

# Is It Possible To Become Lastingly Happier?

*Answers from the Modern  
Science of Well-Being*

BY SONJA LYUBOMIRSKY, PH.D.



*Photography by Manuel Bauer*

## **WHY ARE SOME PEOPLE HAPPIER THAN OTHERS?**

One doesn't have to be an astute observer of human nature to recognize that some people are a great deal happier than others. We all know individuals who are chronically unhappy, often glum, frequently irritable, and sometimes hopeless. Likewise, most of us can identify individuals who are

remarkably happy. Although they may have their low moments and periodic stress, they manage to find joy in their days and are relatively content with the way their lives are going. What sets these two groups of individuals apart? Are happy people simply lucky to be born with a sunnier disposition? Or, are they more fortunate with regard to the events and circumstances of their lives?

In answer to the second question, psychological research has shown that prosperity, health, and physical attractiveness are only minimally related to a person's overall well-being.<sup>1</sup> So, even if some of the unhappiest people have fewer of life's "goods", as long as their basic needs in life are met (e.g., for such necessities as safety, food, and shelter), this shortfall wouldn't explain their discontent.

What about genetics? Growing empirical research done with identical and fraternal twins suggests that each person is born with a particular "happiness set point"—that is, a potential for happiness to which he or she is bound to return, even after major setbacks or triumphs.<sup>2</sup> The set point for happiness is similar to the set point for weight. Some people are blessed with a "skinny disposition." Even when they're not trying, they easily maintain their weight. By contrast, others have to work extraordinarily hard to keep their weight at a desirable level and the moment they slack off even a bit, the pounds creep back on.

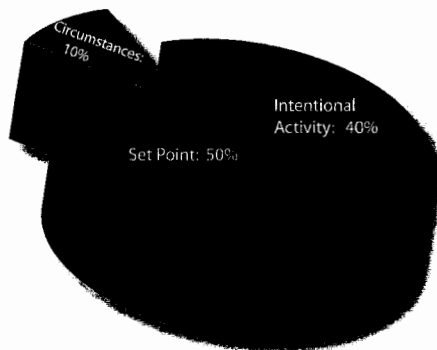
So, some people may simply possess a higher set point for happiness, a higher potential for well-being. They don't have to work hard at it—they just are happy. If this notion is true, it can be rather disheartening.

Are we all doomed to obey the directives of our genes? Along with my students and colleagues, I have found that the answer is a definitive "no." We have conducted the first controlled experimental intervention studies to attempt to increase and maintain a person's happiness level over and above his or her set point.<sup>3</sup> In broadest terms, my

research suggests that sustainable happiness is attainable, if one is prepared to do the work. Much like with permanent weight loss and fitness, becoming lastingly happier demands making some permanent changes, requiring effort and commitment every day of one's life.

#### WHAT DETERMINES HAPPINESS? A THREE-LEGGED THEORY

With Ken Sheldon and David Schkade, I developed a theory that describes the most important factors determining happiness.<sup>4</sup> It's most easily depicted as a pie chart, and this is what it tells us:



About 50% of the differences among people's happiness levels are explained by their immutable genetically-determined set points—that is, whether their set points are high or low or in-between. The implication of this finding is that, like genes for intelligence or cholesterol, the set point that a person inherits has a substantial influence on how happy he or she will be.

The psychological literature also shows that about 10% of the variance in people's happiness levels is explained by differences in people's life

circumstances—that is, whether they are rich or poor, healthy or unhealthy, married or divorced, etc. This discovery is astonishing to many, as it defies the popular belief that people would be happier if only they could alter the major circumstances of their lives.

Importantly, however, our pie chart leaves 40% for room to maneuver—that is, for opportunities to increase or decrease our happiness levels through our intentional activities. This means that an unhappy person can be a great deal happier, but he or she would do well to scrutinize carefully what precise behaviors and activities happy people choose to engage in—in short, what happy people do in their daily lives and how they think. Indeed, monitoring a very happy person's intentional activities and practices (like observing a skinny person) will help us establish which strategies “work” to boost and maintain happiness. Much of my research in the past 17 years has been devoted to doing just that.

For example, below is a sample of observations of the thinking and behavior patterns of the happiest participants in psychological studies.

- They devote a great amount of time to their family and friends, nurturing and enjoying those relationships.
- They are comfortable expressing gratitude for all they have.
- They are often the first to offer a helping hand to co-workers and passersby.
- They practice optimism when imagining their futures.
- They savor life's pleasures and try to

live in the present moment.

- They make physical exercise a weekly—and sometimes daily—habit.
- They are deeply committed to a life-long goal and ambition (e.g., fighting fraud, building cabinets, or teaching their children their deeply held values).

A now-massive literature in the field of happiness shows what kinds of circumstances, attributes, thoughts, and behaviors are associated with life satisfaction and optimal well-being.<sup>5</sup> In my laboratory and a few others, some of the strategies and practices that characterize very happy people have even been studied as part of formal happiness-increasing “interventions.”

For example, over the course of a two-to-three month period, we have encouraged study participants 1) to count their blessings on a regular basis (i.e., express gratitude for what they have—either through journaling or by writing a letter to someone whom they've never properly thanked); 2) to commit acts of kindness several times a week (i.e., doing good things for others, whether friends or strangers, either directly or anonymously, either spontaneously or planned); and 3) to cultivate optimism (i.e., keeping a weekly journal in which they imagine and write about the best possible future for themselves).

In every single study, those who practice their happiness-boosting activity with effort and commitment—and under optimal conditions—report becoming happier people as a result.<sup>4</sup> This research—and a great deal more—is described in my forthcoming

ing book (Penguin Press, 2007) about scientific advances supporting the possibility of real and lasting happiness.

### CONCLUDING WORDS

My research has implications for how to find lasting happiness—how to become and remain a happier person. One of its recurrent themes is that, if individuals aspire to a happiness level higher than their set points, they must invest time and energy in implement-

ing happiness-enhancing strategies and making those strategies habitual.

Consider how much time and commitment many people devote to physical exercise, whether it's going to the gym, jogging, kickboxing, or yoga. If they desire greater happiness, they need to invest as much time and effort in their emotional life as they do in their bodies. Pursuing happiness takes work, but it may be the most rewarding work we'll ever do. ❁

---

### REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Diener, E., Suh, E. M., Lucas, R. E., & Smith, H. L. (1999). *Subjective well-being: Three decades of progress*. *Psychological Bulletin*, 125, 276-302.
- <sup>2</sup> Lykken, D., & Tellegen, A. (1996). *Happiness is a stochastic phenomenon*. *Psychological Science*, 7, 186-189.
- <sup>2</sup> Tellegen, A., Lykken, D. T., Bouchard, T. J., Wilcox, K. J., Segal, N. L., & Rich, S. (1988). *Personality similarity in twins reared apart and together*. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 54, 1031-1039.
- <sup>3</sup> For a review, see Boehm, J., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2007). *Enduring happiness*. To appear in S. Lopez (Ed.), *Handbook of positive psychology* (2nd ed.).
- <sup>4</sup> Lyubomirsky, S., Sheldon, K. M., & Schkade, D. (2005). *Pursuing happiness: The architecture of sustainable change*. *Review of General Psychology*, 9, 111-131.
- <sup>5z</sup> Lyubomirsky, S. (2001). *Why are some people happier than others?: The role of cognitive and motivational processes in well-being*. *American Psychologist*, 56, 239-249.
- <sup>5</sup> Argyle, M. (1999). Causes and correlates of happiness. In D. Kahneman, E. Diener, & N. Schwarz (Eds.), *Well-being: The foundations of hedonic psychology*. (pp. 353-373). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.