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THE ART OF LIVING BY
DISPOSITIONALLY HAPPY PEOPLE

ABSTRACT. The cognitive and motivational processes by which happy people are able to artfully sustain their happiness are examined within a subjectivist construal approach. Individuals who perceive themselves as happy respond to ordinary experiences differently than their less happy peers. Research from our laboratory has revealed these differences in a variety of contexts, including people's responses to decisions, their reactions to social comparisons, and their interpretations of life events. Our research has also shown that, after experiencing failure, happy people tend not to engage in negative self-reflection and are able to perform subsequent tasks without dwelling. Although happy people experience negative moods and negative life events similar to those of less happy people, they evaluate these events less negatively and respond to them in more positive, affirming ways. These group differences suggest a number of possible ways to sustainably enhance happiness, and current experimental interventions designed to test the effectiveness of several intentional happiness-increasing strategies are discussed.

KEY WORDS: art of living, happiness, self-reflection, social comparison, rationalization, maximizing, satisficing, distraction, construal.

Happiness is a how, not a what; a talent, not an object (Hermann Hesse)

Conflicting trends in American culture have been the subject of popular concern: As wealth and comfort have increased, why have well-being and mental health declined (Campbell, 1981; Myers, 2000)? Why have such developments as easier access to education, information, communication, health care, and travel not produced individuals who are satisfied with these luxuries and able to enjoy them? Indeed, improved economic and physical well-being are not accompanied by the increases in happiness that one might expect (Diener and Suh, 1997). Similarly, when one examines the individual rather than cultural level, objective factors account for only a small portion of the variation in happiness (Diener et al., 1999). For example, variables such as marital status, personal income, age, and education correlate weakly with well-being. Even the examination of the upper 10% of consistently happy people has yielded little in the way of objective characteristics that distinguish the happiest individuals from their less happy peers (Diener and Seligman, 2002).

The low explanatory power of objective factors demands a complementary, alternative approach that focuses on subjective influences on happiness. People are not just passively acted on by life events – instead, they actively interpret and respond to circumstances and situations. Using a construal approach to understanding happiness, we argue that these active, subjective processes determine the impact of objective factors on happiness (Lyubomirsky, 2001). An understanding of the thoughts, goals, and behaviors of exceptionally happy people is necessary in explaining how happiness is maintained relatively independent of, and sometimes even in spite of, objective events. To this end, our research examines the cognitive, motivational, and behavioral processes by which happy individuals support and sustain their happiness across a variety of situations. These processes reveal the means by which some individuals achieve an art of living, allowing them to derive satisfaction and pleasure from their experiences.

Several characteristics of our construal framework should be noted. One aspect of this approach is that it primarily treats happiness as a predictor rather than an outcome. In other words, the starting point of our research is not to ask what variables make people happy, but rather how happy people think, evaluate, decide, and respond differently from less happy people. Furthermore, advancing our understanding of these processes can lead to conclusions regarding the potential determinants of happiness. A second aspect of this approach is that our measure of happiness involves the assessment of a person's own global, personal happiness (Lyubomirsky and Lepper, 1999). Because we view happiness as a subjective phenomenon, the best means of obtaining information about a particular person's happiness is by asking that person directly. In our composite happiness measure, individuals respond to four items that ask for a general characterization of oneself as a happy or unhappy person, both in absolute terms and in relation to other people. "Happy people" are defined as those who score in the top quartile of the distribution of composite happiness scores. In this way, happiness is treated as a characteristic of the person, not of a life or a set of circumstances.

It is important to note that although happiness relates to other positive traits, it can also be distinguished from those traits. For example, neither self-esteem nor optimism has been found to produce the same pattern of results as happiness in situations constructed in our laboratory (Lyubomirsky et al., 2003; Lyubomirsky et al., 2001; Lyubomirsky and Ross, 1997; 1999). In addition, happiness appears not to be merely the

sum of a person's mood states: For example, one study showed a high correlation for happiness between two time periods but no correlation for transient affect (Lyubomirsky and Tucker, 1998, Study 1). This finding is consistent with other analyses of the relation of enduring happiness and transient mood. Although happy people report experiencing more positive moods than those who are less happy, they commonly experience negative moods as well (Diener and Seligman, 2002).

Thus, happy people cannot simply be described as individuals who possess other positive characteristics, nor can they be described as individuals who experience constant positive moods. We have to turn to other explanations to find the distinctive characteristics of people who demonstrate the ability to enjoy life. Through individuals' processing of and responses to both real and laboratory events, we can identify specific strategies and response styles typical of people who identify themselves as happy.

DECISION PROCESSES

The secret of contentment is knowing how to enjoy what you have, and to be able to lose all desire for things beyond your reach (Lin Yutang)

Happy individuals both approach and respond to decisions in unique ways. Whether assessing general decision strategies or responses to specific decisions, our research has shown that happy individuals show a consistent pattern of satisfaction with their options and decision outcomes.

Maximizing *Versus* Satisficing Strategies

Are the strategies that happy individuals use to make everyday decisions more rewarding and productive than those employed by their less happy peers? Recent research reveals possible differences in the decision strategies used by happy and unhappy people. Consider two alternative approaches to decision-making. One strategy is to approach decisions with the goal of selecting the best possible alternative – a maximizing approach. Another strategy is to approach decisions with the goal of finding an acceptable or "good enough" option – a satisficing approach (Simon, 1957; see also Michalos, 1978). Several studies examining the relationship of these strategies with happiness have shown that maximizing is negatively associated with happiness (Schwartz et al., 2002). That is, happy individuals are less likely than unhappy ones to report

exhaustively searching through all their decision options. This finding may appear counterintuitive, as maximizers have higher standards and, therefore, might be expected to have better decision outcomes. Indeed, it is possible that maximizers might achieve objectively better outcomes than satisficers, but maximizers are less content with those outcomes than are satisficers. For example, in advance of purchasing a new car, a maximizer might spend more time talking to dealers, reading statistics, and comparing options packages, but he will ultimately be less satisfied with the chosen vehicle than someone who spends less time and effort on the decision.

Preliminary evidence suggests a mediator underlying the relationship between maximizing and happiness. Maximizers who tend to experience regret after decisions show lower levels of happiness, whereas maximizers who do not engage in regret show no differences in happiness from satisficers. Thus, a person's response to his or her decisions – namely, whether or not a person accepts and is content with the selected option – may be more important in sustaining happiness than the decision process itself. Happy individuals are characterized by satisfaction with a decision once it is made, although they may show variation in how they reach that decision. The implication from this finding is that people may be happier if they cease reviewing their options as soon as they select one that is good enough, rather than continuing to consider all the possible outcomes for other options.

Post-decisional Rationalization

Happy persons' responses to specific decisions made in everyday life and in the laboratory are consistent with their general patterns of decision-making described above. A set of studies on post-decisional rationalization have revealed that happy individuals appear to respond to decisions in a way that promotes well-being and that their response style depends on the type of decision. One study examined people's responses to consequential decisions, specifically high-school seniors' college selections (Lyubomirsky and Ross, 1999, Study 1). During the college application process, students rated the colleges to which they had applied on various aspects of college life (i.e., social life and academic quality) both before and after they received letters of acceptance or rejection. Notably, before students received feedback from the colleges, happy and unhappy students rated the colleges no differently – that is, the number, quality, and desirability of colleges to which happy and unhappy students sent applications were nearly identical.

Despite the similarity of happy and unhappy individuals' initial ratings, differences emerged in the ratings obtained after students received feedback from college admissions offices. Happy students rated the college they ultimately chose to attend as more desirable than in their preliminary ratings, whereas unhappy students' ratings of their chosen college showed no changes. That is, happy students found their chosen college even more attractive after selecting it than before. Perhaps they spent timing in fantasizing and thinking about the exciting courses that they will take and the wonderful friends that they will make.

For colleges from which students received rejections, happy students' ratings showed decreases from the ratings made before they received feedback. In contrast, just as for chosen colleges, unhappy students' ratings of the rejecting colleges showed no changes. Interestingly, the source of the happy students' derogation of these rejecting colleges was not their academic quality, but rather assessments of their social life. Thus, happy individuals did not appear to reassess objective information unrealistically, but rather re-evaluated the more subjective aspects of college quality.

As for the colleges that accepted them, but that the students chose *not* to attend, unhappy students uniformly derogated these schools, as though attempting to convince themselves of the correctness of their decision. Happy students, by contrast, showed similar ratings over time of these schools' specific aspects.

These findings reveal an adaptive, protective pattern of responding to decisions that allows happy people both to bolster their self-esteem in support of their own decisions and to protect their self-esteem when hearing of rejection. That is, after reaching a decision, happy individuals appear to engage in a distinctive, dissonance-reducing strategy that allows them to maintain positive emotions and self-confidence. In this study, happy students may have concluded that a rejection reflected the high standards of the college and not their own abilities, while, at the same time, imagining the many different ways that their chosen college was the right one for them.

In marked contrast to the pattern shown by happy students, unhappy participants showed changes in preference for neither the schools they selected nor the schools that rejected them. Exhibiting no tendency to derogate colleges from which they received rejections, unhappy students changed their opinions only to decrease their ratings of colleges that accepted them, but that they rejected. This finding suggests that the

unhappy individuals were trying hard to persuade themselves that they really did not want to attend those schools.

Another study examined responses to less consequential decisions made in the laboratory (Lyubomirsky and Ross, 1999, Study 2). Participants evaluated 10 desserts and ranked their top four choices. They then evaluated the desserts again after hearing which dessert they would receive, which was always either their second or third choice. For the dessert they received, like for the college chosen, happy participants slightly increased their rating of its desirability from the first to the second evaluation. In contrast, unhappy participants viewed the received dessert as slightly less desirable than before. For the dessert they did not receive, like for the colleges not chosen, happy participants showed no changes; however, unhappy participants showed large decreases in the perceived desirability of the non-received dessert. Thus, happy participants appeared to think, "The dessert I did not receive is very good, but the one I received is even better," whereas unhappy participants appeared to try to convince themselves, "The dessert I got is all right, but the one I did not get is much, much worse."

These studies reveal several important features of happy individuals' post-decisional evaluations. First, consistent with findings regarding maximizing decision strategies, happy individuals generally show satisfaction with their choices. With both college choices and dessert choices, happy individuals found their selection even more desirable after the decision than before the decision. In addition, happy individuals showed an adaptive response style that appeared to be sensitive to whether the decision was consequential or inconsequential. When the decision is a consequential one with implications for self-esteem, as with college choice, happy individuals used post-decisional rationalization processes to protect themselves from disappointment. When the decision was inconsequential, as with dessert choices, happy individuals had no need to devalue non-received alternatives and were content to see all of the options as attractive.

USE OF SOCIAL COMPARISON INFORMATION

To be happy, we must not be too concerned with others (Albert Camus)

We daily encounter information about the status, lifestyles, opinions, and relationships of our friends, co-workers, family, and even

fictional characters in the movies. Faced with these readily available and inescapable opportunities for social comparison, individuals vary in their use of such information and in the extent to which it influences their moods and self-perceptions. Our research suggests that, in general, happy people are less sensitive to the successes and failures of their peers than are unhappy people. This relative insensitivity to social comparisons allows happy individuals to maintain positive emotions despite inevitable fluctuations in their own performances relative to other people.

In one study from our laboratory, happy and unhappy students solved anagrams in the presence of a confederate who worked at a much quicker or much slower pace (Lyubomirsky and Ross, 1997, Study 1). The confederate's performance had no influence on the moods of happy individuals. In contrast, unhappy people reported more negative moods when the confederate completed the anagrams faster than when he or she completed them slower. This finding supports the notion that happy individuals' moods appear to be relatively uninfluenced by knowledge about the performance of a peer.

In another study, happy and unhappy participants performed a teaching task, using two hand puppets, and then received feedback about their own performance, as well as the relative performance of a peer (Lyubomirsky and Ross, 1997, Study 2). When happy participants were told they had performed well, they predictably showed increases in happy mood. Importantly, however, this increased positive affect emerged whether or not they also received information that a peer had performed even better. In contrast, unhappy participants showed increases in positive mood *only* if they had not received information that a peer had surpassed them. Thus, happy students benefited from positive personal feedback, regardless of the relative performance of a peer.

When told that they had performed poorly at the teaching task, all participants showed the expected change in mood – that is, both happy and unhappy students reported deflated happy moods. However, when participants were also told that a peer had performed even worse, unhappy participants actually benefited from the negative peer feedback, showing increases in positive mood. Conversely, happy participants showed no change in mood. In sum, for happy participants, news of a peer performing even worse neither increased nor decreased positive mood, allowing them to maintain the mood they had been experiencing prior to performing the task. A similar pattern of results emerged for changes

in self-confidence after the teaching task. Once again, the combined results suggest that the moods and self-esteem of happy people are relatively insensitive to peer comparisons.

Another set of studies examined happy and unhappy people's responses to social comparison information in a group context (Lyubomirsky et al., 2001). In these studies, students participated in 4-person teams, who competed in a relay fashion on a word-generation task. For example, in one study, participants were given word fragments (e.g., IN_ _ _ _) and were asked to complete them with words corresponding to certain definitions (e.g., "baby"). Each participant wrote down word completions for 1 min, after which they passed the task along to the teammate next in line.

In the first experiment, students received one of two kinds of social comparison information: One consisted of feedback about the performance of the participants' group relative to another group (e.g., one's team "won" or "lost"), and the other consisted of feedback in which participants received information about their individual performance in addition to feedback about group performance (e.g., one's team won, but the participant placed last within the team). The individual-performance feedback always hedonically conflicted with the group's performance (i.e., team won but individual placed last or team lost but individual placed first). When presented with only feedback that their team had won, both happy and unhappy participants showed moderate increases in positive affect. However, happy and unhappy students differed in response to feedback that their team had lost: Unhappy participants showed decreases in positive affect, whereas happy participants showed no change. Thus, once again, happy people's feelings appeared to be relatively uninfluenced by peer comparisons, even when such comparisons were made in a group context.

Further differences between happy and unhappy participants emerged in responses to hedonically-conflicting news. When participants received feedback that their team had lost, but that they individually placed first, unhappy participants showed no change in mood. Thus, for unhappy participants, the impact of team defeat was buffered by personal success. In contrast, favorable individual feedback had no influence on happy participants whose team lost, suggesting that happy individuals did not care very much about relative individual rank. Notably, similar results were found for participants' assessments of their own performance.

A second experiment provided all participants with both individual and team feedback (Lyubomirsky et al., 2001, Study 2). Once again, our results showed that happy participants are less sensitive to individual feedback than are unhappy ones. Although happy individuals were influenced by team performance, it made no difference whether they had individually placed first or last within their team. Unhappy participants showed a different pattern, reporting increases in mood when individually placing first and decreases in mood when placing last, regardless of team performance.

In this experiment, participants also provided causal explanations for their performance. Happy and unhappy participants differed in the extent to which they attributed their work to stable, global, and internal causes: Happy students relied on these explanations when they placed first, whereas unhappy ones relied on them when they placed last. In other words, when explaining their personal performance, happy individuals tended to give themselves credit for successes, and unhappy individuals tended to blame themselves for failures.

Combined, the findings from these studies highlight two primary differences between happy and unhappy individuals in their responses to and uses of social comparisons. One difference is that happy individuals appear to be generally less influenced by social comparison information than are unhappy individuals. For example, happy individuals showed smaller changes in mood and self-confidence in response to feedback about the performance of peers. Although social comparisons could be used to improve one's mood and self-perceptions when the outcome is favorable, they can be harmful when the outcome is unfavorable – unfortunately, a common occurrence in daily life. Happy individuals' lower sensitivity to comparison information reflects an ability to maintain positive emotions without relying on such external and avoidable sources of feedback.

Second, happy and unhappy individuals show dramatically different responses to the "failure" of themselves and others. For unhappy people, the blow of failure is cushioned by information that peers have performed even worse. This response is not found in happy people, who appear not to exert such efforts at self-enhancement. In addition, whereas happy individuals show moderate decreases in positive mood after learning that they have done poorly on some task, unhappy individuals show dramatic decreases in mood and in assessments of their own performance. Indeed, it appears that happy individuals' lower sensitivity to social comparisons allows them to

be bolstered by personal success, yet protected against the impact of failure.

SELF-REFLECTION

> Happiness is as a butterfly which, when pursued, is always beyond our grasp, but which if you will sit down quietly, may alight upon you (Nathaniel Hawthorne)

Some of the most interesting, and possibly counterintuitive, findings regarding the unique characteristics of happy people suggest that happy people are inclined to be *less* concerned with their emotional management than their unhappy peers. Indeed, happy individuals tend to spend less time ruminating and reflecting about themselves, their thoughts, feelings, and shortcomings (Lyubomirsky et al., 2003; Lyubomirsky and Kasri, 2000; Lyubomirsky and Ross, 1999). These findings are noteworthy because many people believe that self-reflection is beneficial and that, when addressing personal problems or coping with negative life events, one should turn inward for solutions (Lyubomirsky and Nolen-Hoeksema, 1993; Papageorgiou and Wells, 2001; Watkins and Baracaia, 2001). Supporting these lay beliefs, empirical research has documented a number of benefits of self-consciousness and self-awareness. For example, certain kinds of self-reflection have been associated with self-knowledge (Nasby, 1985) and personal insight (Hixon and Swann, 1993). However, these benefits may be gained at the cost of happiness, such that individuals who engage in a great deal of self-reflection are likely to be "wiser but sadder" (sic) (Alloy and Abramson, 1979; for an alternative account, see Trapnell and Campbell, 1999).

The notion that the costs of ruminative self-reflection far outweigh its potential benefits is supported by increasing empirical evidence. A number of studies suggest that prolonged dwelling and repetitive self-reflection lead to unhappiness (see Wells and Matthews, 1994, for a review). Indeed, several models of depression specifically include self-focused reflection as a mechanism that intensifies and perpetuates depressive affect (e.g., Ingram, 1990; Greenberg and Pyszczynski, 1986; Smith and Greenberg, 1981; Wells and Mathews, 1994). Taken together, research suggests that, despite folk theories about the benefits of self-focused thought, ruminative self-reflection appears to be a maladaptive coping response to both the hassles and the tragedies of life.

Consistent with such evidence, we have shown that dispositionally happy people are less inclined to self-reflect than their unhappy

peers (Lyubomirsky and Kasri, 2000), and, as a result, happy people may be able to avoid experiencing some of the negative consequences engendered by reflection, including increased sad and anxious mood (Scheier and Carver, 1977; Wood et al., 1990), decreased self-confidence (Lyubomirsky and Ross, 1997; 1999; Lyubomirsky et al., 2001), and cognitive interference while performing important tasks (Lyubomirsky et al., 2003). Finally, a great deal of research has documented that, when done *in a negative mood*, repetitive reflection and rumination ushers in a host of adverse outcomes, including increased dysphoria, negatively-biased thinking, poor problem solving, impaired motivation and concentration, and increased stress and problems (for reviews, see Lyubomirsky and Tkach, 2004; Nolen-Hoeksema, 1996). Taken together, these findings suggest that a sequelae of self-perpetuating negative outcomes can be triggered by ruminative self-reflection. Because happy individuals are less likely to self-reflect, they are less likely to experience these negative effects.

Dwelling on Failure

Several recent experiments from our laboratory investigated the role of self-reflective dwelling in happiness (Lyubomirsky et al., 2003). In these studies, self-nominated happy and unhappy students were exposed to the experience of "failing" on an academic task, while one or more of their peers "succeeded." We hypothesized that happy students would spend less time dwelling on the failure and on the unfavorable social comparisons and, therefore, would be less likely to suffer some of the adverse affective, cognitive, and motivational consequences of self-reflection.

In the first study, happy and unhappy students completed an anagram-solving task and were led to believe that they had performed either much better than other students ("relative success") or much worse ("relative failure"). The results indicated that happy students withstood failure better than unhappy students and appeared to be relatively immune to self-reflection and its negative effects. For example, happy participants, in contrast to their unhappy peers, reported spending less time focusing on themselves, were better able to concentrate during a subsequent academic task, and were less likely to admit that their minds had wandered during this task. Additionally, at the end of the experimental session, happy students completed relatively fewer negatively-biased

words in a word completion task (e.g., INFERIOR in response to _ _ _ERIOR) and generated relatively fewer negative thoughts when asked to write "whatever thoughts come to mind." Interestingly, in a second study, the free associations generated by unhappy students who had "failed" on a verbal task contained significantly more references to past academic performances than those of happy students. Finally, in a third study, happy and unhappy participants were again exposed to unfavorable peer comparisons and then subsequently completed a reading comprehension test from an actual graduate school entrance exam. Once again, the results suggested that self-reflection had deleterious effects, impairing participants' ability to concentrate and slowing reading speed. Notably, happy students, in comparison to unhappy ones, did not appear to respond to the negative social comparison by dwelling about it and, therefore, did not suffer decrements in their reading performance.

In sum, it appears that unhappy students are much more likely than happy ones to dwell on "failure". Unfortunately, their reflections end up digging up memories of other past failures, thus further depressing their moods and self-confidence and impairing *present* concentration and performance. Together, the results of these studies suggest that, although the happy students are not oblivious to failure, they resist giving failure more than its due amount of contemplation, thus compartmentalizing and limiting their disappointment.

Overall, our research highlights the unique cognitive processes and strategies that characterize very happy people. The findings of the studies described above suggest that excessive self-reflection in the face of unpleasant events (such as learning that one has failed relative to others) may serve to sap one's cognitive resources and undercut intellectual performance. In sum, these results support the conclusion that excessive self-reflection may trigger a self-perpetuating cycle of negative affective consequences, performance deficits, and, ultimately, undermine one's happiness.

Distraction: An Adaptive Alternative
An adaptive alternative to repetitive and passive self-reflection is engaging in distracting and absorbing thoughts and activities. For example, when feeling stressed or disappointed or sad, instead of focusing on one's current problems, negative feelings, or the implications of those feelings, one might find a neutral or pleasant distraction and only then

attempt problem solving strategies (Lyubomirsky and Tkach, 2004). Activities that are particularly beneficial are ones that are engaging and provide quick positive reinforcement, for example, bike riding, seeing a movie with friends, or learning a new language. Although the features of the activity can vary greatly, from rock climbing to writing poetry to playing chess, the key is that the activity be attention absorbing to the point that individuals "stop being aware of themselves as separate from the actions they are performing" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 53).

One study from our laboratory tested the effects of distraction (vs. the effects of self-reflection) during the decision-making process (Lyubomirsky and Ross, 1999, Study 3). After rating 10 desserts, happy and unhappy students selected and received either their second or third choice. Participants were then asked to think about a series of 32 neutral items that induced one of two distinct attentional states. One set of items required participants to self-reflect (e.g., think about "your character and who you strive to be" and "what your feelings might mean"), whereas the other set was designed to distract participants from thinking about the self (e.g., think about "clouds forming in the sky" and "the expression on the face of the *Mona Lisa*"). Students then rated the 10 desserts again. Although participants' happiness status had no influence on the dessert ratings in this study, their attentional state produced differences in ratings of the dessert that they rejected. Students who self-reflected strongly derogated the rejected dessert as compared with their initial ratings, whereas distracted participants, whether happy or unhappy, rated the rejected dessert only moderately less desirable than in their initial ratings. Thus, distraction-induced unhappy participants to behave like happy ones, in that they felt no need to derogate the rejected option to justify their choice.

In this study, attentional focus also influenced participants' moods, with distracted students reporting more positive mood than self-reflecting ones. These results suggest that turning attention away from the self can contribute to more adaptive post-decisional responses. Furthermore, inducing distraction in *happy* people had no effect on their post-decisional responses, supporting the notion that happy people tend to focus less on their own thoughts and moods than do unhappy people. In sum, this study provides evidence that drawing attention away from the self may be one strategy for boosting mood and improving positive subjective outcomes following decisions.

CONSTRUAL OF EVENTS

> The secret of happiness is this: Let your interests be wide as possible, and let your reactions to the things and persons that interest you be as far as possible friendly rather than hostile (Bertrand Russell)

People sometimes respond to similar life events in very different ways. For example, for some people, moving to a new city would mean opportunities to forge a new identity, to make new friends, to jumpstart an exciting new career, and to learn about the history and geography of an interesting place. For other people, moving to a new city might be viewed in terms of the hassles of finding a new home, of loneliness as friends are left behind, and of the difficulties and stresses of adjusting to an unfamiliar work environment. A person's level of enduring happiness can tell us which interpretation is more likely, and the interpretation of such life events could have implications for maintaining well-being. A series of studies explored the response style of happy individuals in their perceptions and interpretations of both real and hypothetical events.

One study asked both happy and unhappy students to describe one positive and one negative event from their lives and to report their responses to those events (Lyubomirsky and Tucker, 1998, Study 1). Examples of positive events were "had a lot of fun planning out stuff for my boyfriend's birthday" and "went home for Spring Break and saw my parents and close friends." Examples of negative events were "my parents decided to separate" and "being ignored by someone I am interested in." Although independent raters perceived no differences between the life events described by the two groups, the happy and unhappy individuals themselves rated their life events very differently. Happy individuals construed their positive life events as more positive and their negative life events as less negative than did unhappy individuals. In addition, happy and unhappy students reported different cognitive strategies in the ways that they responded to the events. Happy students were more likely than unhappy ones to use humor in coping with an unpleasant life event and more likely to dwell on improvement that had occurred since the event. In sum, although, on the surface, happy and unhappy people appear to experience similar life events (though, for contradictory findings, see Headey and Wearing, 1989;

Magnus and Diener, 1991), they experience and respond to those events quite differently.

Similar patterns have been observed in happy and unhappy people's responses to hypothetical events. When students were asked to rate hypothetical situations and to write a narrative for how a particular situation ends, happy students' responses were more positive than those of unhappy students in both the ratings and the "endings" (Lyubomirsky and Tucker, 1998, Study 2). In yet another study, happy and unhappy individuals rated target persons whom they observed in several video-taped situations (Lyubomirsky and Tucker, 1998, Study 3). Despite the neutral nature of these videotapes, happy people rated the videotaped target individuals more positively than unhappy people. Happy participants were also more likely than unhappy ones to report wanting to be friends with and to work with the target persons.

These studies reveal that, in responding to a variety of events, real and hypothetical, happy people show a tendency toward positively-biased cognition. Happy people exhibit a readiness to evaluate situations and people in positive terms. This positive bias in approaching new situations may be particularly important in sustaining happiness, leading happy people to elicit positive outcomes and responses in other people.

INTERVENTIONS TO INCREASE HAPPINESS

It is not God's will merely that we should be happy, but that we should make ourselves happy (Immanuel Kant)

Research within the construal framework as described so far has examined the cognitive and motivational processes of self-nominated happy individuals. Can we also apply the processes that characterize happy individuals to interventions designed to increase existing happiness levels? Some research suggests that happiness is a stable, genetically-determined trait that may rise and fall in response to life events, but will return to its prior level once hedonic adaptation has occurred (Brickman et al., 1978; Lykken and Tellegen, 1996; Suh et al., 1996). Such research would argue against the ability of individuals to alter their dispositional happiness; however, other research shows that happiness is linked to certain cognitive and

motivational factors that could serve as volitional strategies in interventions. Some researchers have been successful in increasing happiness levels, showing at least short-term gains (Emmons and McCullough, 2003; King, 2001; Lichter et al., 1980; Sheldon et al., 2002). For example, one series of intervention studies specifically designed to increase happiness taught students 14 techniques (e.g., be yourself, spend time socializing, keeping busy) and found significant increases in happiness (Fordyce, 1977; 1983). A follow-up investigation showed that many participants continued to report these increases over time, for periods ranging from several months to 2 years later (Fordyce, 1983, Study 7). These studies suggest, first, that certain factors play a causal role in predicting happiness and, second, that these factors are amenable to manipulation.

We are currently conducting research to determine whether happiness can be boosted by experimentally manipulating certain cognitive processes and behaviors. We argue that, unlike changes in circumstances, volitional, effortful activity can contribute to *sustainable* increases in happiness. For example, Sheldon and Lyubomirsky (2003) recently conducted a three-wave longitudinal study, in which more than 600 undergraduates reported the recent positive activity changes they had made in their lives (e.g., joined a sports team or committed to a new career goal), as well as any recent positive changes in their life circumstances (e.g., moved to better dorm or obtained more financial support). The results showed that, relative to positive circumstantial changes, positive activity changes produced more varied experiences and less hedonic adaptation, and predicted sustained well-being over time.

Two possible means of increasing happiness, which are the focus of current studies, are practicing gratitude and committing acts of kindness. One on-going study asks participants to record things for which they are grateful in varying frequencies over a period of 6 weeks. Furthermore, half of the participants are induced to think about the ways their lives have been enriched by these things, whereas the other half simply writes them down. Another on-going study asks participants to commit acts of kindness on a regular basis either for strangers or for friends and family. We predict that students who actively engage in gratitude and kindness with concerted effort and commitment will experience increases in happiness that persist over time.

CONCLUSIONS

The world of those who are happy is different from the world of those who are not. (Ludwig Wittgenstein)

Regardless of whether their objective circumstances are similar, happy people appear to experience a different subjective world than those who are unhappy. Our research has shown that happy people approach, interpret, and respond to events and situations in a way that supports positive emotions and positive self-regard. This style of processing consistently emerges both for real decisions and events that occur in people's lives, and for decisions and events that occur inside the laboratory. Artfully maintaining and even enhancing their own happiness, happy people seem inclined to view their circumstances and themselves in positive terms, even when experiencing negative life events and negative moods. Our current and future research will reveal whether, through adopting the thoughts, goals, and behaviors of happy people, less happy people may learn to live in a similarly benevolent subjective world.

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