ASSOCIATION FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE

The Road to Happiness Is Paved With a Little Gold, a Lot of Reporters, Many E-Mails, Thousands of Frequent Flyer Miles, and 604 Hours of Writing

Perspectives on Psychological Science
2019, Vol. 14(1) 26–28

DOI: 10.1177/1745691618808516
www.psychologicalscience.org/PPS
SAGE

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On my first day of graduate school—almost 30 years ago—I took a walk around campus with my new Ph.D. advisor, Lee Ross. I don't remember who asked the question first (but I would put my money on Lee): "Why are some people happier than others?" That question jump-started a long-standing program of research into the how and why of well-being—descriptive and correlational studies in the first decade (Lyubomirsky, 2001), followed by controlled experiments to test whether and how people can deliberately shift their happiness upward (Lyubomirsky, 2007; Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013).

In the early years, studying well-being did not appear to be a wise or well-regarded choice. Outside of Ed Diener's early but already ground-breaking work (Diener, 1984), the subject matter was considered to be elusive, unscientific, "soft," and "fuzzy." In the popular press, the situation was far worse, with happiness bearing all the hallmarks of a fad. The market was saturated with newspaper and magazine pieces, television documentaries, and self-help books on the topic, perhaps a symptom of the 20th-century individualist Western zeitgeist. (Our early 21st century world is similar, only more so: Digital media in the form of blogs, YouTube videos, podcasts, and Twitter challenges amplify and propagate any single scientific kernel, however preliminary, within days or hours.)

After I joined the faculty at the University of California, Riverside in 1994, my friends inside and outside of academia began urging me to write a book about my well-being research. For about 10 years, I said that I did not know enough. Finally, still not knowing enough but realizing that lay authors who knew even less would write that book anyway, I found a literary agent—a necessity for popular books if not for scholarly ones. Over several months of writing and revising, he helped me develop a prospectus (proposal) for a trade book. My agent then shopped the prospectus to editors at particular publishing houses whom he believed might take an interest in the topic.

Originally titled *Feeling Great*, a play on David Burns's influential best-seller, *Feeling Good* (1980), the prospectus aimed to interpret and translate well-being science—still relatively young and with few replications—for the public. At this time, in the early aughts, the vast majority of books and other writings about happiness were based primarily on opinion or anecdotal evidence and relatively uninformed by empirical data. Meanwhile, the average person was unaware of findings that were disseminated formally and informally only in scientific circles or published in technical academic journals beyond the reach of the nonexpert. If this description characterizes the field you work in today, then readers may welcome an accessible perspective from an expert.

I connected best with the team that also made the strongest offer (Penguin Press), signed a contract with a standard 1-year deadline, and commenced writing immediately. Fortunately, because the prospectus had already forced me to create a table of contents and to think through the content of each chapter, the structure was already in place. Essentially, the process entailed reviewing the literature and describing the ideas and findings contained therein—akin to writing a series of extended *Current Directions in Psychological Science* papers, but with many more anecdotes, stories, and analogies. I worked on the book while teaching and doing research full-time, forcing myself to write at least 90 min each day. Working closely with an editor

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(actually two—the publishing industry has notoriously high turnover) was a little déjà vu, making me feel like a graduate student all over again, but their feedback was extremely valuable. I sincerely enjoyed this type of popular writing—it calls for a great deal more creativity, inventiveness, flexibility, and (frankly) fun than academic writing. But anyone well practiced in the academic "formula" will find writing for lay readers rather challenging. I rewrote sentences many, many more times than I do for academic papers, and I was perpetually looking for the perfect example, quote, or current event to illuminate a discovery or concept.

In 2006, as I was working on the book, it was uncommon—with some notable exceptions—for academic psychologists to write trade books. At worst, the practice was frowned on and, at best, viewed as too large a time investment that results in a single line on your CV and that takes you away from the (laboratory) work that really matters. Today, many more colleagues are disseminating their research to broader audiences via books, podcasts, blogs, and social media, yet the practice is still not widely accepted or admired, especially before tenure. Indeed, I could have held a lot of office hours or written multiple papers during the 604 hours I spent writing and revising my first book. (Not including reading and thinking—yes, I counted.)

Impacts/Rewards

The How of Happiness (newly titled) was initially published in December 2007, and it is no exaggeration to say that it changed my life, almost overnight. In this article, I hope to convey to colleagues the rewards and benefits of trade book publishing. Aside from the obvious financial perks, there is the reward of stepping outside your academic routine, preempting burnout, inspiring new ideas and a big-picture perspective, working outside your comfort zone, and learning totally new skills. Writing for a broader audience can also reenergize your passion for research if you find it waning.

For me, the book became an instant portal into a different world, one that involved communicating almost daily with the public. This happened through media interviews and appearances, op-eds and other popular pieces, and public lectures to a variety of audiences around the world (educators, physicians, police, executives, lawyers, parishioners, even dockworkers). I had the opportunity to share my expertise in ways that I could have never envisioned in graduate school and to meet many smart and interesting people.

Here is something I did not predict. Publishing the book and interacting almost daily with media had unexpected benefits to my academic life as well. The biggest was a sudden increased ability to attract excellent Ph.D. students, who first learned about me not through my scholarly publications but through the *How of Happiness*. In addition, the exposure gave me opportunities to collaborate on research with scientists from other fields or with companies and organizations offering intriguing samples or contexts to work with. One such opportunity led to the development of a *How of Happiness* application (Live Happy) in the very early days of the Apple app store. Not only did Live Happy end up disseminating my research to a wider—and younger—audience, but user feedback indicated that it helped individuals who might never pick up a self-improvement book to appreciably raise their well-being. As another example, my speeches in the United States and abroad caught the attention of stakeholders in companies, hospitals, clinics, schools, and universities that led to the development or refinement of wellness programs for employees, students, and individuals seeking mental-health care.

Obstacles and Challenges

One has much less control over how one's work is interpreted or applied when it is "out there in the world" than when it stays in scholarly outlets and conference presentations. One of the biggest challenges of disseminating research on well-being to a lay audience has been seeing my words being misinterpreted and then seeing those misinterpretations go viral. My advice to my own past self and others is to include careful caveats about what any particular research finding or idea means and how it should (and should not) be applied, as well as to take the time to clarify and respond to misinterpretations.

On the bright side, I have had the satisfaction of receiving many e-mails from individuals or organizations describing in detail how my book touched their lives; some of these accounts provided insights or ideas for future research questions. But I also receive plenty of criticism, derision, and even hate mail.

Finally, discussions of the credibility revolution (e.g., Vazire, 2018) sometimes mention the rewards and pressures of media attention as an incentive to publish findings that have not been replicated or vetted. I agree that this is a danger and should not be ignored. I also want to emphasize that communicating with the media is hard—incredibly time-consuming, repetitious, often exasperating, and sometimes futile. The rewards are great, but, as with academia, they may be indirect or intermittent.

Concluding Words

In sum, the payoffs of communicating about science with the public are enormous, and I urge colleagues, both young and seasoned, who have interest to try it. If you do, your reach is likely to expand considerably. I offer two comparisons. First, my most cited article has been cited more than 5,000 times. By contrast, the *How of Happiness* has sold in the ballpark of 300,000 copies globally. Second, 18 months after launching a free e-course on *The How of Happiness* and *The Myths of Happiness* (my second book), approximately 21,000 students had taken it; this number, although assuredly much lower than for MOOCs (massive open online courses), happens to be several times greater than all the undergraduate and graduate students whom I have taught in my entire career. I am not much of a blogger, but if you are, consider this: If one of your blog posts has received 4,000 views, it will arguably have a higher impact than your article in a high-impact journal that receives 400 views (or 40 citations).

Most veteran academics are well aware of how research can contribute to teaching and how teaching can inform research. For example, you are compelled to lecture on a paradigm or theory that you never knew about (or long forgot), and this reexamination inspires a clever new idea. Analogously, communicating with a broader audience can also enrich your research, because it forces you to understand it on a deeper level. When I was an undergraduate, I had to present my honors thesis to a committee of faculty and, because it was a rather complicated social-cognition experiment, I had trouble summarizing it. My advisor said, "If you can't write down the premise of your honors thesis on the back of a business card, then you have no business being here." Looking back, my failure to simplify that long-ago experiment was a sign that I had not truly grasped it.

When you are forced to clarify your ideas or simplify research findings in ways that nonpsychologists can understand, you may gain insight into the core or essence of that finding or idea. But be mindful that when you simplify too much, then you risk not just being less precise but being wrong. There is no free lunch.

Action Editor

June Gruber served as action editor and interim editor-in-chief for this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared that there were no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

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