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# The How of Happiness

A New Approach to Getting the Life You Want

Sonja Lyubomirsky • Penguin © 2008 • 384 pages

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Life Advice / Well-Being / Happiness

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## Take-Aways

- Happiness is largely a state of mind.
- Ultimately, your happiness is not conditioned by life's external circumstances.
- Some people are more genetically disposed to happiness than others.
- Anyone, except for the clinically depressed, can be happier if they choose to be.
- Most happy people share the same "happiness habits."
- To be happy, establish new happiness habits for yourself.
- Establishing such habits requires hard work and dedicated effort.
- Create these habits by doing various "happiness exercises" on a daily basis.
- These exercises include being joyful about life, feeling gratitude for what you have and always living in the moment.
- Some exercises work better than others depending on people's personalities, lifestyles and attributes.

## Recommendation

Singer Bobby McFerrin had a monster hit in 1988 entitled *Don't Worry, Be Happy*. The hypnotically perky, happy song hopped its way across the globe, magically lifting the spirits of listeners everywhere. The lyrics say: “In your life expect some trouble / When you worry you make it double / Don’t worry, be happy / Be happy now.” If only happiness were that easy to achieve. Indeed, happiness requires considerable focus and effort, but psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky promises that it is eminently achievable, even for the galactically unhappy. She outlines some proven psychological stratagems and explains why they work, if you put in the effort. Just be aware of and implement specific mood-lifting techniques to improve the level of happiness in your life. Whether or not you cheer up when you hear McFerrin’s catchy tune, *getAbstract* suggests giving Lyubomirsky’s scientific happiness-inducing techniques a shot. Don’t worry, be happy: They just might work.

## Summary

### You Can Be Happy

Don’t be one of those people who believe they are destined to be unhappy. Reorganize your thinking and guess what? You can be happy, even if you aren’t wealthy, thin, beautiful, admired by your peers or a lottery winner. External circumstances don’t determine true happiness. What counts is your attitude toward life. If you’re positive, you are likely to be happy. If you’re negative, you’ll probably be unhappy.

*“The fountain of happiness can be found in how you behave, what you think and what goals you set every day of your life.”*

Genes have much to do with happiness. Some people are born with high happiness “set points.” These markers are similar to diet set points: Some people can eat a ton of food and not gain a pound, while others seem to put on weight just by entering the kitchen. Similarly, people with high happiness set points naturally feel more satisfied than others and more content – happier – with their lives and the world around them.

*“Aiming for greater happiness is no small endeavor, requiring effort and commitment.”*

You can’t change your genes. If you are unlucky and have a relatively low happiness set point, you will tend to feel unhappy rather than happy. But research indicates that people’s set points account for only 50% of their overall happiness. Another 10% is determined by life circumstances – being rich or poor, healthy or unhealthy, fat or thin, loved or unloved, lucky or unlucky – and individuals directly control the remaining 40%.

*“Happy people are all alike; every unhappy person is unhappy in his or her own way.”*

People have the power to substantially improve their happiness by making a conscious effort to be happy, not unhappy. This requires developing the habits and attitudes of happy people, and – if need be – changing their thinking and behavior. Ultimately, you choose to be happy. You can induce happiness using basic,

scientifically proven concepts, but it involves a great deal of effort. Changing your thinking, attitudes and behavior is not easy, but the result could be lifelong happiness.

*“Some of us are likely to be not just slightly unhappy but clinically or subclinically depressed...moderate to severe depression, especially, requires urgent attention from a professional.”*

Unfortunately, some individuals continue to feel grossly unhappy regardless of their heroic attempts to change their thinking and behavior. Such individuals may be seriously depressed and may need professional assistance, such as psychotherapy or medication. If you think you might be depressed, seek help. First, get a full physical examination from your primary-care physician to rule out any somatic causes of depression. Your physician may refer you to a mental-health professional for treatment.

*“All of us want to be happy, even if we don’t admit it openly or choose to cloak our desire in different words.”*

If you are a nondepressed, but still unhappy person, examine why you feel down. This will help you determine which exercises can help you improve your mood and be happier. Ask yourself what underpins your unhappiness. Do you dread the future? Do you feel you don’t have control over your life? Are you shy or naturally pessimistic? Is it hard for you to find pleasure? Your answers to such questions will point you to the exercises that will be the most satisfying for you.

*“If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?” (the Talmud)*

Examine your strong points. For example, if you are naturally competitive, then you should engage in a sport or physical activity where you can excel, and thus feel happier and better about yourself. Consider the life you live before you chose new activities. If your life is highly stressful with little free time, then something simple like counting your blessings may be all you need.

## The 12 Activities of Happiness

Achieving happiness is no mystery. It involves actively doing simple, new things regularly and making them habits. These activities will make you happier – it’s that simple. Of course, introducing new activities into your daily regimen is not easy. If you’re willing to make the effort, pursue the following 12 actions and become happier.

*“Pursuing happiness takes work, but consider that this ‘happiness work’ may be the most rewarding work you’ll ever do.”*

Some of these actions may seem silly, even sappy. Don’t let such reactions stand in the way of your happiness. You don’t have to carry out all the steps; select and try a few. If they don’t work, try others. Choose activities that best suit you and your lifestyle.

You can be sure that some activities, done regularly, will make you feel happy.

1. **Be grateful** – The powerful antidote to negativity about bad life experiences is an “attitude of gratitude” about good experiences. Research indicates that people who appreciate things feel a strong sense of satisfaction, and are more optimistic. As such, they are much happier. To power up your sense of gratitude, start a weekly “gratitude journal” in which you write about things that make you feel grateful.
2. **Stay optimistic** – If you are pessimistic, feeling happy is almost impossible. Everything gets filtered through a dark, negative attitude, and is colored accordingly. Instead, be optimistic about life. Work to enhance your coping skills, so you feel energized and more goal-oriented. To be more optimistic, write down how you see your life going if things go right. This visualization exercise will help activate your “optimistic muscles.”
3. **Don’t overthink** – When you worry constantly about problems (“self-focused rumination”), like a dog gnawing at a bone, you will naturally feel bad, sad and depressed. This rut is remarkably self-defeating. So is routinely comparing yourself negatively to others. To break this harmful bad habit, don’t indulge in it. Switch your focus to something enjoyable instead, like exercise or a movie.
4. **Be kind** – The ultimate happiness secret is being kind. When you go out of your way to be kind, you will feel good about yourself and eliminate negative feelings including guilt and emotional distress. When you are kind, you immediately turbo charge a positive attitude. One way to exercise kindness is engage in volunteer activities – you couldn’t possibly spend your time in a more rewarding way.
5. **Become social** – The overarching message of Barbra Streisand’s song, “People Who Need People,” is that such people “are the luckiest people in the world.” Psychologists agree that the need for social inclusion is one of every humans’ strongest motivational forces. You need to be social to be happy, so make time for others.
6. **Learn to cope** – Stress is universal and may be brought on by a wide variety of problems. You can’t become happy if you don’t know how to cope with stress. Address your problems by focusing on finding solutions. Take things step by step. Develop a strategy and an action plan. Seek advice. If the stress is emotional, not situational, do something that makes you feel good. Go on a hike. Listen to soothing music. Visit a friend. Writing about stress can help alleviate it.
7. **Forgive others** – Often, old bromides contain the most truth and, thereby, remain timely. “Forgive and forget” is one such maxim. Psychologists confirm that people who hold on to anger, resentment and hostility hurt themselves both emotionally and physically. Of course, forgiving someone who has done you wrong is not easy. One way to try is to write a forgiveness letter to that individual. Include details about how the person wronged you. Then forgive him or her in writing. You don’t have to send the letter. Getting the hurtful emotions out is what counts. When you do that, you free yourself of them.
8. **Seize the moment** – Do you live in the future, planning how wonderful things will be when you become rich, lose weight, marry your true love or get a better job? Or do you live in the past, regretting actions that you took or didn’t take. Why not live in the all-important present? Think about it: The present really is all you have. The best way to be in the present is to focus on your current activities. As psychologist William James wrote, “My experience is what I agree to attend to.” Pay attention to your life. Make each moment in your life meaningful. Don’t waste a minute.
9. **Be joyful** – Do you savor your life and enjoy each minute? If not, why not? With the right attitude, even the mundane can be exquisite. Eating breakfast can be a blissful experience if you make it so. So can getting into bed and falling asleep. Use your imagination to enrich your life. Recall wonderful experiences from the past. Make them real again in your mind. Research indicates that nearly one in three individuals gains valuable perspective on current challenges after engaging in “positive reminiscence.”

10. **Become goal-oriented** – People who strongly commit to goals commit to life. Of course, their goals need to be sensible, achievable and truly fulfilling. Are yours? Many people set the goal of becoming rich or improving their physical appearance. But research indicates that being wealthy or beautiful does not guarantee happiness. Indeed, such “extrinsic goals” can get in the way of the more important “intrinsic goals” that can truly make you happy. These differ from individual to individual. For one person, it is learning to cook. For another, it is swimming every morning before breakfast. Life without goals is empty. Commit wholeheartedly to yours.
11. **Become spiritual** – Research indicates that religious people are much happier than nonreligious people. They are also in better health, cope more effectively with disease and deal better with trauma than people who are not religious. Being spiritual – the “search for the sacred” – helps people achieve inner serenity and peace. Religion and spirituality can give meaning to your life.
12. **Stay physically and mentally fit** – If you don’t meditate, you should. Meditation represents the “cultivation of attention.” A period of meditation is a patient, nonstriving time when you let things go, detach from standard thinking and stop making your customary judgments about everything. Do you exercise? Exercise is one of the best ways to immediately feel good about yourself. Do you act like a happy person? Believe it or not, you can fool yourself into feeling happy when you smile and laugh. It’s hard to be sad when you’re smiling.

## The Five Happiness “Hows”

Anyone can be happy temporarily. The trick is to maintain this happiness throughout your life. Understanding happiness and why the 12 strategies can help you attain it increases your chances of becoming permanently happy. Use the five happiness “hows” to understand happiness better:

1. **Stay positive** – Would you feel positive if a game show host knocked on your door to give you a check for a million dollars? You know you would. Unfortunately, the likelihood of this happening is remote in the extreme. Therefore, it makes sense to use the little actions in life – smiling, thinking about good things, purposely feeling joyful – to manufacture similarly positive feelings. Your life can be positive or negative. Choose positivity. Permanent happiness will be your reward. Research shows that positive feelings “foil” negative feelings, so be positive.
2. **Pay attention to timing and variety of experience** – The 12 positive actions can greatly boost your happiness. Put all or a portion of them to work daily. Most importantly, use them when you need them most. For example, you may feel great stress when speaking with your supervisor or your in-laws. Almost certainly, you will feel such stress when speaking to a judge in traffic court. Therefore, time your happiness activities to take place when you need them. Surprise yourself with happy variations when engaging in positive activities. Adding variety to your “happiness regimen” works wonders.
3. **Build your support system** – Try hard to be happy daily. You will be better able to achieve your happiness goals when you have the support of your close friends, family members or mentors. Such social support validates your efforts to be happy. This makes all the difference to your long-term happiness goals. Research shows that people achieve their extended goals more often if they have active support from others.
4. **Commit to your goals** – Swimmers cannot be great at their sport without regular practice. This is equally true for all those – artists, writers, football players, dancers – who want to achieve something.

It also applies to people who want to be happy. If you do, commit to your happiness-enhancement plan and work hard on your individual happiness activities on a daily basis. Nothing comes easy in life; this is as true for happiness as it is for anything else. If you don't have the time for a fully active happiness regimen, does that mean you don't have time to be happy? Make the time – happiness is about getting the most from your life. Make the effort. Commit to a happy life.

5. **Habits** – To be happy, do your happiness activities habitually. Habits depend on regular repetition and constant practice. This is as true for doing things that will make you happy as it is for dieting properly or exercising daily. Work hard to instigate new habits that directly involve your happiness activities. Eventually, like any other habit, they will become subconscious and automatic. When they do, you will be much happier.

*“Everyone’s goal should be to turn positive thinking and behavior strategies into habits.”*

Don't go through life being unhappy. You are very much in control of the degree of personal happiness you experience. Once you understand the primary factors that determine happiness, you can quickly put them to work in your life. This requires conscious effort and strong determination on your part. Make this commitment to yourself this very minute. Become a happy person today.

## About the Author

**Sonja Lyubomirsky** is a psychology professor at the University of California, Riverside, and winner of the Templeton Positive Psychology Prize.



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