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*Editors*

# The Happy Mind: Cognitive Contributions to Well-Being

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# Chapter 6

## Staying Happier

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**Abstract** As many happiness seekers inevitably discover, human beings are remarkably susceptible to hedonic adaptation—the process of becoming accustomed to positive life changes. Even if individuals observe short-term increases in happiness, how can they avoid the natural erosion of happiness over time? Can anyone ever *stay* happier? In the present chapter, we review the mechanisms underlying hedonic adaptation to positive experiences and present evidence that sheds light on how people can deliberately prevent or slow it down. We argue that the intentional, effortful use of positive activities can produce and sustain significant increases in happiness.

### Introduction

A true saying it is, ‘Desire hath no rest;’ is infinite in itself, endless; and as one calls it, a perpetual rack, or horse-mill, [...] still going round as in a ring.’ – St. Augustine

Most people want to be happy (Diener, 2000). Indeed, the pursuit of happiness is such a basic human need that the U.S. founding fathers wrote it into the Declaration of Independence on equal footing with life and liberty. Yet the right to pursue happiness, as many a happiness seeker inevitably discovers, does not guarantee its attainment. For many, happiness is a moving target that often writhes perpetually further out of reach.

Positive and negative events happen to everyone, and research shows that human beings are remarkably adept at adapting (Lyubomirsky, 2011). While adaptation to negative events, such as losing a loved one or becoming paralyzed, can be a blessing—helping individuals overcome adversity—adaptation to positive events is less so. We finally obtain that promotion at work or buy that new convertible, then months or years pass, and our initial joy loses that certain *je ne sais quoi* it once held. Our shiny, new baubles become lackluster, and our most exhilarating achievements lose their thrill. As St. Augustine prophesized, our desire is endless and has no rest; it keeps escalating. One day sooner or later, we become like Veruca Salt in

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*Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*—the girl who wanted the golden goose, then macaroons, a million balloons, and performing baboons. We want more and we want it now.

This observed tendency of people to adapt to the emotion-relevant change catalyzed by positive or negative events has been called hedonic adaptation or the “hedonic treadmill” (Brickman & Campbell, 1971; Frederick & Lowenstein, 1999). This notion likens the pursuit of happiness to a person on a treadmill, who has to keep running at an ever-increasing pace just to stay in the same place. On the one hand, as illustrated above, hedonic adaptation is an adaptive human strategy that helps individuals recover from the slings and arrows of negative experience. On the other hand, research suggests that adaptation to positive experience is a significant impediment to happiness seekers, implying that the pursuit of happiness is ultimately doomed to failure. However, as will be elucidated in the sections that follow, there is far more to the story.

## Research on Hedonic Adaptation

### *Adaptation to Negative Events*

Negative events are a part of every life, and some are worse than others. From job losses, accidents, financial crises and illnesses to divorces, deaths of loved ones, and natural disasters, nearly half of all U.S. adults will experience at least one traumatic event in their lifetimes (Ozer & Weiss, 2004), and almost everyone will occasionally endure moderate to severe daily stress (Weinstein, 1982).

Fortunately, people show a remarkable ability to adapt even to profoundly adverse life events. However, evidence suggests that, on average, they adapt better to some negative events than others. For example, 1 to 60 months after breast cancer surgery, the majority of patients reported that their lives had been changed for the better (Taylor, Lichtman, & Wood, 1984), but 16 months after the building of a new major highway, residents were still not adjusted to the traffic noise (Weinstein, 1982). These studies, however, are limited in that they lack a pre-event baseline for researchers to determine how much adaptation actually took place.

Prospective longitudinal studies do not share this limitation. In a 19-year panel study following more than 30,000 German participants, Lucas (2007a) found that in the first year after the onset of a disability, participants experienced a decrease in happiness that was followed by little adaptation over time. Participants from the same data set who became unemployed (Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2004), divorced (Lucas, 2005), or widowed (Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2003) also reported significantly reduced well-being that, on average, never fully recovered.

Anusic, Yap, and Lucas (2014) replicated many of these results using the Swiss Household Panel (SHP), a longitudinal study that includes over 19,000 individuals

from 7500 households. Both unemployment and widowhood were found to be associated with long-lasting negative effects on life satisfaction, but these declines could be attributable to normative, age-related changes that would have occurred even in the absence of the event. However, disability was uniquely associated with long-term drops in life satisfaction over and above normative declines (Anusic et al., 2014). Although these longitudinal studies elucidate whether people adapt to a variety of negative events, the naturalistic study designs prohibited random assignment to an experimental or control condition. Thus, causal inferences cannot be drawn, and confounding or spurious relationships may partially explain some of the findings.

### *Adaptation to Positive Events*

Positive events play a unique function in the pursuit of happiness, because many people believe that the secret to happiness is to experience as many positive events as possible and to achieve certain personal goals (Lyubomirsky, 2013). Robert J. Hasting's essay "The Station" encapsulates this idea expertly:

"When we get to the station that will be it!" we cry. [...] "When I buy a new 450 SL Mercedes Benz that will be it! When I win a promotion that will be it! [...] I shall live happily ever after!"

In other words, people often try to change their life circumstances to achieve greater happiness. Unfortunately, this is a rather ineffective strategy because people adapt to positive events much like they adapt to negative ones. Few published cross-sectional and longitudinal studies have focused on adaptation to positive events, and thus the empirical literature in this area is relatively limited. Yet remarkably, the research that does exist suggests that individuals adapt to positive events fairly rapidly and completely.

**Winning the Lottery** How many people dream of winning the lottery? When considering adaptation to positive events, one of the most often cited studies found that Illinois State Lottery winners (who had won \$50,000 to \$1,000,000 in 1970s dollars from 1 to 18 months earlier) were no happier than controls (who experienced no such windfall) and took significantly less pleasure from a series of mundane events (Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978). This finding suggests that hedonic adaptation to lottery wins was relatively speedy and complete.

**Getting Married** Although the share of married adults has declined from 72% in 1960 to 50% in 2013 (Pew Research Center, 2014), a majority of Americans marry at least once during their lifetimes or wish to get married some day (Newport & Wilke, 2013a). To be sure, marriage continues to be a positive event that many people eagerly await. However, Lucas and his colleagues (2003) found that German residents who married during a 15-year period of a longitudinal study initially experienced a significant increase in well-being, but reverted to their baseline happiness

after an average of 2 years. Clark and Georgellis (2012) reported similar findings using 18 waves of panel data that followed 10,300 individuals drawn from 250 areas in Great Britain. The study found that people tended to undergo a boost in happiness prior to marriage as they became engaged, anticipated their wedding, and eventually got married. However, like the German sample, over time these British residents eventually fully adapted to marriage within 2 years on average (Clark & Georgellis, 2012; Clark et al., 2008). This short-term boost in well-being was replicated in Swiss household panel data, suggesting that people's life satisfaction levels after marriage are not much different from pre-marriage baselines (Anusic et al., 2014). However, in taking normative changes into account, married participants may have been happier than they would have been if they remained single (due to age-related declines in life satisfaction in the sample over time). In sum, these findings indicate that adaptation to marriage may be fairly complete, but married people may still be happier than single people.

**Starting a New Job** Many people are deeply dissatisfied with their present jobs, and dream of switching careers. However, a longitudinal study found complete adaptation to a new professional position (Boswell, Boudreau, & Tichy, 2005). Boswell et al. (2005) followed high-level managers for 5 years before and after making a voluntary job change, and found that managers experienced an increase in job satisfaction immediately after switching jobs (termed the honeymoon effect), followed by a decline in job satisfaction within a year (the so-called hangover effect). By contrast, high-level managers who chose not to switch jobs during the same time period showed relatively stable levels of job satisfaction.

**Birth of a Child** More than 9 in 10 adults report that they already have children, are planning to have children, or wish they had children (Newport & Wilke, 2013b). Given the ubiquity of this goal, it is not surprising that many individuals believe they will finally attain happiness with the birth of their first child. However, Clark and Georgellis (2012) found evidence for adaptation to this positive event in the British panel data. Here, they discovered a sharp contrast between men and women. Female life satisfaction remained high 3 years before and leading up to the birth of a child, perhaps in part due to the happy anticipation of motherhood. However, after the birth of a child, female life satisfaction quickly reverted to its baseline level. In contrast, the life satisfaction of men was not affected by the newborn.

Other research has reported that although women experience a greater initial boost in well-being upon becoming a parent, males and females show comparable patterns of anticipation and adaptation (Clark et al., 2008). In the Swiss panel data, life satisfaction was found to increase in the years prior to childbirth and decline in the years that follow, ultimately decreasing to below the original baseline (Anusic et al., 2014). Yet in comparing parents to non-parents in normative comparison groups, people who went on to have children were no more or less happy than participants who did not. These findings suggest that adaptation to the birth of a child is relatively rapid and complete.

**Cosmetic Surgery** Many people seek to improve some aspect of their physical appearance through cosmetic surgery, as evidenced by the nearly 6.5 million aesthetic surgeries performed annually worldwide (International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, 2014). One study asked 360 women receiving breast augmentation with silicone gel-filled implants to rate their satisfaction with the procedure after 6, 12, and 24 months (Cash, Duel, & Perkins, 2002). The women reported high levels of satisfaction with the surgery and its psychosocial outcomes, which, interestingly, did not change over time throughout the 2-year period. Over 90% of the female participants were satisfied with the surgery, and most (75% to 85%) reported that the benefits of the procedure exceeded its risks. Another study that followed 540 people about to undergo aesthetic surgery and 260 people who were interested in surgery but decided not to have it found that the surgery group reported more positive outcomes 1 year postsurgery, such as increased well-being, life satisfaction, and body image satisfaction (Margraf, Meyer, & Lavalle, 2013). Although these studies did not find evidence of adaptation, it is possible that the duration of the post-surgery period was not long enough to reveal adaptation effects. Perhaps cosmetic surgery has a longer well-being boost timeframe than other types of positive experiences. Alternatively, cosmetic surgery may continue to produce happiness dividends into the future via upward spirals of positive emotions that accumulate and compound (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002). Experiences of positive emotion may broaden attention and cognition and, in turn, predict future experiences of positive emotion. As this cycle continues, it may result in enhanced psychological resilience and emotional well-being. In the case of cosmetic surgery, such upward spirals could lead to sustained increases in self-esteem and improved romantic opportunities.

## **Obstacles to Sustaining Happiness: Can Adaptation Be Overcome?**

Happiness and positive emotions have been found to be associated with, and promote, numerous desirable life outcomes. These outcomes include superior physical and mental health, enhanced creativity and productivity, higher income, greater prosocial behavior, and stronger interpersonal relationships, with average effect size  $r$ s ranging from .18 to .51 (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). Additionally, positive emotions like joy, contentment, interest, and vitality also advantage individuals recovering from negative experiences (Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson & Cohn, 2008). Therefore, in order to increase individual well-being, researchers would do well to find ways to prevent, slow down, or reduce adaptation to positive events.

If people cannot overcome hedonic adaptation to positive events, then lasting and sustainable increases in happiness may not be possible. Empirical evidence, however, indicates that happiness can and does change over time. Mzorczeck and Spiro's (2005) 22-year study modeled change in life satisfaction in almost 2000 men, and found that life satisfaction increased over these men's lives, peaked at age 65 and

then declined through age 75. A cross-sectional study of adults aged 17 to 82 found a positive correlation between age and subjective well-being (Sheldon & Kasser, 2001), and a 23-year longitudinal study of four generations of families found a negative correlation between age and negative affect (Charles, Reynolds, & Gatz, 2001). Additionally, in a longitudinal study that lasted from 1984 to 2000, 24% of respondents reported shifts in their well-being (unfortunately, mostly for the worse) (Fujita & Diener, 2005).

Researchers have also observed a great degree of variation in individual adaptation rates—that is, in the extent to which people’s happiness levels change following important life events. The Mzorczeck and Spiro (2005) study that tracked life satisfaction over men’s lifetimes found significant individual differences in rates of change. Also, in his 15-year investigation of marital transitions, Lucas (2007b) found that some individuals became much happier after getting married and then stayed happier, while others’ happiness began declining even before their wedding day. Similarly, whereas some widows’ and widowers’ well-being plummeted (and never recovered) after their spouses’ deaths, others actually became happier and remained that way (Lucas, 2003). The mechanisms underlying this individual variability are surely complex. To some extent, these variations are likely dependent on the differences in the individuals’ objective situations—e.g., good or bad marriages, more or less compatible spouses, etc. However, Lyubomirsky (2011) proposes that the main source of individual differences in adaptation rates is variation in the intentional efforts that people undertake to slow adaptation to positive events and accelerate adaptation to negative ones.

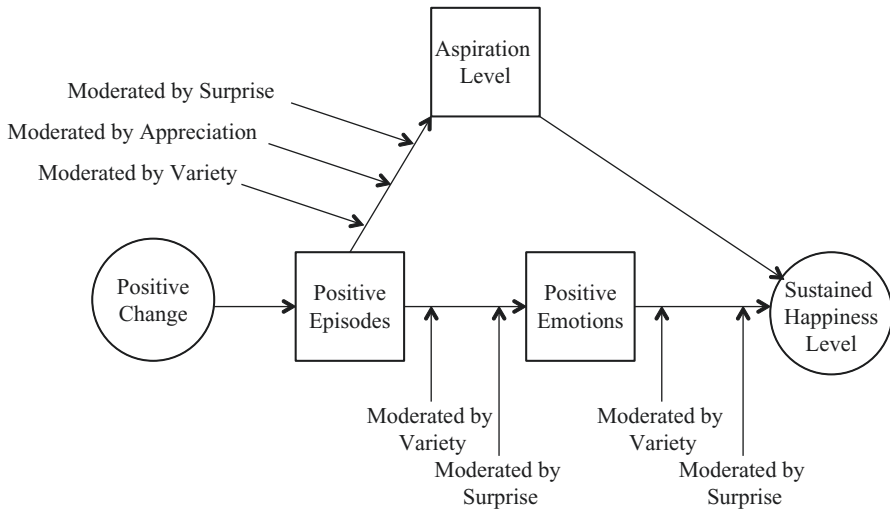
In sum, recent research provides support for the changeability of individual happiness levels, and thus people’s capacity to control the speed and extent of hedonic adaptation via intentional, effortful activities. As such, positive activities that prevent, slow down, or impede the adaptation process are likely to hold the key to achieving increased and sustainable well-being. What are such positive activities and how do they work? Lyubomirsky and Layous (2013) theorize that engaging in positive activities—for example, expressing gratitude or savoring positive events—lead people to experience more positive emotions, positive thoughts, positive behaviors, and greater psychological need satisfaction (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, & Kasser, 2001), which results in increased well-being. This process—as it applies specifically to hedonic adaptation—is described in the Hedonic Adaptation Prevention model.

## The Hedonic Adaptation Prevention Model

Positive life changes may contain the seeds of their own undoing. – Sheldon & Lyubomirsky (2012)

The Hedonic Adaptation Prevention (HAP) model (see Fig. 6.1; Lyubomirsky, 2011; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky 2012) focuses on how hedonic adaptation unfolds in





**Fig. 6.1** Hedonic adaptation prevention model

response to both positive and negative events and suggests how to prevent adaptation from occurring in positive domains. The model begins with a seminal positive event, such as a major positive life change. This seminal positive event (e.g., adopting one's first dog) leads to increased downstream, discrete positive episodes, which can occur as internal cognitive events or as external events (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2012). These positive external events (e.g., playing fetch with the dog, purchasing new toys, or meeting people at the dog park), in conjunction with subsequent increases in internal cognitive events, such as positive emotions (e.g., joy, appreciation, love, gratitude), lead to increases in well-being. (Importantly, we discuss two critical moderators, variety and appreciation, later in this chapter.)

After the initial boosts in well-being derived from the seminal positive event, adaptation occurs over time via two parallel paths: through decreases in positive episodes and emotions (bottom path) and through increases in aspiration (top path). Together, these paths explain emotional and cognitive processes that contribute to the natural erosion of the happiness gained from positive events.

In the first (bottom) path, individuals gradually adapt to the seminal positive event, as the positive episodes become less novel and less numerous, thus decreasing the amount and intensity of resultant positive emotions. In our example, the new dog owner has fewer novel experiences, as the dog park becomes familiar territory, playing fetch becomes another chore, and the toys are no longer new. In turn, the owner experiences fewer positive emotions. As this process occurs, individuals revert or approach their baseline levels of happiness.

A second route by which hedonic adaptation occurs is through increased aspirations regarding the individual's own expectations about his or her quality of life (top path). Even if the positive episodes and emotions that result from the positive seminal event continue to occur, they become predictable and expected; the dog owner



begins to see pet ownership as simply “the new normal” and craves even more gains in happiness. The new dog owner may require more positive episodes in order to maintain boosts in his or her happiness. Thus, the boosts in happiness from the seminal positive event become the individual’s new baseline, and this individual requires even more positive events in order to experience future increases in well-being (Kesebir & Diener, 2008).

As the discussion so far elucidates, hedonic adaptation occurs as a result of less frequent positive episodes and emotions, and increased aspirations. Fortunately, as previously mentioned, individuals who wish to mitigate the speed and extent of adaptation can do so by incorporating the following intentional, effortful positive activities into their daily lives.

## **Staying Happier: Positive Activities**

In this section, we discuss a number of positive constructs that combat hedonic adaptation after a positive life change. For each construct, we describe mechanisms by which hedonic adaptation is thwarted, as well as relevant activities or processes that can be incorporated into daily life. Notably, each of these activities is designed to direct attention to positive aspects and away from the negative. These positive activities aim to keep positive experiences “fresh” in the individual’s mind and to produce a stream of positive emotions, thoughts, and downstream events.

### ***Spice It Up: Integrating Variety***

No pleasure endures, unseasoned by variety. – Publilius Syrus, 1st century BC

Given that adaptation, by definition, can only occur in the context of recurrent or static stimuli, one clear approach to thwarting hedonic adaptation involves incorporating variety into one’s experiences (see Fig. 6.1). Fostering variety in one’s activities, whether with regard to material possessions or broad life changes, allows these experiences to stay fresh, satisfying, and meaningful over time, thus preventing or significantly slowing hedonic adaptation (Lyubomirsky, 2011).

Empirical evidence supports the notion that variety moderates the relationship between seminal positive events and subsequent hedonic adaptation. In one study, among participants who described enacting a positive life change, those who reported higher variety in this change demonstrated increased boosts in well-being compared to those who reported lower variety (Sheldon, Boehm, & Lyubomirsky, 2012; Study 1). Furthermore, over a 10-week intervention, students who were assigned to do varied acts of kindness, rather than to repeat the same acts of kindness, showed stronger increases in well-being (Sheldon et al., 2012; Study 2). In more naturalistic settings, happiness seekers report using a wide variety of strategies—eight on average—to boost well-being (Parks et al., 2012; Study 2). When

asked how they responded after adapting to positive activities, most participants reported that they “kept practicing the same activity in a new way” (Parks et al., 2012; Study 2). These findings suggest that those who are actively seeking happiness intuitively incorporate variety—whether in type of activity or in ways of completing the same activity—into their routines. Finally, given that increases in the number of different types of concurrent positive activities in which one is engaged predicts increases in happiness, it is likely that combining positive activities may further thwart hedonic adaptation (Parks et al., 2012; Study 3).

Beyond variety in behavior, emotional variety can impede hedonic adaptation. Single positive events can trigger variation in subsequent positive emotions, such as pride, contentment, satisfaction, excitement, and love. Variety in positive emotions has been linked with increased relationship satisfaction and closeness in romantic and social relationships, suggesting that emotional variety is critical to inhibiting hedonic adaptation in relationship domains (Jacobs Bao & Lyubomirsky, 2013). Indeed, new theory touts the benefits of variety, rather than limited range, of positive emotions for positive outcomes such as mental health (e.g., emodiversity; Quoidbach et al., 2014).

In other life domains, scholars suggest that one concrete way to incorporate more variety is by spending discretionary income on experiences, as opposed to materialistic purchases. Advertising and conventional wisdom advise that buying a new smartphone or expensive clothing (e.g., “having it all”) will make consumers happy. Empirical evidence, however, supports the notion that experiential purchases, such as getting a massage or taking a day trip, generate more lasting hedonic benefits (Dunn, Gilbert, & Wilson, 2011; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). Indeed, one study tested this hypothesis by randomly assigning participants to spend several dollars on either a material possession (e.g., keychain, picture frame) or an experience (e.g., video game, song). Those in the experiential purchase condition showed less adaptation across a 2-week follow-up period than did those in the material purchase condition (Nicolao, Irwin, & Goodman, 2009).

One reason that people are so quick to adapt to material goods is likely due to such goods’ inherent lack of variety. Purchasing an expensive painting of Paris is a far more static experience than actually going to Paris. While the painting may look fantastic hanging on the living room wall and will initially impress one’s friends, the once-new piece of artwork is eventually going to fade into the standard home décor, and the owner will quickly find the painting no longer brings the same happiness it initially did. On the other hand, a trip to Paris is a dynamic and varied experience, both in terms of behavior and emotion. The traveler will excitedly plan for the trip well in advance, sharing her anticipated joy with loved ones and purchasing new clothes to wear. Upon arriving in the city of light, the traveler will feel curiosity and interest as she tries novel foods, attends legendary museums, and meets fascinating people. After the trip, she can reminisce fondly about her experience, share stories and photos on social media, and feel wonderfully nostalgic when she remembers her time there.

Interestingly, empirical work from marketing researchers has elucidated a novel way to incorporate variety within a positive experience itself—namely, interruption.

Nelson and Meyvis (2008) tested the relationship between interruption and hedonic adaptation across three different studies in which participants were randomly assigned to experience a positive activity (e.g., 3-minute massage, Study 2; a novel but pleasant song, Study 4; a mix of participant-selected songs, Study 6) either continuously or with an interruption. Participants in all three studies consistently reported feeling more enjoyment of the pleasant activity when it was interrupted, rather than when it was experienced continuously. Moreover, these results cannot be explained by contrast effects, as they held true regardless of whether the valence of the interruption was positive (e.g., a short clip from a popular, well-liked song), negative (e.g., a short clip of irritating guitar feedback), or neutral (e.g., silence).

Nelson and Meyvis (2008) propose that an interruption provides the variety necessary to disrupt adaptation to a hedonically pleasant event. Adaptation can occur in a relatively brief span of time, such as that of a 3-minute massage, but a quick break is sufficient to break the uniformity and disrupt the process of hedonic adaptation. Consequently, when the massage resumes, the individual has “reset” their affective experience to their previous baseline and can begin enjoying the massage anew.

We contend that individuals should actively seek to “spice it up” when it comes to maintaining boosts in well-being. Consider the example of a recently married couple settling in to their married life together. The newlyweds can thwart adaptation by intentionally engaging in varied behaviors and activities together, which are likely to engender a number of distinct positive emotions. The couple may feel excited to try a new restaurant, proud after hiking a new trail together, or curious and challenged when attending a couples’ cooking class. Introducing a broad and varied array of emotions and behaviors is likely to produce a stream of novel, engaging downstream episodes, further impeding the progression of adaptation. Following the cooking class, for example, the couple may recreate the dish at home or incorporate new foods into their diet, creating further successive positive episodes and emotions. Additionally, the couple should strive to choose more experiential purchases in their relationship, such as group fitness classes or weekend getaways, rather than materialistic ones, like expensive jewelry or a new flat-screen TV. Finally, given that interruptions can hinder adaptation to married life, the couple may choose to regularly spend some evenings out apart, in order to further disrupt and reset the process of hedonic adaptation.

### ***Relish Happy Surprises***

The moments of happiness we enjoy take us by surprise. It is not that we seize them, but that they seize us. – Ashley Montagu

Surprise is similar to variety, but it is distinguished by its unpredictability. Where variety can be planned and prepared for, surprise is unforeseen and inconsistent. It is within this randomness that researchers find an additional useful mechanism for forestalling hedonic adaptation.

Human beings are exceptional in their need to search for meaning. When life events occur, whether positive or negative, the first question is often “Why?” This search for meaning in life is linked to a number of positive psychological and cognitive functions (e.g., DeZutter, Luyckx, & Wachholtz, 2015; Heintzelman, Trent, & King, 2013; King et al., 2006), but it may also speed adaptation to hedonically pleasing events. Wilson and Gilbert’s (2008) AREA (e.g., Attend, React, Explain, Adapt) model elucidates the ways in which the search for meaning and reason ultimately erodes emotional experience. People attend more closely and react more strongly to events that are self-relevant and surprising, and this intensified affective response is likely due in part to the increased difficulty in explaining the surprising event (Wilson & Gilbert, 2008). Empirical work supports this “pleasure paradox”—the notion that our search for meaning in positive events actually diminishes the duration and intensity of the positive emotions (Wilson, Centerbar, Kermer, & Gilbert, 2005). For a real-world example, consider a company employee who has just been given a bonus at work—a scenario that would undoubtedly boost happiness in many individuals. If this bonus were expected or anticipated based on length of employment or time of year (e.g., a small holiday bonus), that initial surge in happiness may fade as the employee looks ahead toward her next periodic bonus. However, the employee’s level of happiness would be more intense and longer lasting if this bonus were given as an unexpected surprise. She would have more difficulty explaining the raise, attend to it for a longer time, experience more intense and long-lasting positive emotions, and ultimately adapt more slowly.

Obviously, individuals cannot purposefully plan more surprises into their lives, as this would remove the crucial characteristic of unpredictability, but they can plan to engage in adventures and experiences—for example, meeting new people, traveling, or taking up new challenges—that naturally hold surprises. Furthermore, when surprising positive events do occur, we suggest that those who wish to delay the effects of hedonic adaptation resist the urge to explain or rationalize them. By focusing their efforts on appreciating the pleasant surprise, rather than on finding reasons for its occurrence, individuals can prolong the pleasure of life’s happy surprises.

### *Appreciate the Small Things*

We tend to forget that happiness doesn’t come as a result of getting something we don’t have, but rather of recognizing and appreciating what we do have. – Frederick Koenig

“Stop and smell the roses.”

“The grass is always greener on the other side.”

“Count your blessings.”

Such platitudes have been repeated ad nauseam in media and popular culture, but research suggests their directive—to be appreciative of one’s current circumstances—may be critical for delaying hedonic adaptation. Theoretical and empirical

work supports the notion that appreciation is a significant moderator of the effects of hedonic adaptation (see Armenta, Jacobs Bao, Lyubomirsky, & Sheldon, 2014; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2012). Specifically, appreciation of a seminal positive event is associated with reduced likelihood for higher aspirations, thwarting one of the critical pathways specified by the HAP model (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2012). When individuals intentionally appreciate the positive changes in their lives, they are more attuned to nuances and find more aspects to enjoy. Consider the positive life change of purchasing a new, luxurious diamond necklace. This acquisition is already prone to hedonic adaptation, given that it is a materialistic purchase with limited inherent opportunities for variety, and that increasing aspirations for a larger or more desirable diamond can easily arise. However, the purchaser can thwart hedonic adaptation by spending some time appreciating her current necklace. She can reflect on how the jewelry glistens in soft lighting, and how it makes her feel glamorous. She can also spend some time considering how hard she worked to earn the necklace, and how fortunate she is to have the means to afford such a fine piece of jewelry. By spending a few moments considering the positive qualities of her diamond necklace, the individual can slow her rising aspirations and, ultimately, forestall adaptation.

A sizeable body of research suggests that inducing gratitude and appreciation for things, events, or people can generate significant benefits for happiness and well-being (e.g., Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Layous, Lee, Choi, & Lyubomirsky, 2013; Lyubomirsky, Dickerhoof, Boehm, & Sheldon, 2011; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Indeed, gratitude interventions necessarily involve sustained attention to the positive aspects of a life change, which is arguably one of the most critical pathways for obstructing hedonic adaptation (Kahneman & Thaler, 2006). Lyubomirsky and colleagues (2005) suggest that when people are truly grateful and appreciative of their positive life experiences, they are able to gain the maximum amount of enjoyment from these experiences and are thereby prevented from taking them for granted.

A recent study sought to increase savoring by inducing scarcity (Quoidbach & Dunn, 2013). Compared to baseline, participants showed significant increases in savoring the hedonically pleasant experience of eating chocolate when they had been randomly assigned to a restricted access condition (e.g., avoid all chocolate) during the week prior, as compared to an abundant access (e.g., eat as much chocolate as possible) or neutral (e.g., no instruction) conditions. Importantly, those in the abundant access condition showed reduced savoring over time. These data support two important and related notions—that abundance of a pleasant experience *reduces* savoring and that periods of paucity can boost savoring and, ultimately, prevent adaptation to positive events. After all, one may really enjoy a popular new song on the radio, but after hearing it numerous times per day on multiple stations, it begins to feel stale and irritating. Avoiding the song altogether for a period of time may help one to sincerely enjoy it again when it is played in a department store or at a party. Absence truly does make the heart grow fonder.

The above evidence suggests that promoting savoring, appreciation, and gratitude can play a powerful role in forestalling adaptation. By effortfully directing

attention toward appreciation of a positive life change, people can increase and prolong their hedonic experiences. One can also use the more ascetic approach of scarcity and deprivation in order to boost savoring and appreciation and, ultimately, prevent adapting to hedonically pleasant life changes. As Sheldon and Lyubomirsky (2012) aptly summarize, “Appreciation is the psychological opposite of adaptation” (p. 672).

## ***Be Kind to Others***

No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted. – Aesop

Prosocial behavior has been broadly defined as any act intended to benefit another person, including specific acts of kindness such as purchasing coffee for a stranger or helping a significant other with a chore (Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, & Shroeder, 2005). Much research expounds the benefits of prosocial behavior for well-being and happiness (Crick, 1996; Layous, Nelson, Oberle, Schoenert-Reichl, & Lyubomirsky, 2012; Nelson, Layous, Cole, & Lyubomirsky, 2016).

We suggest that performing acts of kindness for others can serve as a highly impactful intervention to forestall hedonic adaptation in one of life’s most important domains: social relationships. Performing a kind act for another person may foster an increased awareness of one’s own good fortune or positive circumstances in life (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Helping others is also likely to produce a wide variety of positive episodes and emotions. For example, a recent study assigned employees to perform acts of kindness for coworkers, like buying a coffee for a coworker, sending a thank you note, or leaving a flower on a coworker’s desk (Chancellor, Margolis, Jacobs Bao, & Lyubomirsky, in press). Consistent with previous studies, kindness givers experienced increases in well-being, as well as in satisfaction with life and work. Notably, however, the authors also assessed the experience of the kindness recipients in this study, and found that kindness recipients subsequently reported nearly three times more acts of prosocial behavior than did controls (for similar findings, see Pressman, Kraft, & Cross, 2015). These findings lend important evidence to the notion that performing relatively small acts of kindness may have powerful indirect effects for thwarting hedonic adaptation in social relationships and beyond by generating increased positive behaviors and positive emotions.

Imagine an individual who has recently adapted to moving in with her best friend in a new city. Her initial boosts in excitement about her new living arrangement have dwindled, and she is feeling a little bored with her roommate. In this scenario, the woman’s adaptation can potentially be ameliorated with a few small kind acts directed at her friend. As she surprises her roommate with a cup of coffee or makes her a nice lunch, the woman may potentially feel an increased sense of closeness in the friendship, awareness of her good fortune in her new living arrangement, and pride in herself for being so thoughtful. Downstream positive episodes are also likely to follow, as the woman’s roommate thanks her for the initial kind act and

reciprocates with a kind act in return. The upward spiral generated by the single initial act of kindness may potentially yield important positive outcomes in revitalizing the roommate relationship.

## Guidelines and Best Practices

The above positive strategies bear significant potential for forestalling adaptation to the positive aspects of one's life. Indeed, several meta-analyses have reported medium effect sizes for positive activity interventions (i.e., Cohen's  $d = 0.34$  in Boiler et al., 2013;  $r = .29$  in Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009), suggesting that individuals who choose to engage in these activities may experience noticeable increases in happiness. However, our intention is not to advocate a one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to preventing hedonic adaptation, as a number of factors can impact the effectiveness of these positive activities. To be sure, a number of recent findings suggest specific ways that the potential benefits of positive activities may be maximized.

First, the features of the positive activities themselves—such as timing, dosage, and variety—can influence their efficacy. For example, happiness seekers might optimize so-called dosage and timing. Layous and Lyubomirsky (2014) liken this approach to a pharmacist explaining a prescription regimen to a patient and saying: “Take three pills immediately, and one per day for a week after that.” Perhaps one of the best examples of dosage and timing in regards to positive activities is a study in which participants were asked to count their blessings either once a week or three times a week. Those who counted their blessings once a week experienced greater boosts in well-being than those who performed the activity three times a week (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, et al., 2005). This finding suggests that the packaging of positive activities may be particularly important (Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014). Variety is another element to be taken into account when packaging. Just as variety can stave off adaptation to positive events (e.g., trying a new dish at a favorite restaurant), so might it prevent adaptation to the positive activities themselves (e.g., alternating between performing small acts of kindness and expressing gratitude to others). Happiness seekers may wish to vary the types of intentional activities they typically use to maintain their happiness, as opposed to performing the same activity on repeat.

Second, it is important to take into account the features of the person. The individual's motivation, beliefs, effort, social support, culture, and baseline levels of well-being are all characteristics that may influence the extent to which he or she benefits from performing any particular positive activity (see Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014; Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013, for reviews). For example, people who are more motivated, believe the activity can work, exert more effort, have social support, come from a culture that values happiness, or are relatively unhappy to begin with may benefit more.



Additionally, the overall person-activity fit is important to consider when implementing positive activities. This fit is best conceptualized as an overlap between features of activities and features of persons (Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014). Every individual has a unique background and distinct preferences, such that some types of positive activities will likely work better for some types of people. For example, a creative person may benefit more from increasing flow experiences, and an introverted person may benefit more from activities that require less social interaction, such as keeping a gratitude journal. Proyer and colleagues (2015) found empirical evidence that boosts in well-being last longer when certain person-activity fit principles are met. Over a 3.5-year follow-up, individuals who were most likely to maintain higher levels of well-being were those who had performed positive activities that they found enjoyable and beneficial, effortfully followed the activity instructions, voluntarily continued practicing the activity after the study had ended, and demonstrated the earliest reactivity in happiness. In short, individuals should not persist or force their way through activities that are not working for them. To curb the maximum amount of hedonic adaptation, people must pursue activities that they do well, that they enjoy doing, and from which they reap early benefits. In sum, happiness can be sustainably increased via positive activities if the individual engaging in such activities has both a “will” and a proper “way” (Lyubomirsky, Dickerhoof et al., 2011).

## Future Directions

For well over a decade, our laboratory has been exploring how to lastingly boost happiness, and thus thwart the hedonic adaptation process. Yet much future work remains. One key future direction that has emerged includes addressing the question of “optimal negativity.” Are there instances when one *should* focus on negative experiences and suffer a temporary well-being setback in order to reap increased well-being dividends in the future? For example, feeling remorse for shouting at a friend can lead an individual to apologize, repairing and strengthening the relationship (thus, boosting long-term happiness). It can also lead that individual to reflect on what she did wrong and make better choices in the future so as to avoid repeating the same mistake. Indeed, mild negative experiences interspersed with positive ones can de-escalate rising aspirations and reset the hedonic adaptation process.

On a broader scale, is there an ideal ratio of positive to negative events that promotes sustainable happiness? Fredrickson and Losada (2005) found that a ratio of positive to negative affect at or above 2.9 was associated with both optimal individual and team flourishing, but more recent work has disputed this finding (e.g., Brown, Sokal, & Friedman, 2013). Future research should continue to examine this question.

More longitudinal studies on adaptation to positive events are also needed. As mentioned earlier, the literature in this area remains relatively scarce. More information about the impact to people’s well-being before, during, and after a positive

event would better inform future experimental studies designing interventions to slow adaptation. Ideally, such future studies would not only elucidate the cognitive, behavioral, motivational, and psychological mechanisms by which positive adaptation operates, but also investigate a wider array of positive events. Previous studies have focused on adaptation to events such as marriage and the birth of a new child, but it would be instructional to study adaptation to other previously uninvestigated positive life events, such as moving to a bigger house, being admitted to college, or winning a Grammy.

Other future studies would be well served by utilizing relatively more objective measures of affect and well-being. For example, most of the longitudinal studies on adaptation to positive and negative events focus solely on self-report measures, and in some cases do so using only a single Likert-type question (e.g., “How satisfied are you with your life in general?”), raising concerns with reliability, social desirability, and other self-report biases (e.g., the acquiescence and self-serving biases; Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Messick & Jackson, 1961). In addition to using multi-item scales of happiness and satisfaction, researchers could also employ measures of daily and momentary affect (e.g., the Experience Sampling Method and Day Reconstruction Method; Csizscentmihalyi & Larson, 1987; Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004), behavioral indicators (e.g., peer reports and Duchenne smiles; Harker & Keltner, 2001), and physiological and neural markers (e.g., structural magnetic resonance imaging; Sato et al., 2015).

Other compelling future research questions could address how and why adaptation rates vary across individuals and cultures (e.g., individualist vs. collectivist) and establish the so-called half-life of positive events (e.g., how long the happiness boost of certain positive events can be “milked” before returning to baseline). Further areas of inquiry might also focus on how, when, and why aspirations could or should rise after adaptation, and whether the type of life change (e.g., intrinsically vs. extrinsically motivated) moderates the effects of positive events on emotions and aspirations. The more psychological scientists learn about the positive hedonic adaptation process, the better positioned they will be to offer guidelines for steps that individuals can take to reduce and slow adaptation to positive changes in their lives and, ultimately, not only to become happier, but to stay happier.

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