one study, participants chose such acts as doing a roommate's dishes, helping a classmate with homework, or holding the door open for a stranger. In general, doing

these acts increased participants' happiness, relative to controls. But it wasn't quite that simple. Researchers also varied (a) the frequency with which participants practiced acts of kindness (either three or nine times each week) and (b) the variety with which participants practiced acts of kindness (either varying their kind acts or repeating the same acts weekly). By contrast, a control group simply listed neutral life events from the past week and were not instructed to engage in any prosocial behavior.

Results showed that the frequency of doing kind acts did not impact well-being. However, the *variety* of kind acts that were done did have an effect, such that those who were asked to perform a range of kind acts showed a noticeable increase in happiness, even at a 1-month follow-up. Those who did not vary the types of acts they were doing actually showed a slight decrease in well-being at one point in the study, only to rebound to their original baseline by the end. The effect of variety on subsequent well-being can be partially explained by the idea of hedonic adaptation mentioned above. Imagine that you are doing the same kind act—opening the door for the person behind you—for several weeks. Initially, it might delight you to see people's surprised and grateful reactions to this behavior, but over time, these reactions may become predictable and dull, and the act may quickly become viewed as nothing more than a chore. If this is the case, it makes sense that this activity would cease to bring you happiness. By varying your kind acts, however, you ensure that each one brings you a burst of happiness as you commit it and witness the recipients' novel and unpredictable reactions.

Why Does It Work?

Presumably, performing acts of kindness works as a happiness-enhancing strategy because it changes your self-perception, allowing you to see yourself as a helpful, kind, and capable person (Bem, 1972). For instance, after volunteering to be a math tutor on the weekend, you may cease to think of yourself as a person who sleeps until noon on a Saturday, and begin to see yourself as one who willingly gets out of bed on a chilly weekend morning to help a struggling math student. This is a far more positive self-view.

Also, doing acts of kindness may help you learn about or capitalize on your personal strengths or talents (Seligman, 2002). The math tutor may learn that he is especially skilled at simplifying and explaining abstract concepts. A Habitat for Humanity volunteer may discover that she is good at working with her hands. As noted by Seligman (2002), making the most of strengths and skills creates a feeling of authenticity that is closely related to well-being.

Also, it simply feels good to observe the effects of your generosity. Seeing your math student vastly improve due to your help or receiving a heartfelt "thank you!" after serving someone at soup kitchen can be a genuine mood booster. But more than that, doing acts of kindness may help build strong social relationships and foster an "upward spiral" of social benefits. As noted by Algoe and Haidt (2005), the recipient of a kind act often feels a bolstered sense of positive feelings and connectedness to his or her

benefactor, which strengthens their relationship. Moreover, doing things for others is socially engaging. It often requires direct interaction with people you may never meet or get to know well. Volunteers at a nursing home may learn the often-remarkable life histories of the patients. A math tutor may come to appreciate that his student is actually hard-working, but that he excels in the arts, rather than at math. Working at a homeless shelter may make you aware of the particular challenges faced by people living all around you. In this way, prosocial behavior can create a sense of empathy for the recipients. Therefore, it is no surprise that people who volunteer report feeling greater ties to the community (Putnam, 2000).

CHOOSING A HAPPINESS-INCREASING ACTIVITY

Right now you may be feeling quite motivated to try out some of these exercises in your own life. We offer some specific instructions on how to do this in the Personal Mini-Experiments at the end of the chapter. In addition, this section provides some helpful advice on how to make these happiness activities work best for you.

To reiterate and summarize what was mentioned above, too much of a good thing with regard to these activities is possible. It is important to keep them fresh, meaningful, and exciting, so we advise you to be mindful of the frequency with which you are doing them. Once a week seems like a good rule-of-thumb, and is consistent with the findings mentioned above (e.g., Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, et al., 2005). Performing the activities more frequently than this may inadvertently turn them into predictable, routine, or boring chores.

Also, consider ways that you might vary the activity you choose to engage in. For example, if your preferred activity is to express gratitude, think of how you could keep this feeling novel. One possibility is that you could focus in and expand on a different domain of life each week. For example, you might write about nature one week, your personal life the next, and your health the next. Ideally, each time you do this exercise, you will focus in on new things for which you can express gratitude, thereby finding more and more things that are worthy of your attention and appreciation.

As anyone who has achieved long-term weight loss, earned a college degree, or finished a marathon can attest, most meaningful successes in life do not come easily or quickly. In keeping with this notion, it is important to remember that improving your level of happiness requires committed effort. Research has found that those who have increased their happiness most successfully have been those individuals who have persisted with the intentional activities over the course of weeks or months (Dickerhoof et al., 2007; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). This means committing to both initiating and maintaining the happiness activities over a long period of time. As is the case with any goal, long-term commitment is required for success.

The activities described above do not work equally well for all. Accordingly, it is important to choose an activity that "fits" with your personality and goals. By fit, we mean that the activity feels natural and genuine to

you. For example, in reading the above descriptions, one type of exercise may have jumped out at you, because it felt very feasible and authentic. Another one may have felt slightly unreasonable, hokey, or unnatural. This is because your personality, strengths, interests, and values will predispose you to enjoy and benefit from certain activities more than others. For example, very shy people might feel more comfortable writing in a gratitude journal rather than doing acts of kindness, which might require what they perceive as awkward interactions with strangers. In short, the happiness activities really only work when this sense of fit exists (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, et al., 2005).

CONCLUSIONS

Despite research and theory to the contrary (Brickman & Campbell, 1971; Lykken & Tellegen, 1996), there is evidence, shown in the present chapter, that suggests that people can make long-term changes to their level of well-being. By engaging in certain intentional activities, such as expressing gratitude, visualizing one's best possible future self, and doing kind acts, individuals report increases in their happiness over periods of several weeks and even months. When implemented consistently and properly (meaning that the activity is well-timed, varied, and "fits" with the person doing it), these activities help change the way people think about and act in their daily lives. Surprising as it may be, we suggest that attaining lasting happiness does not require a large-scale overhaul of the conditions of one's life, but simply an effortful and habitual restructuring of daily behaviors and thoughts. In sum, recent research finds that the road to happiness is a lot closer than most people believe.

PERSONAL MINI-EXPERIMENTS

Start a Gratitude Journal

In this chapter, we discussed several activities that appear to create lasting improvements in people's levels of happiness. We describe these techniques in greater detail below, and hope that you will find one that works for you and will commit to using it regularly and habitually in your own life.

Choose a time of day when you have several minutes to "step outside" your life and thoughtfully reflect. It could be first thing in the morning, during lunch, or before bedtime. Think of three to five things for which you are currently grateful. These can range from minor events (the coworker who always smiles at you first thing in the morning, or the fact that your roommate took out the trash) to qualities of your life more broadly (your good health, a particular talent you have, or the positive qualities of your best friend). Do this task once a week to start. You may find that you would like to do it a little more often than that, and that is fine. The key is to tailor the activity to suit you best.

Having said that, research does show that people can get bored or weary of doing the exact same activity over and over, so our advice is to add some variety to the ways in which you express your gratitude. Some days, you may

choose to simply list a few of your so-called "blessings." Other days, you may want to expand on them and write about *why* you are grateful for them. You could also vary the domain—one day writing about gratitude for people, the next day writing about gratitude for nature, and so on. Sometimes, you may prefer to actually tell someone in person how grateful you are to have him or her in your life.

Think About Your "Best Possible Self": "Think about your best possible self" means that you imagine yourself in the future, after everything has gone as well as it possibly could. You have worked hard and succeeded at accomplishing all of your life goals. Think of this as the realization of your life dreams, and of your own best potentials.

Set aside 20 minutes, once a week, and sit down to reflect upon your best possible future self. Write a detailed description of what your life might be like. Focus on aspects of both your personal and your professional life and vary the domains you consider each week, such as your romantic relationship, your career goals, and your health.

Perform Acts of Kindness: In our daily lives, we all perform acts of kindness for others. These acts may be large or small and the person for whom the act is performed may or may not be aware of the act. Examples include feeding a stranger's parking meter, donating blood, helping a friend with homework, visiting an elderly relative, or writing a thank-you letter. For this exercise, perform five acts of kindness each week and vary them as much as you want. Choose one day during the week (e.g., a Monday or a Saturday) in which to do all five kind acts. The acts do not need to be for the same person, and the act may or may not be similar to the acts listed above. Do not perform any acts that may place yourself or others in danger.

Keep a "kindness journal" in which you write down the details of performing your kind acts at the end of the day in which you did them. You may want to describe exactly what you did, who benefited from your kind act, and—if applicable—their reaction. Also, make a note of how you felt before, during, and after each act.

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