

Whither Happiness?

When, How, and Why Might Positive Activities Undermine Well-Being

Megan M. Fritz & Sonja Lyubomirsky

University of California, Riverside

REFERENCE: Fritz, M. M., & Lyubomirsky, S. (in press). Whither happiness? When, how, and why might positive activities undermine well-being. In J. P. Forgas & R. F. Baumeister (Eds.), *The social psychology of living well*. New York: Psychology Press.

WHITHER HAPPINESS?

Abstract

The pursuit of happiness is ubiquitous around the world (Diener, 2000). Fortunately, decades of research suggest that people can increase their own happiness by intentionally engaging in positive activities like practicing gratitude or kindness (Lyubomirsky, 2008). Lyubomirsky and Layous's (2013) positive activity model suggests when and why positive activities are more (or less) successful at boosting happiness, thus highlighting the mediators and moderators underlying the relationship between positive activities and increased well-being. Little is currently known, however, about the conditions under which positive activities can actively backfire. We posit several key moderators and mechanisms by which performing presumably happiness-increasing activities may give rise to iatrogenic effects. That is, under what conditions might engaging in positive activities produce *unhappiness*?

WHITHER HAPPINESS?

Whither Happiness?

When, How, and Why Might Positive Activities Undermine Well-Being

Across the globe, most people desire happiness (Diener, 2000; Diener, Suh, Smith, & Shao, 1995), and this desire transcends differences in age, culture, geographical location, political beliefs, religion, and life experiences. The quest for the secret of how to increase and sustain happiness has preoccupied men and women for millennia, from the philosophers of ancient Athens to present-day scientists and scholars (Kesebir & Diener, 2008; McMahon, 2008). Although conceptualizations of happiness may shift across generations and cultures, the goal of attaining it remains ubiquitous (McMahon, 2008; Oishi, Graham, Kesebir, & Galinha, 2013).

Notably, happiness is desirable not just because it is pleasurable, but because it grants numerous benefits to both the individual and those around her (see also Frederickson, this volume). Happiness (or well-being)— which researchers define as the experience of frequent positive emotions relative to negative emotions, coupled with high life satisfaction— predicts, correlates, and begets success across multiple life domains, including work, relationships, and physical health (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005; see also von Hippel & Gonsalkorale; and Sheldon, this volume). Relative to their less happy counterparts, happy people have stronger interpersonal relationships, higher incomes, and superior physical and mental health; they receive more favorable job performance reviews, are more likely to get married, and live longer on average (e.g., Boehm & Kubzansky, 2012; Chida & Steptoe, 2008; Lyubomirsky, King, et al., 2005; Simpson, Farrell, Huelsnitz, & Eller, this volume). Positive emotions have also been shown to prompt greater creativity and prosocial behavior (see Lyubomirsky, King, et al., 2005, for a review). Happiness, therefore, does not only feel good—it *is* good. It pays to be happy not

WHITHER HAPPINESS?

just for the individual, but for his social network and his community at large. In this chapter, we will use the terms happiness and well-being interchangeably.

Almost two decades of research suggest that individuals can increase their well-being by engaging in so-called positive activities. Longitudinal randomized controlled trials have shown that purposeful and effortful performance of positive activities can markedly impact happiness, with average effect sizes of $r = .29$ for increasing well-being and $r = .31$ for decreasing depressive symptoms (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). These simple, self-administered positive activities are designed to increase well-being by mirroring the behaviors (or habits) that happy people naturally do. They include expressing gratitude or appreciation (Boehm, Lyubomirsky, & Sheldon, 2011; Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Froh, Sefrick, & Emmons, 2008; Layous, Lee, Choi, & Lyubomirsky, 2013; Lyubomirsky, Dickerhoof, Boehm, & Sheldon, 2011), doing kind acts for others (Chancellor, Margolis, Bao, & Lyubomirsky, 2017; Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008; Layous, Lee et al., 2013; Layous, Nelson, Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, & Lyubomirsky, 2012; Nelson, Layous, Cole, & Lyubomirsky, 2016; Pressman, Kraft, & Cross, 2014; see also Huppert, this volume), cultivating optimism (Boehm et al., 2011; Layous, Nelson, & Lyubomirsky, 2013; Lyubomirsky et al., 2011; Peters, Flink, Boersma, & Linton, 2010; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006), meditating on positive feelings toward the self (Neff & Germer, 2013) and others (Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008), and affirming one's most important values (Nelson, Fuller, Choi, & Lyubomirsky, 2014).

The Positive Activity Model: Summary and Evidence

Recent empirical investigation has shifted from simply focusing on *whether* activities like expressing gratitude or practicing kindness can increase happiness to asking *how*, *when*, *why*, and *for whom* they can do so. Our positive activity model (Figure 1, Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014;

WHITHER HAPPINESS?

Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013) offers predictions for the conditions under which various positive activities may be more (or less) effective at boosting well-being. This theoretical model identifies specific moderators and mediators underlying the relationship between positive activity engagement and increases in well-being. Key moderators pertain to the activity itself (e.g., how often is the behavior practiced and how novel is it), to the person performing it (e.g., how motivated the person is to become happier and if she believes the activity will work), or to the congruence between the two (e.g., person-activity fit). Hypothesized mediators, such as the satisfaction of psychological needs, suggest mechanisms by which positive activities operate to increase happiness.

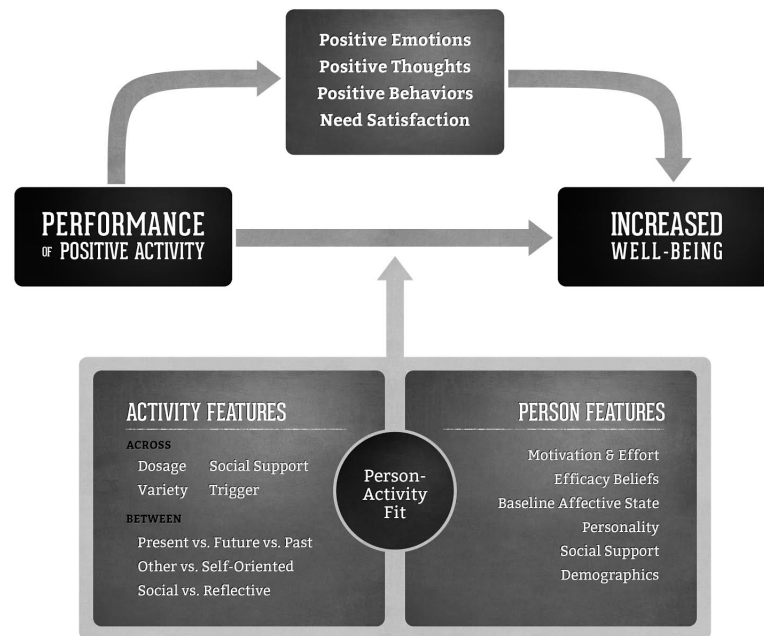


Figure 1. Model of the Psychological Mediators and Moderators Underlying the Efficacy of Practicing Positive Activities. Adapted with permission from “How Do Simple Positive Activities Increase Well-Being” by S. Lyubomirsky & K. Layous, 2013, *Current Directions in Psychological Science*.

WHITHER HAPPINESS?

Features of the Activity

Positive activity interventions—that is, randomized controlled experiments aimed to test the success of positive activities—are maximally beneficial under certain strategic conditions. First, like any behavioral or medical intervention, considerations about dosage (e.g., frequency and timing of administration) are critical. For example, one longitudinal study showed that participants who performed five kind acts per week for 6 weeks showed greater increases in well-being when all five acts were committed on a single day each week, rather than spread across the week (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). Thus, kindness interventions may be most effective when packaged in relatively strong and relatively infrequent doses. Furthermore, research on hedonic adaptation suggests that well-being benefits are stronger and more durable when positive activities are novel and varied, rather than repetitive and boring (Lyubomirsky, 2011). In support of this notion, participants in a 10-week kindness intervention reported stronger gains in well-being when they were instructed to vary their kind acts rather than perform the same kind act week after week (Sheldon, Boehm, & Lyubomirsky, 2012, Study 2).

Features of the Person

Person-level features may also impact the efficacy of positive activity interventions. Happiness seekers will likely obtain maximal benefit from engagement in a positive activity when they feel motivated to become happier (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Lyubomirsky et al., 2011), exert effort toward engaging in the activity (Layous, Lee et al., 2013; Lyubomirsky et al., 2011), and believe that the activity will be successful (Ajzen, 1991; Bandura, 1986; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Layous, Nelson et al., 2013). For example, in a quasi-experimental study, participants who deliberately chose to perform “happiness-increasing” exercises (versus doing “cognitive” exercises) and who mustered more effort (as assessed by observers) into the exercises showed

WHITHER HAPPINESS?

bigger gains in well-being (Lyubomirsky et al., 2011). Theory and research also suggest that baseline attitudes about happiness-increasing strategies (e.g., whether happiness is difficult to change and whether increasing happiness is an appropriate goal; Dweck & Leggett, 1988), as well as baseline affective state (e.g., whether one begins a happiness intervention in a healthy versus vulnerable position), moderate well-being outcomes (Cohn & Fredrickson, 2010; Nelson et al., 2014; see also Fiedler & Arslan, this volume). Cross-cultural work also suggests that intervention effects may differ based on the participant's culture. For example, optimism and gratitude interventions have been shown to increase well-being more strongly in European American participants relative to Asian American participants (Boehm et al., 2011); gratitude activities have stronger effects for participants in the United States than in South Korea (Layous, Lee et al., 2013); and kindness activities have stronger effects in Hong Kong Chinese (relative to Americans) when directed towards friends and family (versus strangers) (Shin & Lyubomirsky, 2017).

The Role of Person-Activity Fit

An additional factor to consider when designing the optimal happiness practice is the level of "fit" between the activity and the individual. In other words, certain activities appear to work best for certain individuals (Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014). For example, highly extraverted happiness seekers may reap more benefits from positive activities that require interacting with others, and interventions delivered online or via mobile app may be ideal for tech-savvy users (see also Amichai-Hamburger & Etgar; and Dunn & Dwyer, this volume). One study found that individuals' enjoyment of a positive activity was linked with both greater intervention adherence and increases in well-being (Schueller, 2010). Thus, features of the person may interact with features of the activity to promote or hinder well-being boosts.

WHITHER HAPPINESS?

Evidence for Mediators

The positive activity model also identifies potential mechanisms by which engagement in a particular positive activity will promote well-being. Positive activities generate well-being via increases in positive emotions, thoughts, and behaviors, as well as by satisfying psychological needs (i.e., autonomy, competence, and social connectedness; Deci & Ryan, 2000). For example, Fredrickson and colleagues (2008) found that participants who engaged in loving-kindness meditation experienced increases in personal resources (e.g., social relationships, physical health) and, in turn, reported greater life satisfaction, and this effect was mediated by increases in positive emotions (see also Fredrickson, this volume). Gratitude and optimism interventions have been shown to increase well-being by promoting positive construals of events—for example, people who practiced gratitude and optimism subsequently perceived their daily experiences as more satisfying (Dickerhoof, 2007; see also Huppert, this volume). Additionally, students assigned to pursue goals related to autonomy and connectedness showed increased well-being over a 6-month period, relative to students assigned to pursue goals related to their life circumstances (Sheldon et al., 2010).

Summary and New Questions

Taken together, the empirical and theoretical work we have described so far focuses on the fundamental question of when positive activities are successful at increasing well-being, and when they may have little to no effect. We propose here that the positive activity model can also be applied to suggest the circumstances in which positive activities might actively backfire. In other words, under what conditions might positive activities actually engender *unhappiness*? Little is known about when, why, and how happiness-increasing strategies can produce adverse effects (cf. McNulty & Fincham, 2012; see also Fiedler & Arslan, this volume). For example, in

WHITHER HAPPINESS?

what situations and for what types of individuals might gratitude lead people to feel resentful, guilty, indebted, morally inferior, conflicted, and/or uncomfortable? When might kindness lead people to feel taken advantage of, resentful, and overburdened? Accordingly, we discuss here the potential contraindications and iatrogenic effects of the pursuit of happiness.

When Might Positive Activities Backfire?

Activity Overdose

Just as particular activity-level characteristics may promote gains in well-being, such characteristics may also lead to unhappiness. For example, inappropriate, incorrect, or suboptimal dosage and timing of a positive activity may inadvertently undermine well-being.

Gratitude interventions may be particularly susceptible to the perils of “overdose.” In the oft-used counting blessings activity (Emmons & McCullough, 2003), individuals are asked to list things in their lives for which they are grateful. However, when people are obligated to think harder to come up with a list of items, they tend to use an effort-as-information heuristic, thereby judging harder-to-generate items to be less common (see Schwarz, Bless, Wanke, & Winkielman, 2003, for a review). For example, people asked to recall 12 examples of their own assertive behaviors subsequently rate themselves as less assertive than those asked to recall only 6 examples of their own assertive behaviors (Schwarz et al., 1991). This finding holds implications for list-based positive activity interventions, such as the counting blessings activity. If a happiness seeker is compelled to list too many blessings, she may find the exercise challenging and thus conclude that her life must not have many blessings, thus experiencing increased dismay, more sadness, and tempered well-being.

Additionally, gratitude interventions may be detrimental when administered too frequently. In a 6-week intervention, students were randomly assigned to count their blessings

WHITHER HAPPINESS?

once per week or three times per week, or to a wait-list control (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon et al., 2005). While students who counted their blessings once per week showed significant improvements in well-being, those who counted their blessings three times per week slightly decreased in well-being from baseline.

Kindness interventions may also backfire when administered in too high doses. For example, in Sheldon and colleagues' (2012, Study 2) examination of high- versus low-variety kindness interventions, participants instructed to repeat the same act of kindness (i.e., low-variety condition) for 10 consecutive weeks reported lower happiness on average at the end of the study, relative to baseline. In other words, this dosage of the kindness intervention did not merely fail to increase well-being; it appeared to have contributed to *reductions* in well-being. It is likely that performing the same kind act (e.g., doing a particular household chore) repeatedly for 10 weeks causes the act to feel stale, monotonous, and burdensome, producing negative emotions (e.g., resentment, tedium) and, hence, poor well-being outcomes.

Extremes of Motivation

The positive activity model indicates that the success of any given positive activity is moderated—that is, augmented—by the person's motivation to become happier (for empirical evidence, see Lyubomirsky et al., 2011). However, recent work suggests that *overvaluing* happiness (i.e., strongly agreeing with statements like “How happy I am at any given moment says a lot about how worthwhile my life is”; Mauss, Tamir, Anderson, & Savino, 2011) may be linked with lower well-being. In clinical populations, overvaluing happiness is associated with both self-reported and clinician-rated depressive symptoms (Ford, Shallcross, Mauss, Floerke, & Gruber, 2014). Experimental work also suggests that overvaluing happiness can paradoxically reduce it. In one study, participants who were randomly assigned to a happiness-valuation

WHITHER HAPPINESS?

condition reported lower positive affect and more negative affect during a positive experience (i.e., watching a “happy” film clip) than participants not so induced; however, this effect was not present during a negative experience (i.e., watching a “sad” film clip; Mauss et al., 2011). This finding suggests that individuals who are too highly motivated to become happier—those who are preoccupied with being happy and who seek happiness too often and too directly—may find themselves counterintuitively thwarting their own happiness (see also Forgas, this volume).

Overly motivated happiness-seekers may spend too much time monitoring their own well-being and emotions. Consequently, when a particular positive activity (say, expressing gratitude) does not elicit the expected degree of happiness, these individuals attribute the discrepancy to personal failings (e.g., “I’m doing something that is supposed to make me happy—why am I not happier?”; Gruber, Mauss, & Tamir, 2011), engendering negative emotions, dissatisfaction, and reduced happiness. Ultimately, the pursuit of happiness, regardless of one’s approach, may produce iatrogenic effects when one’s motivation and standards for reaching the goal of happiness are too high, when engagement in positive activities prompts high self-focus and a sense of entitlement to happiness, and when one’s explicit aim is the achievement of the goal (i.e., increased happiness) rather than enjoyment of the journey (Ford & Mauss, 2014; Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014; see also Fiedler & Arslan; and Forgas, this volume).

Person-Activity Misfit

When considering a positive activity intervention, happiness seekers are encouraged to maximize their benefits and adherence by choosing an activity that feels natural, meaningful, and enjoyable (Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014). However, it is likely that particular interactions

WHITHER HAPPINESS?

between aspects of the individual and the activity may not merely fail to produce well-being benefits, but instead, may markedly diminish happiness.

The positive activity model suggests that baseline affective state may impact the efficacy of a positive activity intervention. After all, if a person is already relatively high in well-being, she may not have much room for improvement; conversely, if she is experiencing too much acute distress or anxiety, she may experience limited improvement in well-being. However, it is also possible that baseline affective state may actively contribute to contraindications of positive activities. For example, consider an individual who is moderately depressed and is attempting to engage in a gratitude letter exercise. She may feel intensely lonely if she cannot think of anyone to whom she can express gratitude. Or, if she does identify an individual to whom she feels grateful, she may feel like a failure for having needed help in the first place, guilty for not having expressed gratitude sooner, or worthless for not having repaid the kind act. Experimental evidence supports the notion that gratitude activities can have detrimental effects for depressed or dysphoric individuals. Dysphoric students prompted to write a gratitude letter actually showed declines in well-being from before to after the intervention (Sin, Della Porta, & Lyubomirsky 2011). Thus, it seems that a person's baseline affective state can interact with the activity itself (in this case, expressing gratitude) and lead to person-activity misfit.

Another potential person-activity misfit could result from an incongruence between an individual's personality and their selected activity. In one study, students were assigned to participate in a campus-based kindness intervention that required them to perform kind acts for passers-by (Pressman et al., 2014). Although kindness-givers reported boosts in well-being on average, a small percentage of participants reported *poorer* well-being after the study. For these participants, engagement in a kindness activity reduced life satisfaction, diminished positive

WHITHER HAPPINESS?

affect, and heightened negative affect. Furthermore, discussions with study participants revealed that introverted and shy participants felt negative emotions such as discomfort and anxiety when approaching strangers to perform kind acts. These results suggest that aspects of personality may not simply impact who benefits more or less from engaging in kindness interventions: These interventions may actually undermine happiness among highly introverted individuals.

Finally, a mismatch between an individual's culture and the positive activity he or she chooses to engage in could also result in person-activity misfit and lead to an erosion in well-being. For example, a woman from Japan who attempts to build happiness by striving toward autonomy-related goals (e.g., making her own decisions independently; Sheldon et al., 2010) may find that the collectivist, interdependent perspectives inherent in her culture clash with the individualist nature of this activity. Although pursuing autonomy goals may fulfill her desire for more independence, self-sufficiency, and self-esteem, it may also be in conflict with the cultural expectation of social cohesion and obligation to the group, leading her to feel selfish or overly self-focused and thus diminishing well-being. Similarly, an individualist may experience dissonance or discomfort when expressing gratitude if he is socialized to be independent and not rely on others for help.

Mediators Gone Sour

In addition to the role of personality, Pressman and colleagues (2014) posit another reason that their kindness activity had iatrogenic effects for a subgroup of participants. When the kindness-recipients did not respond to the kindness-givers as expected (e.g., did not thank them properly), the givers likely experienced increased negative emotions (e.g., frustration, disappointment, resentment) and/or negative thoughts (e.g., questioning whether the kind act was appropriate or appreciated). These negative emotions and thoughts may subsequently have

WHITHER HAPPINESS?

dampened well-being. This account highlights one way that the mediating pathways proposed in the positive activity model not only suggest mechanisms by which positive activities work (or do not work), but the pathways by which positive activities engender unhappiness.

Individuals are likely to experience poorer well-being outcomes when positive activities produce negative (rather than positive) emotions, thoughts, and behaviors, or when they produce decrements (rather than boosts) in psychological need satisfaction (i.e., less connectedness, autonomy, and competence) (see Figure 1). For example, a gratitude exercise could make a person feel guilty, embarrassed, and/or indebted for not having thanked the benefactor sooner and bearing the burden of needing to reciprocate. Supporting these ideas, three experiments conducted in the U.S. and South Korea found that gratitude exercises were more likely to generate mixed emotions than other positive exercises (such as experiencing relief and recalling kind acts). In other words, practicing gratitude made people feel not only connected and uplifted but also guilty and indebted (Layous et al., 2017). Expressing gratitude may also lead individuals to feel ashamed for needing help in the first place, uncomfortable or awkward while trying to share their gratitude, conflicted about having needed help, or subordinate or socially inferior for having been in a position that required assistance. Thus, the happiness seeker may feel *less* autonomous and competent, as she needed someone else's assistance to achieve a goal she could not achieve on her own. She may also feel more resentful, and consequently *less* socially connected toward her benefactor. This combination of increased negative emotions and low psychological need satisfaction may bear the potential to reduce happiness in people trying to practice gratitude.

One perhaps surprising example of a positive activity that can trigger negative emotions, thoughts, and behaviors is doing acts of kindness. Kindnesses that are too lavish (like giving

WHITHER HAPPINESS?

away one's personal laptop or cellphone to a stranger) or too burdensome (like spending days helping a neighbor move) may promote feelings of resentment, frustration, or anger. The kindness-giver may perceive themselves as being taken advantage of or feel exploited or distressed. As mentioned above, the response of the kindness-recipient may also promote negative thoughts or behaviors that contribute to unhappiness. The kindness-giver may feel low autonomy if the recipient expects or demands the kind act, or she may feel incompetent if her kind act did not help the recipient as much as she had hoped. As a result, she may decide to stop engaging in such prosocial acts in the future or may even start acting more selfishly. Taken together, such factors clearly can contribute to poorer well-being outcomes in both the short-term and the long-term.

When positive activities result in reduced autonomy (one component of psychological need satisfaction), unhappiness is also likely to result. For example, in a study involving monetary donations, participants randomly assigned to donate freely showed increases in positive affect, while those forced to donate money showed marginally significant decreases in positive affect (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010). Inagaki and Orehek (in press) theorize that the requirement of positive activities to be autonomous in order to boost well-being also applies to another form of prosocial behavior—namely, providing support. For example, the association between chronic caregiving and reduced well-being may be partially explained by the caregivers' sense of necessity or obligation to help (Inagaki & Orehek, in press). Taken together, this work suggests that when positive activities are performed under conditions of low or no autonomy—that is, when positive activities are extrinsically motivated—they may reduce well-being. This phenomenon is consistent with classic work on cognitive dissonance, which has revealed that the perception of autonomy is critical to attitudinal shifts following a dissonance-inducing activity

WHITHER HAPPINESS?

(e.g., writing counterattitudinal essays; Baumeister & Tice, 1984; Linder, Cooper, & Jones, 1967).

The Social Costs of Positive Activities

Very little research has examined the potential costs of the types of positive activities we have been discussing on individuals other than the happiness seeker. Notably, targets of gratitude letters, recipients of kind acts, or partners of individuals trying to practice optimism or savoring may all be impacted.

Kindness interventions, for example, are inherently social or other-oriented—that is, they do not merely affect the person performing the kind act; typically, another individual is involved to receive the generosity. Intuitively, of course, receiving a kind act should always be a positive experience, yet the literature on social support shows that receiving aid can threaten self-efficacy, curb autonomy, and invoke feelings of indebtedness among recipients (Fisher, Nadler, & Whitcher-Alagna, 1982). Researchers suggest that social support may confer deleterious effects on intimate relationships, particularly when efforts to help misfire, undermine the recipient's sense of self-sufficiency, or draw attention to the challenge or stressor the helper was trying to ameliorate (Rafaeli & Gleeson, 2009). Happiness seekers engaging in prosocial behavior should ensure that they are responsive to the recipient's needs (Maisel & Gable, 2009) and ideally demonstrate their generosity face to face (see Dunn & Dwyer, 2017). They should also strive to avoid inducing guilt or indebtedness in the recipient, making the recipient feel weak, vulnerable, or like a burden, or blaming the recipient for his or her misfortunes or setbacks (cf. Bolger, Zuckerman, & Kessler, 2000; McClure et al., 2014).

Regarding targets of gratitude, cross-cultural research suggests that receiving an expression of gratitude may not be a purely positive experience in all contexts. In Western

WHITHER HAPPINESS?

cultures, for example, gratitude letters are frequently addressed to parents, but East Asian parents might feel insulted for being thanked for doing something they consider their parental duty. They may even feel disrespected by the implication that helping their child was optional. Such negative emotions may interfere with well-being, and, instead, foster dissatisfaction and unhappiness. Even in Western contexts, recipients of gratitude may feel awkward, uncomfortable, or indebted, thus impairing connectedness and relationship satisfaction.

Even individuals only proximally connected to the happiness seeker might suffer adverse effects on their well-being. In one study, company employees who witnessed acts of kindness in the workplace (i.e., participants who interacted with kindness-recipients) appeared to experience unfavorable social comparisons (Chancellor et al., 2017). It seems that merely viewing others receiving assistance may invoke negative thoughts and emotions for observers, who may wonder, “Why is everyone suddenly so nice to my colleagues and not to me?” While this effect requires far more empirical investigation and replication, it is possible that *not* being selected as a target of a kind act may functionally diminish happiness.

Implications and Conclusions

In this chapter, we have put forward a number of pathways by which so-called positive activities might undermine well-being instead of lifting it. We believe that it is critical to study when, how, and why happiness-increasing activities can actually make people less (rather than more) happy not just because this phenomenon is counterintuitive, but because well-being scientists can learn a great deal about when such practices will “work” by learning about when they will not work.

For example, if counting too many blessings is found to trigger feelings of disenchantment and alarm, then researchers will be galvanized to test what precise optimal

WHITHER HAPPINESS?

dosage of counting blessings is necessary to trigger feelings of elevation, connectedness, and contentment. By the same token, after learning that expressing gratitude sometimes makes people feel less (rather than more) happy, gratitude scientists may be inspired to design a gratitude practice that could deliver the perfect mix of positive and negative emotions necessary to motivate the individual to be a better person. In previous work (Armenta, Fritz, & Lyubomirsky, in press), we have proposed that gratitude can stimulate self-improvement (e.g., “Now that I recognize how much my parents have supported me throughout my education, I want to prove myself worthy of their kindness by being the best student possible”). However, this process may operate most successfully when the expression of gratitude produces enough positive emotion (e.g., feeling uplifted and supported by others) to motivate the person to approach goals, but also enough negative emotion (e.g., feeling guilty and indebted) to recognize the need to do so.

This idea that although the practice of gratitude may sometimes “feel bad,” but that the lingering unpleasant feelings may light a fire of change, suggests that sometimes the backfiring effects of positive activities may actually not be backfiring effects at all, but may instead represent adaptive processes. Indeed, according to evolutionary theorists, occasional negative emotions, combined with mild positive emotions, appear to be the most adaptive combination for humans (see Diener, Kanazawa, Suh, & Oishi, 2015; von Hippel & Gonsalkorale; and Forgas, this volume). Future investigators would do well to establish when, why, and how the apparent well-being-undermining effects of some positive activities under particular conditions may produce beneficial outcomes in the short-term or long-run.

Finally, but not unimportantly, as McNulty and Fincham eloquently proposed in 2012, well-being scientists should reconsider using the term “positive” to refer to positive activities,

WHITHER HAPPINESS?

positive processes, and positive constructs. The evidence presented here persuasively suggests that positive activities (like expressing gratitude and doing acts of kindness) can have adverse impacts. To call them positive may not only be inaccurate but uninformative.

Our review, however, is clearly only the beginning, highlighting a few areas in which empirical evidence is emerging and many more areas in which it is scarce or lacking. Given mounting evidence suggesting that small and simple self-administered activities can transform people into happier and more flourishing individuals, it is critical to focus more empirical attention on what may not be “positive” about such practices and habits.

WHITHER HAPPINESS?

References

- Ajzen, I. (1991). The theory of planned behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Processes, 50*, 179–211.
- Amichai-Hamburger, Y., & Etgar, S. (2017). Internet and wellbeing. To appear in J. P. Forgas & R. F. Baumeister (Eds.), *The social psychology of living well*. New York: Psychology Press.
- Armenta, C. N., Fritz, M., & Lyubomirsky, S. (in press). Functions of positive emotions: Gratitude as a motivator of self-improvement and positive change. *Emotion Review*.
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Baumeister, R. F., & Tice, D. M. (1984). Role of self-presentation and choice in cognitive dissonance under forced compliance: Necessary or sufficient causes? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 46*, 5-13.
- Boehm, J.K., & Kubzansky, L. D. (2012). The heart's content: The association between positive psychological well-being and cardiovascular health. *Psychological Bulletin, 138*, 655-691.
- Boehm, J. K., Lyubomirsky, S., & Sheldon, K. M. (2011). A longitudinal experimental study comparing the effectiveness of happiness-enhancing strategies in Anglo Americans and Asian Americans. *Cognition & Emotion, 25*, 1263–1272.
- Bolger, N., Zuckerman, A., & Kessler, R. C. (2000). Invisible support and adjustment to stress. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 79*, 953.
- Chancellor, J., Margolis, S. M., Bao, K. J., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2017). *Everyday prosociality in the workplace: The benefits of giving, getting, and glimpsing*. Manuscript under review.

WHITHER HAPPINESS?

- Chida, Y., & Steptoe, A. (2008). Positive psychological well-being and mortality: A quantitative review of prospective observational studies. *Psychosomatic Medicine, 70*, 741-756.
- Cohn, M. A., & Fredrickson, B. L. (2010). In search of durable positive psychology interventions: Predictors and consequences of long-term positive behavior change. *Journal of Positive Psychology, 5*, 355-366.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and wellbeing. *American Psychologist, 55*, 68-78.
- Dickerhoof, R. M. (2007). Expressing optimism and gratitude: A longitudinal investigation of cognitive strategies to increase wellbeing. *Dissertation Abstracts International, 68*, 4174 (UMI No. 3270426).
- Diener, E. (2000). Subjective well-being: The science of happiness and a proposal for a national index. *American Psychologist, 55*, 34-43.
- Diener, E., Kanazawa, S., Suh, E. M., & Oishi, S. (2015). Why people are in a generally good mood. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 19*, 235-256.
- Diener, E., Suh, E. M., Smith, H., & Shao, L. (1995). National differences in reported subjective well-being: Why do they occur? *Social Indicators Research, 34*, 7-32.
- Dunn, E. W., Aknin, L. B., & Norton, M. I. (2008). Spending money on others promotes happiness. *Science, 319*, 1687-1688.
- Dunn, E. W., & Dwyer, R. J. (2017). The future of happiness. To appear in J. P. Forgas & R. F. Baumeister (Eds.), *The social psychology of living well*. New York: Psychology Press.
- Dweck, C. S., & Leggett, E. L., (1988). A social-cognitive approach to motivation and personality. *Psychological Review, 95*, 256-273.

WHITHER HAPPINESS?

- Emmons, R. A., & McCullough, M. E. (2003). Counting blessings versus burdens: An experimental investigation of gratitude and subjective well-being in daily life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 84*, 377-389.
- Fiedler, K., & Arslan, P. (2017). From a hedonic perspective on the good life to an analysis of underlying adaptive principles. To appear in J. P. Forgas & R. F. Baumeister (Eds.), *The social psychology of living well*. New York: Psychology Press.
- Fisher, J. D., Nadler, A., & Whitcher-Alagna, S. (1982). Recipient reactions to aid. *Psychological Bulletin, 91*, 27.
- Ford, B.Q. & Mauss, I.B. (2014). The paradoxical effects of pursuing positive emotion: When and why wanting to feel happy backfires. In *Positive emotion: Integrating the light sides and dark sides* (1st ed., pp. 363-381). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ford, B. Q., Shallcross, A. J., Mauss, I. B., Floerke, V. A., & Gruber, J. (2014). Desperately seeking happiness: Valuing happiness is associated with symptoms and diagnosis of depression. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 33*, 890-905.
- Forgas, J. P. (2017). Negative affect and the good life: On the cognitive, motivational, and interpersonal benefits of negative mood. To appear in J. P. Forgas & R. F. Baumeister (Eds.), *The social psychology of living well*. New York: Psychology Press.
- Fredrickson, B. L. (2017). Biological underpinnings of positive emotions and purpose. To appear in J. P. Forgas & R. F. Baumeister (Eds.), *The social psychology of living well*. New York: Psychology Press.
- Fredrickson, B. L., Cohn, M. A., Coffey, K. A., Pek, J., & Finkel, S. M. (2008). Open hearts build lives: Positive emotions, induced through loving-kindness meditation, build

WHITHER HAPPINESS?

- consequential personal resources. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *95*, 1045-1062.
- Froh, J. J., Sefick, W. J., & Emmons, R. A. (2008). Counting blessings in early adolescents: An experimental study of gratitude and subjective well-being. *Journal of School Psychology*, *46*, 213–233.
- Gruber, J., Mauss, I. B., & Tamir, M. (2011). The dark side of happiness. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *6*, 222-233.
- Huppert, F. A. (2017). Living life well: The role of mindfulness and compassion. To appear in J. P. Forgas & R. F. Baumeister (Eds.), *The social psychology of living well*. New York: Psychology Press.
- Inagaki, T. K., & Orehek, E. (in press). On the benefits of giving social support: When, why, and how support providers gain by caring for others. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*.
- Kesebir, P. & Diener, E. (2008). In pursuit of happiness: Empirical answers to philosophical questions. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *3*, 117-125.
- Layous, K., Lee, H., Choi, I., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2013). Culture matters when designing a successful happiness-increasing activity: A comparison of the United States and South Korea. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, *44*, 1294-1303.
- Layous, K., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2014). The how, why, what, when, and who of happiness: Mechanisms underlying the success of positive interventions. In J. Gruber & J. Moskowitz (Eds.), *Positive emotion: Integrating the light sides and dark sides* (pp. 473-495). New York: Oxford University Press.

WHITHER HAPPINESS?

- Layous, K., Nelson, S. K., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2013). What is the optimal way to deliver a positive activity intervention? The case of writing about one's best possible selves. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 14*, 635-654.
- Layous, K., Nelson, S. K., Oberle, E., Schonert-Reichl, K., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2012). Kindness counts: Prompting prosocial behavior in preadolescents boosts peer acceptance and well-being. *PLOS ONE, 7*, e51380.
- Layous, K., Sweeny, K., Armenta, C., Na, S., Choi, I., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2017). *The proximal experience of gratitude*. Manuscript under review.
- Linder, D. E., Cooper, J., & Jones, E. E. (1967). Decision freedom as a determinant of the role of incentive magnitude in attitude change. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 6*, 245-254.
- Lyubomirsky, S. (2008). *The how of happiness: A scientific approach to getting the life you want*. New York: Penguin Press.
- Lyubomirsky, S. (2011). Hedonic adaptation to positive and negative experiences. In S. Folkman (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of stress, health, and coping* (pp. 200-224). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lyubomirsky, S., Dickerhoof, R., Boehm, J. K., & Sheldon, K. M. (2011). Becoming happier takes both a will and a proper way: An experimental longitudinal intervention to boost well-being. *Emotion, 11*, 391-402.
- Lyubomirsky, S., King, L., & Diener, E. (2005). The benefits of frequent positive affect: Does happiness lead to success? *Psychological Bulletin, 131*, 803-855.
- Lyubomirsky, S., & Layous, K. (2013). How do simple positive activities increase well-being? *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 22*, 57-62.

WHITHER HAPPINESS?

- Maisel, N. C., & Gable, S. L. (2009). The paradox of received social support: The importance of responsiveness. *Psychological Science, 20*, 928–932.
- Mauss, I. B., Tamir, M., Anderson C. L., & Savino, N. S. (2011). Can seeking happiness make people unhappy? Paradoxical effects of valuing happiness. *Emotion, 11*, 807-815.
- McClure, M. J., Xu, J. H., Craw, J. P., Lane, S. P., Bolger, N., & Shrout, P. E. (2014). Understanding the costs of support transactions in daily life. *Journal of Personality, 82*, 563-574.
- McMahon, D. M. (2008). The pursuit of happiness in history. In M. Eid & R. J. Larsen (Eds.), *The science of subjective well-being* (pp. 80-93). New York: Guilford Press.
- McNulty, J. K., & Fincham, F. D. (2012). Beyond positive psychology?: Toward a contextual view of psychological processes and well-being. *American Psychologist, 67*, 101-110.
- Neff, K. D., & Germer, C. K. (2013). A pilot study and randomized controlled trial of the Mindful Self-Compassion program. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 69*, 28-44.
- Nelson, S. K., Fuller, J. A. K., Choi, I., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2014). Beyond self-protection: Self-affirmation benefits hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 40*, 998-1011.
- Nelson, S. K., Layous, K., Cole, S., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2016). Do unto others or treat yourself?: The effects of prosocial and self-focused behavior on psychological flourishing. *Emotion, 16*, 850-861.
- Oishi, S., Graham, J., Kesebir, S., & Galinha, I. C. (2013). Concepts of happiness across time and cultures. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 39*, 559-577.

WHITHER HAPPINESS?

Peters, M. L., Flink, I. K., Boersma, K., & Linton, S. J. (2010). Manipulating optimism: Can imagining a best possible self be used to increase positive future expectancies? *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 5*, 204–211.

Pressman, S. D., Kraft, T. L., & Cross, M. P. (2014). It's good to do good and receive good: The impact of a 'pay it forward' style kindness intervention on giver and receiver well-being. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 10*, 293-302.

Rafaeli, E., & Gleeson, M. E. (2009). Skilled support in intimate relationships. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 1*, 20-37.

Schueller, S. M. (2010). Preferences for positive psychology exercises. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 5*, 192–203.

Schwarz, N., Bless, H., Strack, F., Klumpp, G., Rittenauer-Schatka, H., & Simons, A. (1991). Ease of retrieval as information: Another look at the availability heuristic. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 61*, 195-202.

Schwarz, N., Bless, H., Wanke, M., & Winkielman, P. (2003). Accessibility revisited. In G. V. Bodenhausen & A. J. Lambert (Eds.), *Foundations of social cognition: A festschrift in honor of Robert S. Wyer, Jr.* (pp. 51-77). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Sheldon, K. M. (2017). Understanding the good life: Eudaimonic living involves well-doing, not well-being. To appear in J. P. Forgas & R. F. Baumeister (Eds.), *The social psychology of living well*. New York: Psychology Press.

Sheldon, K. M., Abad, N., Ferguson, Y., Gunz, A., Houser-Marko, L., Nichols, C. P., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2010). Persistent pursuit of need-satisfying goals leads to increased

WHITHER HAPPINESS?

- happiness: A 6-month experimental longitudinal study. *Motivation and Emotion*, 34, 39-48.
- Sheldon, K. M., Boehm, J. K., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2012). Variety is the spice of happiness: The hedonic adaptation prevention (HAP) model. In I. Boniwell & S. David (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of happiness* (pp. 901-914). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sheldon, K. M., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2006). How to increase and sustain positive emotion: The effects of expressing gratitude and visualizing best possible selves. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 1, 73-82.
- Shin, L. J., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2017). Recalling kind acts for close others vs. strangers in Hong Kong Chinese and European Americans. Paper to be presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, San Antonio, TX.
- Simpson, J. A., Farrell, A. K., Huelsnitz, C. O., & Eller, J. (2017). Early social experiences and living well: A longitudinal view of adult physical health. To appear in J. P. Forgas & R. F. Baumeister (Eds.), *The social psychology of living well*. New York: Psychology Press.
- Sin, N. L., Della Porta, M. D., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2011). Tailoring positive psychology interventions to treat depressed individuals. In S. I. Donaldson, M. Csikszentmihalyi, & J. Nakamura (Eds.), *Applied positive psychology: Improving everyday life, health, schools, work, and society* (pp. 79-96). New York: Routledge.
- Sin, N. L., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2009). Enhancing well-being and alleviating depressive symptoms with Positive Psychology Interventions: A practice friendly meta-analysis. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 65, 467-487.

WHITHER HAPPINESS?

von Hippel, W., & Gonsalkorale, K. (2017). Evolutionary imperatives and the good life. To appear in J. P. Forgas & R. F. Baumeister (Eds.), *The social psychology of living well*. New York: Psychology Press.

Weinstein, N., & Ryan, R. M. (2010). When helping helps: Autonomous motivation for prosocial behavior and its influence on well-being for the helper and recipient. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 98, 222-244.