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Abstract and Keywords

Philosophers, writers, self-help gurus, and now scientists have undertaken the challenge of how to foster greater happiness. In this chapter, we first discuss the different ways that happy and unhappy individuals construe their worlds, respond to social comparisons, make decisions, and self-reflect. Next, we examine whether deliberate strategies to improve happiness can be effective, and consider factors that may curtail their effectiveness. Specifically, we review evidence from randomized controlled experiments indicating that people can increase their happiness by practicing simple positive activities with effort and commitment. Such activities—including performing kind acts, expressing gratitude or optimism, and re-experiencing joyful events—represent the most promising route to enhanced happiness. We also discuss the optimal conditions under which positive activities increase happiness, and the mechanisms that underlie their success. Future researchers must continue not only to investigate which particular practices make people happier, but how and why they do so.

Keywords: Happiness, well-being, construal, intervention, positive activities

> *How to gain, how to keep, how to recover happiness is in fact for most men at all times the secret motive of all they do, and of all they are willing to endure.*
>
> —*William James*

The quest for ever-greater happiness has existed since antiquity, and this curiosity has not abated. In today's society, countless self-help books, magazine articles, and online videos from around the world promise the secret to a happy life. Fortunately, the pursuit of happiness is not without reward (see Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). A great deal of empirical evidence indicates that happiness—which researchers define as frequent positive emotions and high life satisfaction—is associated with, precedes, and leads to desirable life outcomes such as superior health (Boehm & Kubzansky, 2012), longevity

(Chida & Steptoe, 2008), higher income (De Neve & Oswald, 2012), better job performance (Erdogan, Bauer, Truxillo, & Mansfield, 2012), and stronger relationships (Feeney & Collins, 2015). Not surprisingly, growing interest in both the lay and scientific communities is focusing on how, when, and why people can realize and sustain meaningful changes in happiness or well-being (two terms that we will use interchangeably).

This chapter examines several questions about the pursuit of happiness. First, what are the strategies that dispositionally happy people use to foster and preserve their well-being in comparison to their less happy peers? Second, what are the scientific community's reservations and uncertainties regarding the feasibility of pursuing—and sustainably increasing—happiness? Third, what evidence exists to suggest that people can indeed learn strategies to achieve sustainable increases in well-being? And, finally, how, why, and under what conditions do such strategies work, and who in particular may benefit from them?

What Are Happy and Unhappy People Like?

Why are some people happier than others? Is it due to their marital status, the salary they earn, their life experiences, or the culture they grow up in? Hundreds of empirical articles to date have examined how these and other "objective" circumstances relate to happiness. Surprising to many laypeople, such factors (including marriage, age, sex, culture, religion, income, and life events) explain relatively little variation in people's levels of well-being (e.g., Diener, Tay, & Myers, 2011; Luhmann, Schimmack, & Eid, 2011; Tov & Diener, 2007; for a review, see Diener, Suh, Lucas & Smith, 1999).

Given the relatively small role that circumstantial factors play in the differences between happy and unhappy people, we propose that happy and unhappy individuals differ considerably in their *subjective experience and construal* of the world (Lyubomirsky, 2001). In other words, happy people are inclined to perceive and interpret their environment differently from their less happy peers. This construal theory prompts us to explore how people's thoughts, behaviors, and motivations can explain their happiness over and above the mere objective circumstances of their lives. A growing body of research suggests that happy people successfully enhance and maintain their happiness through the use of multiple adaptive strategies vis-à-vis construal of themselves and others, social comparison, decision making, and self-reflection (e.g., Liberman, Boehm, Lyubomirsky, & Ross, 2009; Lucas, Diener, & Suh, 1996; Lyubomirsky, Boehm, Kasri, & Zehm, 2011; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999; Lyubomirsky & Ross, 1997; Lyubomirsky, Tucker, & Kasri, 2001; Schwartz et al., 2002; Seidlitz, Wyer, & Diener, 1997).

Construal

Research suggests that happy individuals tend to view the world in relatively positive and happiness-promoting ways. For example, when describing their previous life experiences, self-described happy people retrospectively evaluated the experiences as pleasant both at the time of occurrence and when recalling them (Lyubomirsky & Tucker, 1998, Study 1; cf. Seidlitz et al., 1997). Unhappy people, however, evaluated their past life events relatively unfavorably at both time points. Notably, objective judges did not rate the events described by happy people as inherently more positive than those described by unhappy people, suggesting that happy and unhappy people experience similar events but interpret them differently. Further supporting this finding, when individuals were asked to evaluate hypothetical situations, dispositionally happy people rated the situations more positively than their less happy peers, even after their current mood was taken into account (Lyubomirsky & Tucker, 1998, Study 2). Moreover, being able to maintain positive information actively in the mind (before it moves to long-term memory) has been found to be related to higher levels of well-being, which suggests that emotional functioning is tied with executive functioning (Pe, Koval, & Kuppens, 2013).

Chronically happy people also tend to use a positive perspective when evaluating the world around them. For example, they tend to judge almost everything about themselves and their lives favorably, including their friendships, recreation, self-esteem, energy levels, and purpose in life (Lucas et al., 1996; Lyubomirsky, Tkach, & DiMatteo, 2006; Ryff, 1989). Furthermore, individuals who are able to derive large boosts in positivity from pleasant events in their daily lives—for example, from helping or interacting with another person or from engaging in a hobby—show higher levels of well-being and less depression than individuals who did not get a boost from pleasant events (Catalino & Fredrickson, 2011). These effects appear to extend to evaluations of others as well. In one study, students interacted with a female stranger in the laboratory and were then asked to evaluate her personality. Compared with unhappy students, happy students rated the stranger more positively and expressed a stronger interest in becoming friends with her (Lyubomirsky & Tucker, 1998, Study 3). Thus, happy people seem to enjoy more positive interpretations of their daily lives than less happy people.

Social Comparison

In general, happy people are less sensitive than unhappy people to feedback about other people's performances, even when that feedback is unfavorable. One illustrative study asked participants to solve anagrams in the presence of a confederate who was performing the same task either much more quickly or much more slowly (Lyubomirsky & Ross, 1997, Study 1). When exposed to a slower confederate, all participants (regardless of how happy they were) reacted the same way to the experience—specifically, performing the task enhanced their confidence in their ability to solve anagrams. In the presence of a faster confederate, however, happy students did not change their

judgments of how good they were at solving anagrams, but unhappy participants derogated their own skills. This suggests that the self-perceptions of happy individuals are relatively invulnerable to social comparisons.

In another study, students were asked to "teach" a lesson about conflict resolution to a hypothetical audience of children while ostensibly being evaluated by experts (Lyubomirsky & Ross, 1997, Study 2). After teaching, participants were provided with an expert evaluation of their own and a peer's performance. The results showed that happy people responded to the situation predictably—they reported more positive emotions when told that their performance was excellent (even when a peer had done even better) than when told that their performance was poor (even when a peer had done even worse). By contrast, unhappy people reported more positive emotions after receiving a *negative* expert evaluation (accompanied by news that a peer had done even worse) than after receiving a positive expert evaluation (accompanied by news that a peer had done even better). Again, this suggests that happy people's emotions and self-regard are less influenced by social comparisons than those of their unhappy peers (see Lyubomirsky et al., 2001, for similar evidence in a group context).

Decision Making

Besides using different strategies for social comparisons, happy and unhappy people show distinctly different responses when making decisions about both inconsequential matters (e.g., selecting a dessert) and momentous ones (e.g., selecting a college; Lyubomirsky & Ross, 1999). Happy people tend to be more satisfied with all of their available options (including the option they eventually choose) and only express dissatisfaction when their sense of self is threatened. For example, when self-reported happy students were asked to rate the attractiveness of several desserts before and after learning which dessert they would get to keep, they increased their liking for the dessert they got and did not change their liking for the dessert they could not get. In contrast, unhappy students found the option they were given to be minimally acceptable (derogating that dessert after learning they could keep it), and the forgone options to be even worse (Lyubomirsky & Ross, 1999, Study 2).

Similar patterns have been observed for happy and unhappy high school students facing a more significant decision—namely, the choice of a college (Lyubomirsky & Ross, 1999, Study 1). After being accepted by individual colleges, self-described happy students boosted their liking and judgments of those colleges. To protect their self-esteem, however, happy students decreased their overall ratings of the colleges that had rejected them. This dissonance reduction presumably allowed the happy students to maintain positive feelings and self-regard. By contrast, unhappy students (maladaptively) continued liking the colleges that had rejected them.

Happy and unhappy people also differ in how they make decisions in the face of many options. Compared with unhappy people, happy people are more likely to "satisfice"—that is, to be satisfied with an option that is merely "good enough," without concern for alternative, potentially better options (Schwartz et al., 2002). Unhappy people, in contrast, are more likely to "maximize"—that is, to strive to make the absolutely best choice regardless of time and effort. Although maximizers' decisions may ultimately produce objectively superior results (e.g., a higher paying job), maximizers experience greater regret about their choices and diminished well-being relative to "satisficers" (Iyengar, Wells, & Schwartz, 2006). This finding has been replicated across cultures; however, when the specific tendencies of maximizers are investigated in American men and women, the inverse association between maximizing and well-being seems to be driven by maximizers' constant search for alternative options and their problems with making decisions (Oishi, Tsutsui, Eggleston, & Galinha, 2014). Thus, the detrimental effects of maximizing may stem more from decision-making difficulties than from having high standards.

Happiness has also been found to be associated with preferences for the timing of positive and negative experiences. When happy people experienced an unpleasant event, such as the loss of a substantial amount of money, they preferred to experience a pleasant event quickly thereafter (within a day), perhaps to buffer themselves against the negative feelings stemming from the loss (Sul, Kim, & Choi, 2013). In comparison, less happy people preferred to experience a pleasant event several days after an initial loss, when the pleasantness could no longer buffer against the loss. Thus, decision-making processes may reinforce happiness and unhappiness.

Reflective Processes

Unhappy people are much more likely than their happier peers to excessively self-reflect and dwell, which can lead to detrimental outcomes. For example, unhappy students led to believe that they had failed an anagram-solving task showed diminished concentration, which impaired the students' subsequent performance on an intellectually demanding and consequential test (Lyubomirsky, Boehm, et al., 2011). Another study demonstrated that manipulating a person's focus of attention (i.e., reflecting versus distracting) could eliminate the differences between the cognitive strategies used by happy and unhappy individuals (Lyubomirsky & Ross, 1999, Study 3). These findings hint at a critical mechanism underlying differences between happy and unhappy people—namely, that one could make happy people look unhappy by prompting them to ruminate about themselves. Conversely, one could make unhappy people look happy by directing attention away from themselves.

The ways in which people think about positive life events may also differentially impact happiness. A set of studies from the United States and Israel examined the relationship between well-being and two different thought perspectives that can be used to consider past autobiographical experiences—namely, "endowing" (or reflecting on) life events

versus "contrasting" them with the present (Liberman et al., 2009; cf. Tversky & Griffin, 1991). When thinking about past events, happy people are more likely than unhappy people to report endowing or savoring positive life experiences and contrasting negative life experiences (i.e., considering how much better off they are today). In contrast, unhappy people are relatively more likely to report endowing or ruminating about negative experiences and contrasting positive experiences (i.e., considering how much worse off they are today). Such findings have been replicated in research on savoring, which involves an explicit focus on past, current, or future positive life experiences to prolong or foster pleasure (Bryant, 2003). For example, studies have shown that savoring is associated with greater levels of well-being (Hurley & Kwon, 2013; Jose, Lim, & Bryant, 2012; Quoidbach, Berry, Hansenne, & Mikolajczak, 2010). This evidence suggests that happy people's strategies of processing life events prolong and preserve positive emotions, whereas unhappy people's strategies dampen the inherent positivity associated with joyous events and enhance the negativity associated with distressing events.

Can Less Happy People Learn Strategies to Achieve Sustainable Happiness?

The differences between chronically happy and unhappy people suggest that happy people think and behave in ways that reinforce their happiness. Given these findings, is it possible for unhappy people to learn deliberate strategies to achieve greater well-being? Evidence suggests that, in natural settings, people do try to become happier. For example, college students report a variety of strategies that they use to increase their happiness, including spending time with friends, pursuing goals, engaging in leisure activities, participating in religion, and directly acting happy or smiling (Tkach & Lyubomirsky, 2006; see also Warner & Vroman, 2011). Furthermore, a survey revealed that, on average, people regularly perform eight positive activities (e.g., performing kind acts, being optimistic, savoring life's joys; Parks, Della Porta, Pierce, Zilca, & Lyubomirsky, 2012). Although some of these techniques (e.g., practicing religion) are anecdotally known to make people happy, and other ones (e.g., acting happy) are positively correlated with happiness, it is unclear whether such strategies *cause* increases in happiness or whether already happy people are simply more likely to practice them.

Reservations About the Pursuit of Happiness

Doubts about the possibility of increasing and maintaining happiness come from four areas of research. To begin with, twin and adoption studies suggest that genetics account for a large amount of variation in well-being (up to 50%; Lykken & Tellegen, 1996). However, genetic influences on happiness may not be so strong as previously thought, because environmental contexts also play a critical role (Hahn, Johnson, & Spinath, 2013; Røysamb, Harris, Magnus, Vittersø, & Tambs, 2002; Stubbe, Posthuma, Boomsma, & De

Geus, 2005). Although genetic influences may predispose an individual to a certain range of happiness levels, they do not guarantee it; furthermore, even relatively high levels of heritability do not prevent happiness-enhancing strategies from increasing average levels of happiness on a broader scale (Nes, 2010).

Another concern regarding whether sustainable changes in well-being are feasible is the concept of *hedonic adaptation*. Brickman and Campbell (1971) posited that, after a positive or negative life experience, people become accustomed to their new conditions and return to their baseline level of happiness. This notion of a "hedonic treadmill" suggests that people adapt to circumstantial changes such as starting a new job or getting a divorce (see also Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978). Increasing research has shown that people may indeed adapt to positive changes in their lives relatively quickly (e.g., see Clark, Diener, Georgellis, & Lucas, 2008, for a review), which could make hedonic adaptation a formidable barrier to sustainably increasing well-being. However, a recent theoretical model has outlined strategies to delay adaptation to positive experiences by appreciating and varying the initial experience (Lyubomirsky, 2011, 2013; Sheldon, Boehm, & Lyubomirsky, 2013; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2012). Moreover, research using prospective longitudinal designs has indicated that, depending on the life event, hedonic adaptation may be either slow and incomplete or rapid and complete (Luhmann, Hofmann, Eid, & Lucas, 2012). For example, unemployment appears to be particularly detrimental to one's well-being (Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2004), but getting married does not appear to make a measurable difference after the initial honeymoon period (Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2003). Thus, hedonic adaptation may be relevant for some life changes but not all, and specific strategies exist that individuals can use to delay adaptation.

A third source of pessimism about the possibility of real change in happiness is the strong association between happiness and personality (Diener & Lucas, 1999). Personality traits are characterized by their relatively fixed nature and lack of variation across time (McCrae & Costa, 1994). Thus, some researchers conceptualize happiness as part of a person's stable personality and, by extension, a construct that is unlikely to undergo meaningful change (Costa, McCrae, & Zonderman, 1987). However, there is a growing recognition that personality can, in fact, change across the lifespan (Roberts & Mroczek, 2008; Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006), so it is possible that happiness could similarly show fluctuations with age, even if happiness is a component of an individual's personality.

Finally, recent theory and research suggests that the pursuit of happiness may have a "dark side" (Gruber, Mauss, & Tamir, 2011). For example, in one experiment, explicitly valuing happiness was associated with disappointment and diminished, rather than increased, well-being (Mauss, Tamir, Anderson, & Savino, 2011). The authors argued that the goal of pursuing happiness can be detrimental because, unlike other common goals (e.g., career success), disappointment at not achieving happiness is a direct threat to the goal itself (i.e., happiness). Traditional Buddhist thought, which counsels that true happiness is achieved by renouncing individual happiness, is consistent with this notion.

Despite the potential costs of being (too) motivated to be happy, people worldwide report that happiness is one of their most important life goals (Diener, 2000; Diener, Suh, Smith, & Shao, 1995). Accordingly, it is important to reconcile the contradictory theory and research about the effects of directly pursuing well-being. One promising approach is to investigate the optimal conditions under which the pursuit of happiness can be productive and desirable—for example, when motivation and standards for reaching the goal of happiness are not too high or too low, when the practice of positive activities does not unduly direct practitioners' attention to their own well-being, and when happiness is a byproduct rather than an explicit aim (Ford & Mauss, 2014; Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014).

The Sustainable Happiness Model

In their model of the primary determinants of happiness, Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade (2005) challenge these reservations, offering an optimistic perspective regarding the feasibility of pursuing and attaining improvements in happiness. According to their model, *chronic happiness*, or the happiness one shows during a relatively long-term period in life, is influenced by three factors: (1) genetic influences (thought to account for approximately half the variance in individual differences in happiness); (2) life circumstances like culture, gender, and marital status (to which people ultimately adapt); and (3) behavioral, cognitive, and motivational activities (e.g., practicing acts of kindness, expressing gratitude, or pursuing intrinsic life goals).

Intentional activities represent the most promising route for fostering meaningful change in well-being (cf. Lyubomirsky, 2008). The benefits of intentional activities are that they are naturally variable and tend to have beginning and ending points (i.e., they are episodic). These two characteristics alone could work against adaptation because it is much more difficult to adapt to something that is continuously changing (i.e., one's activities) than to something that is relatively constant (i.e., one's circumstances). Supporting this argument, when people were asked to rate various aspects of recent positive changes in their activities (e.g., starting a new fitness program) versus positive changes in their circumstances (e.g., moving to a nicer apartment), they described their activity-based changes as more "variable" and less prone to adaptation (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006a). Furthermore, activity-based changes predicted well-being both six and 12 weeks after the start of the study, whereas circumstance-based changes only predicted well-being at six weeks. It appears that by the twelfth week of the study, students had already adapted to their circumstantial changes, but not to their intentional activities.

Using Positive Activities as the Basis of Happiness Interventions

Increasing evidence suggests that happiness interventions involving intentional activities can be effective in improving happiness. Fordyce (1977, 1983) was one of the first researchers to teach volitional happiness-boosting strategies (e.g., socializing, practicing optimism, being present-oriented, reducing negativity, and not worrying) to different classrooms of students. Across seven studies, students who were taught the happiness-increasing strategies demonstrated increases in happiness compared with students who received no training. Fordyce's pioneering studies provided preliminary evidence that people can increase their short-term happiness through "training" programs. Our laboratory and others have extended this work by examining the efficacy of intentional happiness-enhancing activities in randomized controlled experiments, with a particular focus on identifying critical moderators and mediators. We describe some of the most well-established intentional activities here—practicing kind acts, expressing gratitude, visualizing ideal futures, and processing happy life experiences—although numerous others have been described and tested (for reviews, see Bolier et al., 2013; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009), including some Web-based activities (e.g., applying personal strengths; Drozd, Mork, Nielsen, Raeder, & Bjorkli, 2014; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005).

Committing Acts of Kindness

Engaging in kind acts or prosocial behavior (e.g., holding the door open for a stranger or doing a roommate's dishes) is thought to have an impact on happiness for a variety of reasons, including bolstered self-regard, positive social interactions, and charitable feelings towards others and the community at large. In one study, college students were asked to perform five acts of kindness per week for six weeks (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, et al., 2005). Happiness increased for students performing acts of kindness, but only for those who performed all of their kind acts in a single day. Perhaps when the kind acts were spread throughout the week, the effect of each kind act was distributed, such that participants did not differentiate between their normal (and presumably kind) behavior and the kindnesses prompted by the intervention. In another kindness intervention from our laboratory, participants in a 10-week randomized trial were invited to practice kind acts that either varied or were repeated each week (Sheldon et al., 2013). Participants who performed a wide variety of kind acts showed increases in happiness from baseline to post-intervention. In contrast, participants who were not given the opportunity to change their kind acts actually showed decreases in happiness across the intervention. Restricting variety—or the ways in which kind acts were implemented—clearly curtailed benefits to well-being.

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The disadvantages of limiting choice or restricting autonomous motivation (i.e., acting volitionally in a way that is consistent with one's sense of self) have been reported in other prosocial research (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010). Furthermore, an experiment from our laboratory specifically investigated whether encouraging autonomous motivation would bolster the effects of performing kind acts. Across a six-week intervention, North American and South Korean college students who received autonomous motivation support to engage in kind acts (through an experimental manipulation) showed the biggest increases in well-being relative to other groups (Nelson et al., 2015). Together, these interventions suggest not only that can happiness be improved by prosocial behaviors, but also that the timing, variety, and personal motivation of performing such behaviors affects the magnitude of improvement.

Additional research lends further support to the efficacy of kindness interventions, albeit with shorter experimental periods or unique samples. For example, in a daylong study, individuals were given $5 or $20 and instructed to either spend the money on themselves (e.g., for a personal bill or gift to self) or on another person (e.g., for a charitable donation or gift; Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008). At the end of the day, those who spent the money on somebody else reported greater happiness than those who spent the money on themselves. Other work has found that performing kind acts can be beneficial for young children. In one study, classrooms of 9–11year olds were randomly assigned to either practice three kind acts each week (e.g., help their parent with a chore) or track the locations of three places they had visited each week (e.g., Grandma's house; Layous, Nelson, Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, & Lyubomirsky, 2012). After the four-week intervention, students in both conditions reported increased positive feelings, but students who carried out kind acts for other people were significantly more likely to be well-liked by their peers. Thus, acting kindly towards others may result in advantageous outcomes— particularly in the social domain—beyond just an enhanced sense of personal well-being.

Expressing Gratitude

Expressing gratitude—either by writing a letter of gratitude to someone who has shown kindness, or counting one's blessings—is expected to bolster happiness because it promotes the savoring of positive events and situations, bolsters resilience in the face of adversity, and counteracts hedonic adaptation by allowing people to see the good in their life rather than taking it for granted. In one study modeled after Emmons and McCullough (2003), participants wrote up to five things they were grateful for (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, et al., 2005). The recounted "blessings" ranged from relatively trivial (e.g., texting) to significant (e.g., one's health). Optimal timing again proved important: increases in well-being were observed only in participants who counted their blessings once per week rather than three times per week. This finding provides further evidence not only that an intentional activity can successfully increase happiness, but also that the implementation of that activity is critical.

Other studies have asked participants to express gratitude by writing a letter of appreciation to someone in their lives. For example, in an experiment of men and women who actively chose to participate in a well-being intervention, those who expressed gratitude (or optimism) demonstrated increases in well-being relative to those in a control condition or those who had not chosen to be part of well-being intervention (Lyubomirsky, Dickerhoof, Boehm, & Sheldon, 2011). Similarly, in a study with both North American and South Korean college students, participants who wrote letters of gratitude (or performed kind acts) showed larger improvements in well-being than participants in the control condition (Layous, Lee, Choi, & Lyubomirsky, 2013). However, North Americans seemed to benefit from practicing both gratitude and kindness, whereas South Koreans benefitted more from engaging in kind acts (for more about the effects of culture, see "Moderators of Positive Activities" in this chapter; cf. Boehm, Lyubomirsky, & Sheldon, 2011).

Gratitude interventions have also been shown to be effective among children. In one study, gratitude and life satisfaction increased (and negative affect decreased) immediately after or three weeks after middle-school students listed their blessings over the course of 10 days (Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008). In a similar study, students ranging in age from 8–19 years old were asked to write a letter of gratitude and share it with the person they were grateful for (Froh, Kashdan, Ozimkowski, & Miller, 2009). Compared with students in the control condition (who wrote about daily events in their lives), students in the gratitude condition demonstrated increases in positive affect following the intervention, but only if they had initially low levels of positive affect. This suggests that gratitude-based interventions can boost a sense of well-being among children, but only under certain conditions (see also Froh et al., 2014).

Visualizing Best Possible Selves

Visualizing and writing about one's best possible self in the future (Markus & Nurius, 1986) is also thought to boost happiness because it presumably enhances optimism and helps integrate one's priorities and life goals. King (2001) previously demonstrated that thinking and writing about one's most hoped for future self was related to boosts in well-being, and a subsequent study from our laboratory confirmed those initial findings (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006b). In addition to a best possible selves condition, our four-week intervention also included a gratitude and a control condition. Results of the four-week intervention indicated that participants in both experimental conditions reported increased positive feelings immediately after the intervention; however, these increases were statistically significant only among those who visualized their best possible selves (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006b). These findings were extended in a study that prompted college students to write about their best possible future selves in four different contexts (academics, social relationships, career, and health; Layous, Nelson, & Lyubomirsky, 2013). Relative to participants who described their daily activities, participants who imagined their ideal futures showed increases in positive emotions across the four-week

intervention period. Similar findings have also been reported in other studies (see Boehm et al., 2011; Lyubomirsky, Dickerhoof, et al., 2011; Peters, Flink, Boersma, & Linton, 2010).
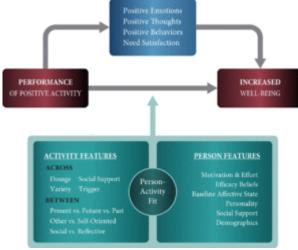
Re-experiencing Happy Life Events

Other happiness interventions focus on recalling positive life experiences, with some exploring how particular methods of recall affect well-being. In a study of Japanese men and women in the workplace, happiness improved for employees who put effort into recounting three positive work-related events for six weeks, relative to employees who completed a neutral control task (Chancellor, Layous, & Lyubomirsky, 2015). Two other experiments tested whether systematically analyzing one's thoughts and feelings associated with the happiest moments in life would reduce some of the inherent joy associated with such experiences, whereas savoring such moments (without attempting to organize or find meaning in them) would preserve positive emotions and generally increase happiness (Lyubomirsky, Sousa, & Dickerhoof, 2006). In the first study, participants who thought privately about their happiest life event reported higher life satisfaction than those who talked or wrote about the event. In the second study, participants wrote or thought about their happiest day by either systematically analyzing or repetitively replaying it. Writing and analyzing were expected to be detrimental to well-being, whereas thinking and replaying were expected to enhance well-being. As expected, participants who repetitively replayed their happiest day while thinking about it showed increases in positive emotions four weeks after the study was over, compared with the other groups. In summary, strategies that involve systematic integration and structuring of one's happiest moments (processes naturally engendered by writing or talking) may diminish positive emotions. In contrast, a successful happiness-increasing strategy involves replaying past positive life events as though watching a video again.

Moderators of Positive Activities

Under what conditions do happiness interventions work best? Our laboratory's positive activity model (see Figure 1) proposes that the effectiveness of happiness-boosting activities is moderated by both features of the activities themselves and features of the person performing the activities (Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013). Although we have alluded to some moderating conditions when discussing the effectiveness of positive practices (for example, the "dosage" and variety of activities), we will briefly discuss here other important moderating factors (for more extensive reviews, see Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014; Nelson & Lyubomirsky, 2014).

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Figure 1 Model of positive activities: Positive activities lead to improvements in happiness via increases in positive emotions, positive thoughts, and positive behaviors, as well as the satisfaction of psychological needs. Characteristics of the activity, as well as those of the individual practicing it, affect the extent to which a given activity improves happiness.

"How Do Simple Positive Activities Increase Well-Being" by S. Lyubomirsky & K. Layous, 2013, *Current Directions in Psychological Science,* p. 58
Adapted with permission from .

Motivation and Effort

Can someone who does not wish to become happier become happier anyway by practicing the habits of dispositionally happy people? A study conducted in our laboratory tested the hypothesis that positive activities would be most beneficial among individuals who demonstrated an explicit desire to become happier (Lyubomirsky, Dickerhoof, et al., 2011). Men and women volunteered for one of two studies—one advertised as a happiness intervention (i.e., indicating high motivation to become happier) and the other advertised as a generic cognitive exercise (i.e., indicating low motivation to become happier). Regardless of the study they selected, participants then completed either a gratitude, best possible self, or control activity. At the conclusion of the eight-week intervention period, participants who had self-selected into a study on happiness reported greater boosts in well-being from the positive activities than participants who self-selected into a generic study. That is, only individuals who were initially motivated to increase their happiness received the maximum benefit of the happiness-increasing activities.

Although motivation to become happier is a key factor in the pursuit of happiness, the effectiveness of positive activities may still be limited if people do not put genuine effort into completing them. Indeed, several studies have shown that the amount of effort that people muster when engaging in happiness interventions is positively associated with the amount of benefit they receive from the interventions. For example, individuals who continued performing a meditation activity 15 months after the meditation intervention ended reported greater well-being than individuals who stopped performing the activity (Cohn & Fredrickson, 2010). In addition, in a study that prompted students to either express gratitude or visualize their ideal futures, the best predictor of positive affect four weeks later was continued performance of the intervention activity (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006b). In other words, the benefits of positive activities are most pronounced among individuals who put effort into the activity above and beyond what they were instructed to do. Subsequent research has found that the effort individuals exert when performing positive activities, whether that effort is self-reported or indirectly assessed (e.g., via the number of characters in a gratitude letter), is associated with greater gains in well-being (Chancellor et al., 2015; Layous, Lee, et al., 2013; Lyubomirsky, Dickerhoof, et al., 2011).

Culture

Different cultures approach happiness in different ways (see Oishi, Graham, Kesebir, & Galinha, 2013; Uchida, Norasakkunkit, & Kitayama, 2004), and thus activities to increase happiness may not be equally effective for members of all cultures. Two sets of studies by our laboratory found that individuals of European or American descent benefited more from practicing optimism (Boehm et al., 2011) or writing letters of gratitude (Boehm et al., 2011; Layous, Lee, et al., 2013) than did individuals of Asian descent. Notably, however, Americans and South Koreans benefited equally from performing acts of kindness (Layous, Lee, et al., 2013). One interpretation of these findings is that, relative to Western cultures, Asian cultures value interpersonal over intrapersonal goals (Uchida et al., 2004), and acts of kindness are done explicitly for the benefit of another person rather than for oneself. Although further research is needed to fully assess the moderating role of culture on positive activities, it is clear nonetheless that cultural values have a critical impact on the effectiveness of happiness-increasing activities.

Initial Happiness and Depression

It is not surprising that some people are happier than others, but does this natural variation in happiness levels influence the effectiveness of positive activities? Research examining the importance of baseline levels of happiness and depression has provided mixed answers to this question. People low in initial happiness arguably have the most to gain from happiness interventions, and several studies have indeed found that depressed individuals benefit from positive activities as much as, or more than, non-depressed individuals (e.g., Seligman et al., 2005; see also Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009, for a review). Other research, however, has found the opposite effect; in one study, mildly depressed individuals benefited more from a neutral activity than from writing a letter of gratitude, perhaps because the gratitude letter was too demanding and guilt-inducing for depressed individuals (Sin, Della Porta, & Lyubomirsky, 2011).

Person–Activity Fit

Although positive activities are generally an effective means of increasing happiness, they are not equally effective for all people. We propose that the impact of positive activities is influenced by the specific preferences and characteristics of the person who performs them, or the *person–activity fit* (see Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014; Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013). Person–activity fit has not yet received considerable empirical attention, but studies that have directly examined the concept have supported it. For example, Schueller (2010) found that individuals put more effort into, and benefited more from, activities that they explicitly preferred compared with activities that they did not prefer. Similarly, Dickerhoof (2007) found that people who reported that happiness interventions were enjoyable and natural to perform received greater boosts in well-being from the interventions than people who did not find the interventions enjoyable. Thus, although empirical research on person–activity fit is still in its infancy, it may potentially prove to be a key moderator of the success of positive activity interventions.

Current and Future Directions

An important caveat to the happiness intervention research conducted to date is that participants practicing a particular positive activity have rarely been followed for extended periods of time. A comprehensive understanding of the sustainable impact of activity-based interventions on happiness must use a longitudinal perspective (i.e., assessing well-being many months and even years after an intervention). Although some studies have measured happiness six months (Lyubomirsky, Dickerhoof, et al., 2011; Seligman et al., 2005), 15 months (Cohn & Fredrickson, 2010), and even 18 months later (Fordyce, 1983), it is unclear whether participants were still engaging in their assigned exercises for that period of time. As discussed earlier, empirical evidence suggests that the participants most likely to show long-lasting benefits of a happiness intervention are those who continue to implement and integrate the intervention activity into their lives, even after the active intervention period has ended (e.g, Cohn & Fredrickson, 2010). If effort is no longer exerted after the prescribed intervention period—when researchers are not encouraging, let alone enforcing, participants' practice of their happiness-inducing activity—participants may or may not continue with the activity on their own accord. We believe that without ongoing committed effort, benefits from happiness-enhancing activities will begin to subside. Additional research regarding this issue is needed to evaluate the extent to which continued practice and effort moderate effects over the long-term.

Another unresolved issue in studies regarding positive activities is precisely why or how they contribute to improvements in well-being—that is, what are the key mediators? The positive activity model proposes that a positive activity will only be successful if it generates positive feelings, thoughts, or behaviors, or otherwise satisfies one or more basic human needs (see Figure 1; Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013). Fostering one or more of these mediators is expected to subsequently enhance one's sense of well-being. Preliminary evidence supports this notion. For example, in a meditation-based intervention designed to foster feelings of warmth and care towards others, participants' daily positive emotions increased, which in turn led to increases in their psychological, physical, and social resources (Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008). Lastly, the improved resources, in turn, led to overall improvements in well-being. Similarly, in an intervention that prompted participants either to express gratitude (by writing letters of appreciation to people in their lives), express optimism (by imagining and writing about their best possible futures), or list activities from the past week (a comparison control), individuals in the positive activity conditions perceived their weekly experiences to be more satisfying than individuals in the control condition (Dickerhoof, 2007). Notably, these satisfying experiences were linked with increases in well-being at the end of the intervention.

Another intervention that prompted college students either to perform kind acts or to focus on their schoolwork as usual provides evidence for the role of satisfying human needs as potential mediators (Nelson et al., 2015). In this study, the relationship between performing autonomy-supported kind acts and improved well-being was partially mediated by the increases in need satisfaction (i.e., feelings of autonomy, competence, and connectedness with others; Deci & Ryan, 2000) that participants reported during the six-week intervention period (see also Sheldon et al., 2010). In summary, these studies suggest that positive activities enhance one's sense of well-being via increases in pleasant emotions, positive cognitions, and satisfying the basic needs of autonomy, competence, and connectedness. Additional research is needed to replicate these findings and more explicitly test other proposed mechanisms underlying happiness-enhancing interventions.

Happiness in the Spotlight

This review of the sustainable happiness and positive-activity literature illustrates personality and social psychology's increasing focus on the causes, correlates, variations, and consequences of happiness. Why has happiness rapidly emerged in the scientific spotlight? Throughout the history of Western individualist societies, both laypeople and intellectuals alike have been preoccupied with attaining greater well-being. Indeed, people in a wide variety of cultures report the pursuit of happiness as one of their most meaningful, desirable, and significant life goals (Diener & Oishi, 2000; Diener et al., 1995; Triandis, Bontempo, Leung, & Hui, 1990). It is not surprising, then, that happiness has become a topic of tremendous research interest. Furthermore, whereas earlier thinkers, lacking the proper scientific methodologies, could only philosophize about the nature and roots of happiness, advances in assessment and methodology have enabled current researchers to investigate well-being with greater confidence and increased precision (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2002). Finally, as ever more people around the globe, and especially in the West, have their basic needs met, they have begun to enjoy the "luxury" of focusing on psychological fulfillment—that is, on psychological well-being rather than only on material well-being. And, for those with non-essential wealth, there may be a dawning recognition that material consumption—possessing the latest gadget or living in the grandest house—is not rewarding in and of itself (Gilovich, Kumar, & Jampol, 2015).

Are there any costs to devoting energy and resources to the scientific study of well-being? We believe the costs are avoidable and few (cf. Ford & Mauss, 2014; Gruber et al., 2011). Certainly, a single-minded obsession with the pursuit of happiness, as well as ceaseless monitoring of happiness, may not only backfire by making people miserable but may obscure or preclude other important goals or activities—activities that may be "right," virtuous, or moral, but not happiness-inducing. Furthermore, although the characteristics of happy individuals help them achieve success in many areas of life, some of their characteristics (e.g., reliance on heuristics or diminished attention to the self) may be

detrimental in certain contexts (Lyubomirsky, King, et al., 2005). In short, happiness may be a necessary condition of the good life—a healthy, well-lived life—but it is not a sufficient condition. Other concerns should motivate people too, such as cultivating self-acceptance and nourishing strong social relationships (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Then again, it is notable that many, if not most, important, worthy, and socially desirable life activities, which sometimes appear to be incongruent with the pursuit of happiness—like caring for a sick family member, studying for the Medical College Admission Test, or turning the other cheek—can all be used as strategies to ultimately enhance well-being (Lyubomirsky, 2008).

Conclusion

Man is the artificer of his own happiness.

—Henry David Thoreau

We have reviewed several cognitive and behavioral strategies that happy people use to maintain their high levels of well-being and have suggested that less happy people can strive successfully to be happier by learning such strategies and implementing them with determination and commitment. Despite historical sources of pessimism regarding change in well-being, people *can* become sustainably happier by practicing intentional activities—but only with concerted effort and under optimal conditions (Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, et al., 2005). Although hedonic adaptation to positive changes in people's lives is one of the most significant barriers to happiness (Lyubomirsky, 2011; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2012), the positive activities described here, and probably many others, can work to inhibit, counteract, or slow down the adaptation process and ultimately give rise to meaningful changes in well-being. Future researchers would do well to continue investigating under what conditions positive activities are most effective, least effective, and even detrimental.

Future Questions

1. Besides happiness, what other outcomes related to the "good life" might be affected by the practice of positive activities?
2. What are the underlying processes by which positive activities enhance happiness?
3. Is there a point in the lifespan when positive activities are more or less effective? For example, are positive activities equally beneficial for children, young adults, and older adults?
4. Under what conditions might the pursuit of happiness backfire?

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Julia K. Boehm

Julia K. Boehm, Department of Psychology, Chapman University

Peter Ruberton

Peter Ruberton, Department of Psychology, University of California, Riverside

Sonja Lyubomirsky

Sonja Lyubomirsky, Department of Psychology, University of California, Riverside