

The How

of

Happiness

A New Approach to
Getting the Life You Want

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understand. In becoming happier, we not only boost experiences of joy, contentment, love, pride, and awe but also improve other aspects of our lives: our energy levels, our immune systems, our engagement with work and with other people, and our physical and mental health. In becoming happier, we bolster as well our feelings of self-confidence and self-esteem; we come to believe that we are worthy human beings, deserving of respect. A final and perhaps least appreciated plus is that if we become happier, we benefit not only ourselves but also our partners, families, communities, and even society at large.

2.

How Happy Are You and Why?

Have you ever known someone who is deeply and genuinely happy? A person who truly has the ability to see the world through rose-colored glasses? Someone who appears composed and untroubled even in the face of adversity? Perhaps it is a friend or a coworker or even a member of your family. It's hard not to envy such people. How do they do it? Why aren't they bothered or distraught by the strains and ordeals of everyday life, like most of us?

It's especially frustrating and perplexing to be around such individuals when they're in the same difficult or troubling situation as we are but seem happy in spite of it. Say, for example, that you both share a tormenting boss, a screamer who is never satisfied with your work. Or you both are in the first year of law school and are loaded down with a crushing amount of reading and homework. Or you both are new parents and overwhelmed with the sleep deprivation, anxiety, and drudgery of caring for a newborn. Such situations drag you down, making you moody, nerve-racked, and sometimes even terribly unhappy and low. But this happy person you know seems able to brush off the frustrations, the stresses, the hardships, and the

disappointments, to pick herself up each time and to put on a positive face. She sees challenge where you see only threat. She takes an uplifting, optimistic perspective when you feel distrustful and beaten down. She is galvanized to take action, while you are sluggish and passive.

Such individuals may be mind-boggling and intimidating and, yes, even off-putting at times. They can be demoralizing because they make us wonder about our own dispositions. How can we be more like them? Can we ever be as happy as they are? I've asked myself these questions too and decided that the only way to find out is to do some research, to study genuinely happy people systematically and intensively. By closely observing them, we can learn a great deal not just about them but about ourselves.

In my interviews and experiments with very happy people, I've even found a few who remain happy or are able to recover their happiness fairly quickly after tragedies or major setbacks. Take the cases of Angela and Randy.

ANGELA

Angela is thirty-four and one of the happiest people that I ever interviewed.¹ You wouldn't guess it, however, from all she's had to bear. When Angela was growing up in Southern California, her mother was emotionally and physically abusive to her, and her father did nothing to intervene. In addition to what she endured at home, she was overweight as a teenager and stigmatized at school. When Angela was in eleventh grade, her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer, and the physical abuse ended. However, the emotional abuse got only worse, until Angela couldn't stand it any longer and moved out to marry a man she'd known for just three months. She and her husband moved up north and lived there for four years. Soon after the birth of their daughter, Ella, they divorced, and Angela moved back to California, where she still lives.

Angela is currently a single mother. Things are hard financially. Her ex-husband doesn't visit his daughter and pays no child support. To pro-

vide for her small family, Angela has taken a crack at several careers. During her last career change she felt as though she had finally found her dream job (as an aesthetician), but she was fired unexpectedly, her hopes and finances in ruins. She had to file for bankruptcy and go on welfare for a time. Right now she is back in college full-time, working toward a degree in nursing.

Still, with all that has happened and all the challenges that have come to pass, Angela considers herself a very happy person. Her daughter, Ella, to whom she is extremely close, brings her endless joy. They relish reading *The Chronicles of Narnia* together, going to free concerts, and snuggling in bed watching videos. As Angela sees it, Ella doesn't always have what the other kids have, but she gets more love than she could possibly want. Angela also has an infectious sense of humor, and when she laughs about her troubles—the time on welfare, the day she lost her beloved job—it's impossible not to laugh along with her. She has made many friends—indeed, formed a whole community of like-minded people—and they are a pleasure and a support to her. She finds deep satisfaction in helping others heal from their own wounds and traumas, for as she reasons, "It's virtually impossible to face one's shadows alone."

RANDY

Like Angela, Randy endured a lot as a child. He lost two people close to him to suicide, at age twelve his father and at age seventeen his best friend. When he was in fifth grade, his mother left his father and moved the family out of state and away from everyone he knew in order that she could live with her boyfriend, Roy. Although Randy's bond with his mother was, and still is, strong, Roy belittled Randy, and their relationship was strained. Interestingly, much like Angela, Randy escaped his home life by marrying too soon and too young. His marriage was fraught with difficulty and finally ended when he discovered the extent of his wife's infidelities. Still, he was devastated initially by the breakup and felt that he had had more than his share of loss and death.

Today Randy is one of those happy people who make everyone around them smile and laugh. He picked himself up after his divorce, moved to another city, found work as a safety engineer, and eventually remarried. He is now forty-three, remarried for three years, and step-father to three boys. How did he do it? Randy is an eternal optimist and claims that seeing the "silver lining in the cloud" has always been his key to survival. For example, although some of his coworkers find their jobs frustrating and stressful, he says that his allows him "to think outside the box." Moreover, while a friend of his struggles with stepchildren, Randy is overjoyed by "the opportunity to be a dad." Indeed, one of his favorite activities is watching his sons play football. Others might look back on their childhoods with bitterness, but he remembers the good times.

Where Do You Fit In?

Although they may appear unique, there are quite a few Randys and Angelas around. Of course, there are many very unhappy individuals as well. All of us can identify people who are exactly the opposite—that is, people who never seem to be happy, even during the good times, who are chronically sullen and sour, who accentuate the negative and focus on the downside of everything, and appear to be unable to find much joy in life.

SHANNON

One such person I interviewed is Shannon. At twenty-seven Shannon is studying for a certificate to teach English as a second language. She has a boyfriend, who's in school in Italy, and when he returns in two months, they plan to move in together. Growing up, Shannon had an uneventful childhood, a stable and modest home, and several close friends. Her family did a lot of traveling all over the United States. Shannon told me that when she was in eighth grade, her mother gave her a dog, Daisy, still alive today. Shannon considers the dog one of her best friends.

But despite the lack of tragedy or trauma in her life, Shannon seems to

turn everything into a crisis. She found the transition from high school to college extremely stressful and often felt crushed and overwrought about the harder and less familiar workload. In the dormitory, she shared a room with a roommate, who was generally a nice person but who had irritating habits, like turning up the volume on the TV. Shannon was incredibly bothered by this and grew more and more distant and hostile toward her roommate. When Shannon finally was able to switch to a new roommate whom she liked and admired, she was ecstatic at first but then became hurt that the other girl "was never around."

Today Shannon is very active. She rock climbs and Rollerblades in the summer and snowboards and skis in the winter. She also told me that she enjoys teaching and thinks there is mutual growth between the children she currently tutors and herself. On the surface, her life is quite good. She has a promising and enjoyable career ahead of her, a boyfriend, a stable family life, even a dog she loves. However, Shannon sees herself as a generally unhappy person. Although she is pleased with her academic achievements, she believes that she can't truly enjoy those achievements because of a lack of self-confidence. Indeed, she minimizes any success by explaining it away as caused by luck or persistence. Sometimes she even is haunted by the feeling that she should have chosen a different career. Overall, Shannon feels very alone and believes her life to be unsteady and her relationships unreliable. She remembers her childhood fondly, as the only time she knew "true happiness" and felt self-assured and carefree. Today she depends a great deal on her boyfriend for positive feelings of self-worth, and she experiences life as "very lonely" when he's not around. She is prone to overspend and overeat at such times. When Shannon feels particularly insecure and hopeless, everything seems dark, and she finds herself sinking into dejection and gloom.

THE HAPPINESS CONTINUUM

Human happiness, like height or temperature or IQ, lies on a continuum, a numerical scale that ranges from very, very low to very, very high. Shannon represents the lower end of the happiness continuum. Randy and

Angela are at the high end. All of us fit somewhere on that scale, and it is critical to find out where exactly that may be. No matter whether you are deeply depressed or are simply not as happy as you'd like to be, before you can begin the process of becoming happier, you need to determine your present personal happiness level, which will provide your first estimate of your happiness set point.

From the Greek philosopher Aristotle to the father of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud to *Peanuts* creator Charles Schulz, writers and thinkers have offered wide-ranging definitions of happiness. Aristotle wrote that happiness is "an expression of the soul in considered actions," Freud noted that it's a matter of *lieben und arbeiten*—to love and to work—and Schulz famously proclaimed, "Happiness is a warm puppy." Most of us, however, are well aware of what happiness is and whether we are happy. To paraphrase the late U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, happiness is like obscenity: We can't define it, but we know it when we see it.

I use the term *happiness* to refer to the experience of joy, contentment, or positive well-being, combined with a sense that one's life is good, meaningful, and worthwhile. However, most of us don't need a definition of happiness because we instinctively know whether we are happy or not. Academic researchers prefer the term *subjective well-being* (or simply *well-being*) because it sounds more scientific and does not carry the weight of centuries of historical, literary, and philosophical subtexts.² I use the terms *happiness* and *well-being* interchangeably.³

So, how do you measure the degree to which you are a happy or an unhappy person? Because no appropriate happiness thermometer exists, researchers generally rely on self-reports. In much of my research with human participants, I have used a popular simple four-item measure of overall happiness that I developed and call the Subjective Happiness Scale.⁴ The title is fitting, inasmuch as happiness is inherently subjective and must be defined from the perspective of the person. No one but you knows or should tell you how happy you truly are. So reply to the four items opposite to determine your current happiness level, which you need to know before you can estimate your set point. (More on that later.)

SUBJECTIVE HAPPINESS SCALE

INSTRUCTIONS: For each of the following statements or questions, please circle the number from the scale that you think is most appropriate in describing you. (Carefully take note of the labels, or anchors, for the 1 to 7 scales, as they differ for each of the four items.)

(1) In general, I consider myself:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not a very happy person						a very happy person

(2) Compared with most of my peers, I consider myself:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
less happy						more happy

(3) Some people are generally very happy. They enjoy life regardless of what is going on, getting the most out of everything. To what extent does this characterization describe you?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not at all						a great deal

(4) Some people are generally not very happy. Although they are not depressed, they never seem as happy as they might be. To what extent does this characterization describe you?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
a great deal						not at all

HOW TO CALCULATE YOUR SCORE:

STEP 1: Total = Item 1: _____ + Item 2: _____ + Item 3: _____ + Item 4: _____ = _____

STEP 2: Happiness score = Total (from above) _____ divided by 4 = _____

Date: _____

Happiness score (2nd administration): _____ Date: _____

Happiness score (3rd administration): _____ Date: _____

As you may have gathered, the highest happiness score that you can get is 7 (if you give yourself a 7 on all four items) and the lowest is 1 (if you rate yourself 1 on all four items). I have administered this scale to many different groups of people, as have other researchers, and the average score runs from about 4.5 to 5.5, depending on the group. College students tend to score lower (averaging a bit below 5) than working adults and older, retired people (who average 5.6).⁵

Now you have determined the value of your current happiness score. If you're past college age, and your happiness score is lower than 5.6, then you're less happy than the average person. To put it another way, more than 50 percent of people in your age group rate themselves higher on the scale. If your score is greater than 5.6, then you're happier than the average person. Of course, what the "average person" is for you will depend on your gender, your age, your occupation, ethnicity, etc. But what's important to remember is that *no matter what your score is*, you can become happier.

COULD YOU BE DEPRESSED?

Some of us are likely to be not just slightly unhappy but clinically or sub-clinically depressed. If your happiness score is 4 or lower or if you've been feeling down for more than a couple of weeks, I encourage you to complete a depression scale. (If not, you may choose to skip this subsection.) The depression scale takes less than ten minutes, and those minutes may turn out to be invaluable.

Opposite is a standard, commonly used depression questionnaire called the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale, or CES-D.⁶ There are many measures of depression, but this one is recommended for use with the general (i.e., nonclinical or nonpsychiatric) population.⁷ Follow the instructions to complete the scale and determine your overall depression score.

CENTER FOR EPIDEMIOLOGIC STUDIES DEPRESSION SCALE

INSTRUCTIONS: This set of questions is related to how you *felt or behaved* in the *past week*. Using the scale below, please write the number which best describes how often you felt or behaved this way *during the past week*.

0	1	2	3
rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day)	some or a little of the time (1-2 days)	a moderate amount of the time (3-4 days)	most or all of the time (5-7 days)

- _____ 1. You were bothered by things that usually don't bother you.
- _____ 2. You did not feel like eating; your appetite was poor.
- _____ 3. You felt that you could not shake off the blues even with help from your family and friends.
- _____ 4. You felt that you were just as good as other people. (X)
- _____ 5. You had trouble keeping your mind on what you were doing.
- _____ 6. You felt depressed.
- _____ 7. You felt that everything you did was an effort.
- _____ 8. You felt hopeful about the future. (X)
- _____ 9. You thought your life had been a failure.
- _____ 10. You felt fearful.
- _____ 11. Your sleep was restless.
- _____ 12. You were happy. (X)

- ____ 13. You talked less than usual.
- ____ 14. You felt lonely.
- ____ 15. People were unfriendly.
- ____ 16. You enjoyed life. (X)
- ____ 17. You had crying spells.
- ____ 18. You felt sad.
- ____ 19. You felt that people disliked you.
- ____ 20. You could not get "going."

HOW TO CALCULATE YOUR SCORE:

STEP 1: Your scores on Items 4, 8, 12, and 16 (the ones marked with an X) should be "reverse-scored"—that is, if you gave yourself a 0, cross it out and change it to a 3; if you gave yourself a 1, change that to a 2; change a 2 to a 1; and change a 3 to a 0.

STEP 2: Using the changed scores for those four items, now add your scores for *all* the 20 items.

Your total depression score is ____ Date: _____

Your total depression score is ____ Date: _____

Your total depression score is ____ Date: _____

The lowest score that you could possibly get is 0 and the highest is 60. Psychologists use the cutoff score of 16 to differentiate depressed persons from nondepressed ones. So, if your score is 16 or higher, you would be classified as depressed. Exactly *how* depressed depends on how high your score is; depression can range from quite mild (a score of 16 to 20) to moderate (a score of 21 to 25) to severe (a score of 26 to 60).⁸ Further-

more, unlike the happiness scale, the depression scale is acutely sensitive to your moods and to your general mental state, so that you would be expected to obtain different depression scores at different times, even as close as two weeks apart.

If you are currently depressed or if you've ever been depressed, you are not alone. Studies show that 15 percent of people in the United States (and 21 percent of women⁹) will become clinically depressed at some point during their lifetimes.¹⁰ Of the rest, half report experiencing mild depression occasionally, usually as a result of a major setback or crisis, be it a broken heart, the death of a loved one, a career failure, or a financial loss. Furthermore, the age at which people experience their first depressive episode has decreased dramatically during the last several decades.¹¹ Incredibly, of *all* diseases, depression places the largest burden on society in the United States (and the fourth-largest disease burden in the world in terms of reduced years of healthy life, after perinatal conditions, lower respiratory diseases like chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and HIV/AIDS).¹² The World Health Organization predicts that by the year 2020 depression will be the second-leading cause of mortality in the entire world, affecting 30 percent of all adults.¹³

Many experts believe that depression has become an epidemic.¹⁴ By some estimates, clinical depression is ten times more likely to torment us now than it did a century ago.¹⁵ Several forces may be behind this development. First, our expectations about what our lives should be like are greater than ever before; we believe that we can do anything, and we are profoundly disappointed when reality doesn't meet or even come close to perfection. Second, our increasingly individualistic culture leaves us all alone to manage our everyday stresses and problems, compelling us to blame only ourselves for our shortcomings and failures. Increasing job insecurity also contributes to the many stressors of modern life. And perhaps most important may be the unraveling of the social fabric. Compared with previous generations, we feel far less belonging and commitment to our families and communities and are thus less buffered by social support and strong meaningful connections to others. All these

factors may combine to make more of us clinically depressed than ever before.

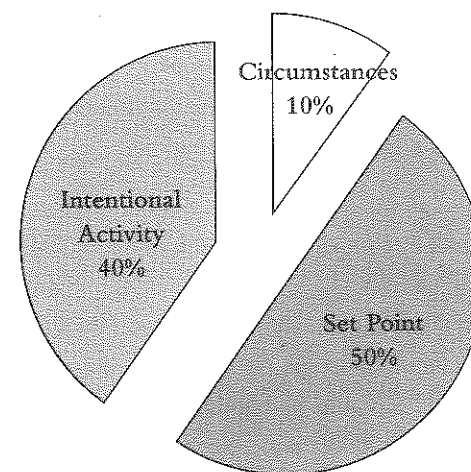
If you have scored as depressed, I encourage you to see a mental health professional—a psychiatrist, clinical psychologist, or licensed counselor with whom you can discuss your options for treatment, including psychotherapy and antidepressant medication. Moderate to severe depression, especially, requires urgent attention from a professional. If you are depressed, you will also likely greatly benefit from the happiness-increasing strategies described in Part II of this book. Additionally, if you have scored in the depressed range, be sure to skip ahead and read the “Postscript” chapter (“If You Are Depressed”) before continuing to learn about those strategies, as you will need to know how to adapt the happiness program to your unique symptoms, feelings, and needs.

Happiness Myths

No matter where you fall on the happiness and depression scales—whether you are rarely happy, occasionally happy, or even fairly happy—you will learn how to apply to your own strengths and weaknesses the happiness-enhancing strategies that I teach you, in order to make yourself permanently happier and more fulfilled. But before you can start incorporating those strategies into your own life, I need to dispel a number of myths surrounding happiness.

One of the great obstacles to attaining happiness is that most our beliefs about what will make us happy are in fact erroneous. Yet they have been drummed into us, socialized by peers and families and role models and reinforced by the stories and images ever present in our culture. Many of the presumed sources of happiness seem so intuitive and so commonsensical that all of us—even happiness researchers!—are prone to fall under their spell. This is where science can shine a clear and vivid light. The three major myths about happiness that we tend to fall for are plainly illuminated by the happiness pie chart, which I here reproduce.

What Determines Happiness?



MYTH NO. 1: HAPPINESS MUST BE “FOUND”

The first myth is that happiness is something that we must *find*, that it's out there somewhere, a place just beyond our reach, a kind of Shangri-la. We could get there, yes, but only if the right things would come to pass: if we'd marry our true loves, secure our dream jobs, purchase elegant houses. Don't be the person who is waiting for this, that, or the other thing to happen before she can be happy. There's a cartoon in which a little boy on a tricycle says to a playmate holding a kite, “I can't wait to grow up and be happy.”¹⁶ If you're not happy today, then you won't be happy tomorrow unless you take things into your own hands and take action. To understand that 40 percent of our happiness is determined by intentional activity is to appreciate the promise of the great impact that you can make on your own life through intentional strategies that *you* can implement to remake yourself as a happier person.

Happiness is not out there for us to find. The reason that it's not *out* there is that it's *inside* us. As banal and clichéd as this might sound, happiness, more than anything, is a state of mind, a way of perceiving and approaching ourselves and the world in which we reside. So, if you want to be happy tomorrow, the day after, and for the rest of your life, you can do it by choosing to change and manage your state of mind. These steps lie at the heart of this book.

MYTH NO. 2: HAPPINESS LIES IN CHANGING OUR CIRCUMSTANCES

Another big fallacy is the notion that if only something about the circumstances of our lives would change, then we would be happy. This kind of thinking is what I call "I would be happy IF _____" or "I will be happy WHEN _____." This logic is shared by some of us who remember periods in our lives when we experienced real happiness but think that we could never recapture the exact set of circumstances that brought this real happiness about. Perhaps these were the college years (as they were for me, at least in hindsight), or when we fell in love for the first time, or when our children were young, or when we lived abroad. The reality is that the elements that determined our happiness in the past, and can make for future happiness, are with us right now and are right here waiting to be taken advantage of. As we can see from the pie chart, changes in our circumstances, no matter how positive and stunning, actually have little bearing on our well-being.

MYTH NO. 3: YOU EITHER HAVE IT OR YOU DON'T

One day my brother, who's an electrical engineer, told me that he had read an article about Buddhist monks who taught themselves to be happy through meditation. "What a new concept!" he exclaimed. "I never thought you could *teach* yourself to be happy. I thought you either have it or you don't." This notion—that we are born happy or unhappy—is ubiquitous. Many of us, especially those of us who are not very happy, believe that our

unhappiness is genetic and there's really nothing we can do about it. To the contrary, growing research demonstrates persuasively that we can overcome our genetic programming.

In the rest of the chapter we'll consider each of these fallacies more deeply. Let's start by examining exactly what it is that scientists have learned about the ways that the circumstances of our lives do and do not influence us.

The Limits of Life Circumstances

Life circumstances include, to quote Herman Melville, "the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country." Consider the incidental but stable facts about your life: your gender, age, and ethnicity; where you grew up; which significant events shaped your childhood and adolescence (e.g., on the negative side: parental divorce, car accident, stigma, bullying; on the positive side: family harmony, winning an award, being popular); and which significant events have taken place in adulthood. Are you married, single, divorced, widowed, or separated? What are your occupation, income, and religious affiliation? What kind of living conditions and neighborhood do you live in? Have you ever been diagnosed with a chronic or acute illness? Or, as Shakespeare might ask, have you suffered the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune?

As significant as our major life events are to each of us, studies suggest that they actually determine, as the pie chart shows us, a tiny percentage of our happiness. The 10 percent figure represents an average from many past investigations, which reveal that all life circumstances and situations put together account for only about 10 percent in how happy different people are. So, although you may find it very hard to believe, whether you drive to work in a Lexus hybrid or a battered truck, whether you're young or old, or have had wrinkle-removing plastic surgery, whether you live in the frigid Midwest or on the balmy West Coast, your chances of being

happy and becoming happier are pretty much the same.¹⁷ How could this be?

MATERIAL WEALTH

Consider material wealth—your monthly income, nest egg, assets, and possessions. For the moment, let's assume that by virtue of your being able to afford to buy this book and to have the leisure time to read it, your household stands above the U.S. national median in income.¹⁸ A compelling case can be made that the level of material comfort (or lack thereof) you are experiencing today is equivalent to how the top 5 percent lived a half century ago!¹⁹ Recently, while reading *No Ordinary Time*, Doris Kearns Goodwin's fine book about the Roosevelts, I ran across a description of what life was like in the United States in 1940.²⁰ Approximately one-third of all homes in 1940 did not have running water, indoor toilets, or bathtub/showers, and more than half had no central heating. If you were twenty-five years or older in 1940, you would have stood only a 40 percent chance of having completed the eighth grade, a 25 percent chance of having graduated from high school, and only a 5 percent chance of having finished college.

When asked to rate their overall satisfaction with life, Americans in 1940 reported being "very happy," with an average score of 7.5 out of 10.²¹ However, times have changed. The typical house today not only has running water, two or more baths, and central heating but is twice the size, with an average of two rooms per person, not to mention being equipped with microwave ovens, dishwashers, color TVs, DVD players, iPods, and personal computers. And real monthly personal income has more than doubled. So what is the average score for Americans' happiness today? It's 7.2.²²

Apparently, all that extra space and those gadgets and appliances don't really make us happy, even if we think they will.²³ How many of us have ever said, "If only I had [fill in blank here], I would be so happy!" I have said that many times myself, as a teenager before owning my first car, as a student before I could afford to live alone, and as a parent before each of my kids had his or her own bedroom. (They still don't.)

Very wealthy people have a great deal more than the average person, but the research shows that they are not much happier. Consider Michael Ovitz, former president of the Walt Disney Company. In the *Los Angeles Times*, columnist Steve Lopez reported on Ovitz's plans to build a 28,059-square-foot mansion for his wife and him. This home will have the world's largest basement (13,974 square feet), a separate 4,997-square-foot office with guest quarters, a 2,407-square-foot covered tennis pavilion, a garage big enough to accommodate thirteen cars, a yoga room, and an art gallery.²⁴ I would bet that if Mr. Ovitz were to complete the Subjective Happiness Scale and e-mail it to me, his overall score would be no higher than that of my neighbor who teaches middle school and lives in a pleasant but tiny studio apartment.

Materialism and its costs. As I write this, the high-end department store Macy's is unleashing its newest advertising campaign. Each of its full-page full-color advertisements features a single beautiful model—dressed in a new cashmere sweater, holding a spanking new handbag, wearing tight jeans—with the tagline "What makes you happy?" If only we could acquire the sweater, handbag, or jeans, the ad suggests, we all would be bursting with joy! Frank Lloyd Wright observed: "Many wealthy people are little more than the janitors of their possessions."²⁵ You too could become a janitor of your possessions, if your goals primarily revolved around material things. Indeed, not only does materialism not bring happiness, but it's been shown to be a strong predictor of *unhappiness*. Researchers examined the attitudes of twelve thousand college freshmen at elite colleges and universities in 1976, when they were eighteen years old on average, and then measured their life satisfaction at age thirty-seven.²⁶ Those who had expressed materialistic aspirations as freshmen—that is, making money was their primary goal—were less satisfied with their lives two decades later. Furthermore, materialists are more likely than nonmaterialists to suffer from a variety of mental disorders!²⁷

One of the reasons for the failure of materialism to make us happier may be that even when people finally attain their monetary goals, the achievement doesn't translate into an increase in happiness.²⁸ Also,

materialism may distract people from relatively more meaningful and joyful aspects of their lives, such as nurturing their relationships with family and friends, enjoying the present, and contributing to their communities. Finally, materialistic people have been found to hold unrealistically high expectations of what material things can do for them.²⁹ One father confided to me that he believed that purchasing a forty-two-inch flat-panel TV would improve his relationship with his eleven-year-old son. It didn't.

Few of us would own up that a wide-screen television, a Sub-Zero refrigerator, and a seven-foot-high SUV have noticeably improved their lives. (My husband, who is chopping vegetables while I write this, just shouted to say that he would be really, really happy if only he had a kitchen island!) Yet most people still report that "more money" would definitely enhance the quality of their lives.³⁰ Since 1967 an annual study called the American Freshman Survey has probed the attitudes and plans of freshmen all around the United States. In its last year—2005—263,710 students at 385 colleges and universities responded. A record high number of freshmen, 71 percent, said it's very important to be "very well off financially," compared with 42 percent in 1967.³¹ Interestingly, only 52 percent of current freshmen admitted that it was very important or essential for them to "develop a meaningful philosophy of life," compared with 86 percent in 1967.

Of course the more those college freshmen attain, the more they'll want. Those with salaries of under \$30,000 per year claim that \$50,000 would thrill them, whereas those who earn more than \$100,000 say they need \$250,000 to be satisfied.³² If they only knew how the wealthy truly felt. In a study of 792 well-off adults, more than half reported that wealth didn't bring them more happiness, and a third of those with assets greater than \$10 million said that money bought more problems than it solved.³³ Indeed, although those with higher incomes report being somewhat more satisfied with their lives, studies of how they actually spend their days find that they don't spend time in any more enjoyable activities than their less prosperous peers and, in fact, are more likely to

experience daily anxiety and anger.³⁴ A wise (and rich) person once said, "I've never borrowed a significant amount of money in my life . . . [because] I never thought I would be way happier when I had 2X instead of X."³⁵

BEAUTY

Before I explain why having a huge amount of money isn't going to make most of you sustainably happy, I'd like to mention one other life circumstance that does not correlate with happiness, and that is physical attractiveness. Even I, as a seemingly objective scientist, have trouble believing that being very beautiful wouldn't make me happier. But would it?

The American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery reports that more and more of us are remaking our appearances every year. The year 2004 saw an increase of 44 percent in the number of cosmetic procedures over 2003, including a record 2.8 million Botox injections, 1.1 million chemical peels, and hundreds of thousands of breast augmentations, eyelid surgeries, nose reshapings, and liposuctions.³⁶ Most people report being satisfied with their postsurgery physical appearances—but only for short periods of time.³⁷ The happiness boost is not likely to endure.

One explanation for why a cosmetic enhancement doesn't bring abiding happiness—and, in general, why being beautiful doesn't have a stronger effect on our well-being—is that we simply don't focus on our appearance when thinking about how happy we are. A fascinating study that investigated how people in the Midwest versus California were affected by their local weather backs up this argument. Researchers were interested in whether people who live in California are truly happier (as many believe) than those who live in the Midwest.³⁸ To this end, they asked college students at two California colleges and two midwestern ones to rate their satisfaction with their lives overall and their satisfaction with *the weather*. The former is a judgment of deep, overall well-being, and the latter is a judgment of a more transient feeling. It

turned out that *both* the Californians and the midwesterners believed that people in California were happier. But they were not. There was absolutely no difference in the overall satisfaction of the two groups of students.

However, an enormous difference emerged in the students' ratings of their satisfaction with the weather. Midwesterners were much less happy with the summer weather they experienced and much, *much* less happy with their winter weather. Indeed, the midwesterners were significantly less satisfied than Californians with a number of other aspects of their lives, such as personal safety, outdoor activities, and the natural beauty of their surroundings. So why weren't they less happy overall? Because, the researchers explained, people don't focus on such things as the weather or their personal safety—or any single aspect of their lives, for that matter—when they try to figure out how happy they are overall. While it's not fun to be cold and wet, being cold and wet doesn't make you believe that you're unhappy. I submit that the same phenomenon occurs with regard to physical attractiveness. If beautiful people were asked if they were happy with their looks, they'd say "sure." But if they were asked if they were happy overall, their looks would have a minimal, if any, effect on their judgment.

My assertion that there's no link between beauty and happiness implies that beautiful people are no happier than their plain-looking relatives, colleagues, and friends. That happens to be true. Ed Diener and his coinvestigators did a series of very nice studies that, in my opinion, definitively resolve this issue.³⁹ Using a multimethod approach, dragging happy and unhappy undergraduate volunteers into the lab, Diener and others photographed and videotaped them and then showed the photos and videos to a panel of judges to rate them on physical attractiveness. In some of the studies Diener and colleagues instructed participants to come "as they are," and in others, they were asked to come "unadorned," removing all cosmetics and jewelry and with their clothing and hair covered. The latter was accomplished by having the unwitting participant don a white shower cap (to cover all hair) and a white laboratory coat (to conceal clothing) or to

insert her head in an oval cutout of a big piece of cardboard, kind of like the ones in cheesy amusement parks that offer the chance to be photographed with the body of a muscleman or princess, but the cardboard in this study was just blank and white.

If you are thinking that this is an odd setup for a laboratory study, it is. But it allowed Diener to study the happiness/attractiveness link. Are happier participants actually "objectively" more attractive (as rated by judges who saw their photos or videos), or do they simply have higher opinions of their own handsomeness or beauty?

The results were revealing. Although the happiest participants tended to believe that they were attractive, the objective judges did not regard them as any nicer-looking than their less happy peers. Interestingly, this finding was even more pronounced when the participants were "unadorned," suggesting that happy people may be particularly skilled at enhancing their natural beauty.

So, the bottom line is that good-looking people aren't any happier. Of course this brings up the question of which comes first, the chicken or the egg, thinking you're beautiful or being happy. There's evidence that happy people are somewhat more likely to perceive *everything* about their lives, including their appearances, in more positive, optimistic ways.⁴⁰ But other people don't rate them as more physically striking, at least when viewed in a photograph or a ten-minute video, and especially not when their faces are sticking through a cardboard cutout!

So beauty is not associated with happiness. Becoming objectively more beautiful will not make most of you happier. Coming to *believe* that you are beautiful is another story, and research suggests that this may be one of many happiness boosters.

THE CURIOUS AND POWERFUL PHENOMENON OF HEDONIC ADAPTATION

When I am in New York, I want to be in Europe, and when
I am in Europe, I want to be in New York.

—Woody Allen

One of the great ironies of our quest to become happier is that so many of us focus on changing the circumstances of our lives in the misguided hope that those changes will deliver happiness. In an attempt to allay unhappiness, a recent college graduate may choose a high-paying job in a distant city, a middle-aged divorcée may undergo beautifying cosmetic surgery, or a retired couple may buy a condominium with a view. Unfortunately, all these individuals will likely become only temporarily happier. An impressive body of research now shows that trying to be happy by changing our life situations ultimately will not work.

Why do life changes account for so little? Because of a very powerful force that psychologists call hedonic adaptation.⁴¹

Human beings are remarkably adept at becoming rapidly accustomed to sensory or physiologic changes. When you walk in from the bitter cold, the warmth of the crackling fire feels heavenly at first, but you quickly get used to it and may even become overheated. When a mild but conspicuous odor dwells in your apartment, you may completely fail to notice it until you have left for a while and returned. This experience is labeled physiological or sensory adaptation. The same phenomenon, however, occurs with hedonic shifts—that is, relocations, marriages, job changes—that make you happier for a time, but only a short time. To give a concrete example, I had laser eye surgery at age thirty-six, after a lifetime of near blindness, discomfort with contact lenses, and loathing of glasses. The result was miraculous. For the first time in memory, I could read street signs, tell time when waking in the middle of the night, and see my toes in the shower. The surgery made me wonderfully happy. Remarkably, however, after about two weeks I was completely and perfectly adapted to

my new 20/20 vision, and it no longer provided the happiness boost it had on that memorable first day. Nearly everyone has stories like this: about moving into a bigger house, securing a promotion or a pay raise, getting a makeover, or flying first class. Research psychologists have even tried to bottle this experience by investigating it systematically—for example, asking whether people show hedonic adaptation to such significant life events as marriage, sudden wealth, or chronic illness. It turns out they do.

THE ALTAR, THE LOTTERY, AND A HOUSE IN THE 'BURBS

Any happy newlywed will wonder how it could be possible to adapt to the benefits of matrimony. Indeed, every married person reading this has undoubtedly grasped the enormous, life-changing impact of marriage. In fact, studies show that married people are significantly happier than their single peers.⁴² Numerous anecdotal examples, including mine, prove the point: Getting married was one of the best things that I have ever done, and I am absolutely convinced that I am happier now than before.

Yet psychological researchers have evidence to prove me wrong. In a landmark study, residents of West Germany and East Germany, including citizens, immigrants, and foreigners—25,000 in all—were surveyed every year for fifteen years.⁴³ Over the course of the study, 1,761 individuals got married and stayed married. Using this spectacular data set, scientists showed that alas, marriage has only a temporary effect on happiness. It appears that after the wedding husband and wife get a happiness boost for about two years and then simply return to their baseline in happiness, their set point. It seems wise not to share this bit of news with newlyweds.

Several lines of research suggest that a similar phenomenon occurs with the attainment of money and possessions. In a classic study conducted back in the 1970s, psychologists interviewed some lucky individuals who had won between fifty thousand and one million dollars (in 1970s dollars) in

the Illinois State Lottery.⁴⁴ Strikingly, less than a year after receiving the potentially life-changing news of winning the lottery, they reported being no more happy than regular folks who had not experienced the sudden windfall. Indeed, the lottery winners mused that they now derived less enjoyment from day-to-day activities, such as watching television or going out to lunch, relative to the nonwinners.

Why does hedonic adaptation occur? The two biggest culprits are rising aspirations (e.g., the bigger house you buy after your windfall feels natural after a while; you experience a sort of “creeping normalcy” and begin to want an even bigger one) and social comparison (e.g., your new friends in the new neighborhood are driving BMWs and you feel you should too). As a result, even as people amass more of what they want with every year, their overall happiness tends to stay the same. To paraphrase the Red Queen in *Through the Looking-Glass*, “We’re running faster and faster, but we seem to end up in exactly the same place.”

My friend Dianna is a walking case study in hedonic adaptation. When she married her husband, he was still a graduate student, and for a year they shared a single tiny dormitory room, lacking a kitchen, with their new baby and Dianna’s mother. I remember thinking how insanely difficult this must have been: her husband laboring to finish his dissertation, the baby crying in the middle of the night, a mother-in-law sleeping a couple of feet away. Years later the family, now with three beautiful girls, moved to a tidy bedroom community north of San Diego, with a neighborhood pool and an excellent public school. Their house is lovely and new—two stories, four bedrooms, family room, enormous yard with playground set. A few months after they settled in, Dianna called to tell me about a house three doors down from them that had just gone on the market. It was identical to theirs, but it had an extra bedroom and an extra patio where one could mount a barbecue. She was obsessed with this house, ruminating about every possible way that it was superior to theirs. Could they afford to buy it? Maybe they could. Could they? Maybe somehow they could. . . .

So the bad news about hedonic adaptation is that it ultimately dampens your happiness and satisfaction after any positive event or uplift. But there is

good news too. I would argue that human beings are actually lucky to have the ability to adapt quickly to changing circumstances, as it’s extremely useful when *bad* things happen. Some studies of hedonic adaptation show, for instance, that we have a phenomenal ability to recover much of our happiness after a debilitating illness or accident.

Do you think that having end-stage kidney disease would reduce your capacity for happiness? Imagine having to endure *nine hours* of hemodialysis per week, during which you are attached to a machine filtering your blood. Imagine having to adhere to a strict diet, limiting meat, salt, and even daily fluids. Most people are positive that this situation would make them quite unhappy. Researchers put their belief to empirical test.⁴⁵ Two groups of people—healthy participants and dialysis patients—were asked to carry for a week PalmPilots that would beep them randomly every ninety minutes. After each beep, the participant was required to punch in the mood that he happened to be experiencing at that very moment (pleased? joyful? anxious? unhappy?). The average of a person’s mood ratings gathered over the course of a week happens to be an excellent indicator of his general well-being because such ratings are unlikely to be edited, filtered, or otherwise biased. It turned out that the renal disease patients were just as happy as the healthy controls. It seems that they adapted quite well to their condition. But the healthy participants truly believed that they would be less happy if they had to undergo regular dialysis, and even the patients themselves lacked insight into their own miraculous capacity for hedonic adaptation; they were certain they’d be happier if they had not had to endure the disease.

Amazing as it may seem, people show a great deal of adaptation to disabilities like paralysis and blindness and other conditions that involve losing an important capacity or function. Consider a multiple sclerosis patient whose disease, as it developed, was transformed from something frightening to something manageable. Although with time Ernest could no longer drive, run, walk, or even stand, these things “lost much of their importance. . . . [They] are no longer within the sphere of possibility and are therefore not missed as though they were possible.” He explained his change in perspective this way: “Gradual changes have taken place

in my outlooks, in my likes and dislikes, in what I feel to be a natural part of my life and in what I had always regarded as a necessity for happiness. . . . Probably had I known in 1956 what would be the symptoms that have appeared by now, I would have been anxious about and discouraged by the prospect of the future. Now that I actually find myself here, however, it seems that things are not nearly so bad as I would have thought then."⁴⁶

SUMMING UP

We cannot and will not adapt to everything. But the evidence for hedonic adaptation, especially with regard to positive events, is very strong. Human beings adapt to favorable changes in wealth, housing, and possessions, to being beautiful or being surrounded by beauty, to good health, and even to marriage. The only exception that I would argue is the effects of having children. As a mother of two I can attest that the first time you cuddle with your child, it feels wonderful. The thousandth time, it feels—oh, maybe 95 percent as wonderful.

The Happiness Set Point

I hope that you have now accepted the fact that the specifics of your life circumstances, unless they are truly dire, are really not the crux of your unhappiness. If you're unhappy with your job, your friends, your marriage, your salary, or your looks, the first step you should take toward reaching greater lasting happiness is to put those things aside in your mind for now. Hard as it is, try not to reflect on them. Keep reminding yourself that these things are really not what is preventing you from getting happier. It will take a great deal of discipline and self-control, and you may lapse, but it's important to unlearn this commonly held but false belief.

One of my guilty pastimes is reading newspaper advice columns. Some months ago a woman wrote in to my local paper, complaining about

every job that she's ever had. At her first job she was plagued by spiteful, gossipy coworkers, at her second it was an overbearing boss, at her third it was utter monotony, and so on. She appealed for help in finding a job she likes. The wise advice columnist's blunt reply was something like this: "It's not the colleagues or the boss or the nature of the work; it's something that *you're* doing!"

If the cause of your unhappiness is really not your circumstances, then surely it must be that you were just born this way. This is also a fallacy, the myth of "you either have it or you don't." Challenging the veracity of this belief is trickier because you see, it is partly true. As the pie chart illustrates, your genetically determined predisposition for happiness (or unhappiness) accounts for 50 percent of the differences between you and everyone else. Notably, a susceptibility to clinical depression has also been found to be partly rooted in our genetic makeups. Before we get depressed about being born depressed, however, I'd like to highlight one vital implication of these findings: that those of us who wish we were a great deal happier should be a little less hard on ourselves. We are, after all, dealing with a stacked deck to some extent. Another critical step in clearing the way to committing to becoming happier is to appreciate the fact that 50 percent is a long way from 100 percent, and that leaves ample room for improvement. So how exactly do we know that the happiness set point accounts for 50 percent?

HELEN AND AUDREY

The strongest evidence for the set point comes from a series of fascinating studies done with identical and fraternal twins. The reason that studying twins reveals so much about the genetics of happiness is that twins share specifically known portions of their genetic material; identical twins share 100 percent, and fraternal twins (like regular siblings) 50 percent. So, by measuring the degree to which twins are similar in their happiness levels, we can infer how much of their happiness is likely rooted in their genes.

One of the most famous twin studies, the Happiness Twins study, was

carried out by behavior geneticists David Lykken, Auke Tellegen, and colleagues at the University of Minnesota. Using data from the Minnesota Twin Registry, they have followed a large number of mostly Caucasian twins born in Minnesota.⁴⁷ Let's consider two participants from their study, Helen and Audrey, who are thirty years old and identical twins, born in St. Paul.⁴⁸ Suppose our task was to guess how happy Audrey is, and we are given information about her life during the past ten years. A lot happened: She graduated from Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, and launched a career in graphic design; she had a long-term relationship that didn't work out, then started another one with the man who is now her husband of two years. The couple recently moved to Chicago and live together in a two-bedroom apartment. She's not religious, but she considers herself a spiritual person.

If we wanted to figure out (or "predict," as psychologists would say) how happy Audrey is from examining her life over the last decade, we wouldn't do very well. The correlation between happiness and income (or occupation or religiosity or marital status) is very small. In the Happiness Twins study, for example, income accounted for less than 2 percent of the variance in well-being, and marital status accounted for less than 1 percent. However, if we tried to guess how happy Audrey is by considering the happiness level of her twin sister, Helen, who still lives in St. Paul, we'd be much more accurate. In fact, if we considered Helen's happiness level ten years ago—at age twenty!—that level would be very close to Audrey's happiness today.

In other words, the average happiness of your identical twin (even if assessed ten years earlier) is a much more powerful clue to your happiness today than *all the facts and events* of your life!

However, to be completely sure of their striking findings of the comparable levels of the happiness of identical twins, researchers had to compare the happiness of fraternal twins as well. Recall that fraternal twins are one-half as genetically similar to each other as are identical twins. Interestingly, the researchers found that if Helen and Audrey had been fraternal twins and thus no more alike than any two sisters, you could *not* guess Audrey's happi-

ness from knowing Helen's. Whether or not your fraternal twin (or any other sibling) is happy or unhappy implies nothing about how happy or unhappy you might be. This fact—that identical twins (but not fraternal ones) share similar happiness levels—suggests that happiness is largely genetically determined. Indeed, the present-day consensus among researchers, based on a growing number of twin studies, is that the heritability of happiness is approximately 50 percent; hence the 50 percent slice of the pie on my pie chart.

SEPARATED AT BIRTH

There's a significant problem with such twin studies, however. To make conclusions from them, the researchers must assume that both types of twins—identical and fraternal—experience similar family environments. But is this really true? Unlike identical twins, fraternal twins of the same sex often look and behave quite differently. Thus their parents, teachers, and friends are likely to treat them differently, and the twins themselves are likely to emphasize their uniqueness. So the environment and upbringing of fraternal twins are not really as closely shared as those of identical twins.

Fortunately, this problem can be addressed by doing a different kind of study altogether. Researchers can compare twins raised together with twins separated in infancy and raised apart. This is a tough-to-find sample, but one researcher managed to assemble a set of such twins who had already reached middle age and asked them to complete measures of well-being.⁴⁹ Their findings have been deemed a classic in psychology. The identical twins were extremely similar to each other in their happiness scores, and remarkably, the similarity was no smaller if the twins had been raised apart! The happier one identical twin was, the happier the other was—no matter whether they grew up under the same roof or on different coasts. Interestingly, however, regardless of whether they were raised together or apart, the happiness levels of the *fraternal* twins were completely uncorrelated. Like any siblings, fraternal twins do not resemble

each other in their average levels of happiness. Again, these findings are fascinating, underscoring the conclusion that happiness is, to a large extent, influenced by genetic factors, that each one of us inherits a pre-programmed set point. But the research also shows us that yes, while 50 percent of the differences among our happiness levels is determined by set points (and 10 percent, let's not forget, by circumstances), fully 40 percent is still available to us to mold.

I've probably come across the twins data a dozen times, yet they freshly surprise me each time I see them. I picture two little identical twin boys separated at birth and growing up to be teenagers and then men with different parents and siblings, in different homes, schools, and cities. I imagine them meeting each other for the first time in their thirties or forties and being floored at how similar they are. The Minnesota Twin Registry has documented many such meetings, and the stories are probably familiar enough to have entered the national consciousness. The most famous case is that of two men—both named James—who encountered each other for the first time at age thirty-nine.⁵⁰ The day they met, both were six feet tall and weighed exactly 180 pounds. Each smoked Salems, drank Miller Lite, and habitually bit his fingernails. When they discussed their life histories, some incredible coincidences emerged. Both had married women named Linda, had divorced them, and then remarried women named Betty. Each James enjoyed leaving love notes to his wife throughout the house (though perhaps both Lindas didn't appreciate it enough). Their firstborn sons were also named James, one James Alan and the other James Allen, and both men had named their dogs Toy. Each James had owned a light blue Chevrolet and had driven it to the same beach in Florida (Pass-a-Grille Beach) for family vacations. I would bet anything that they were equally happy (or unhappy).

DO GENES PREDESTINE US TO BE HAPPY OR UNHAPPY?

No matter which way we look at it, the empirical data from the Happiness Twins study led to the conclusion that the genetic basis for happiness is strong—very strong. It appears that each of us is born with a happiness set point, a characteristic potential for happiness throughout our lives. The magnitude of that set point may originate from the sunny maternal side of our family or our depressive paternal side, or roughly equally from both; we'll never know. The essential point is that even if major life changes, like a new relationship or a car accident, might push our happiness level up or down, we tend to revert to this genetically determined set point. Evidence for this phenomenon comes from studies that follow people over time as they react to good and bad things happening in their lives. For example, one study tracked Australian citizens every two years from 1981 to 1987 and found that positive and negative life events (e.g., "made lots of new friends," "got married," "experienced serious problems with children," or "became unemployed") influenced their feelings of happiness and satisfaction as we would expect. But after the events had passed, their feelings returned to their original baselines.⁵¹ Another study conducted in the United States with undergraduates showed essentially the same thing. The big and small events experienced by these students boosted or deflated their well-being, but only for about three months.⁵² So, although you may be made temporarily ecstatic or miserable by what comes to pass, it seems that you can't help eventually returning to your set point. And as far as anyone knows, this set point *cannot be changed*. It is fixed, immune to influence or control.

But just because your happiness set point cannot be changed doesn't mean that your happiness level cannot be changed.

In *The African Queen*, Katharine Hepburn declares to Humphrey Bogart, "Nature, Mr. Allnut, is what we are put in this world to rise above!" We can rise above our happiness set points, just as we can rise above our set points for weight or cholesterol. Although on the face of it, the set

point data appear to suggest that we all are subject to our genetic programming, that we all are destined to be only as happy as that "programming" allows, in actuality they do not. Our genes do not *determine* our life experience and behavior. Indeed, our "hard wiring" can be dramatically influenced by our experience and our behavior. This is illustrated, as I describe in detail later, by the notion that there's a great deal of room to improve our happiness by the things we *do*, our intentional activities. Even the most heritable traits like height, which has a heritability level of .90 (relative to about .50 for happiness), can be radically modified by environmental and behavioral changes. For example, since the 1950s the average height of Europeans has been growing at a rate of two centimeters per decade, in part because of better overall nutrition.⁵³

Or take the case of a rare condition known as phenylketonuria. PKU stems from a mutation in a single gene on chromosome 12 and, without treatment, leads to brain damage, resulting in mental retardation and premature death.⁵⁴ PKU is said to have a heritability of 1, because it is *entirely* genetically determined. But this doesn't mean that an infant born with the gene that causes PKU is doomed to its lethal effects. If the parents ensure that the infant's diet is free of an amino acid called phenylalanine, which is found in such common foods as eggs, milk, bananas, and NutraSweet, the brain damage may be entirely prevented. It's important to note that the infant's genetic endowment doesn't change—she will always carry the mutant gene—but the expression of her genetic endowment *can* change.

I make much the same case for happiness. If you are born with a low set point for happiness, the genes coding for that set point will always be a part of you. However, for those genes to be fully expressed, they must encounter the appropriate, fitting environment, much the way a seed requires a particular soil to grow. In fact, there is a powerful study that shows just what a dramatic effect one particular environmental factor can have on whether or not people who have a "depression gene" actually succumb to depression. That environmental factor is severe stress.

THE CASE OF THE "DEPRESSION GENE"

When I was an undergraduate, I was a research assistant for a psychology professor named Paul Andreassen. Paul was a good friend of another professor, Avshalom Caspi, who dropped by our lab on a regular basis. At the time I was in awe of research, of professors, indeed of anything having to do with Harvard, and I remember Avshalom as a dark, striking figure with long hair and an Israeli accent. Little did I know that years later and a continent away, along with his future wife and collaborator, Terri Moffitt, he would conduct a truly groundbreaking study.⁵⁵ Caspi, Moffitt, and their colleagues at King's College in London were interested in the relationship between stress and depression. Why do stressful life experiences, like being evicted from one's apartment or losing a pregnancy, trigger depression in some people but not in others?

It turns out that depression is associated with a particular gene, called the 5-HTTLPR, which comes in two forms, the long and the short. The short allele is undesirable to have, because it rids the brain of a substance needed to fend off depressive symptoms.⁵⁶ Caspi tracked the presence of this so-called bad gene in a sample of 847 infants born in New Zealand and learned that more than half carried it. At the time of the study, because those infants were now twenty-six years old, the researchers were able to identify the number of stressful or negative life events the participants had experienced during the past five years (since age twenty-one), as well as evidence of depression during the past year (at age twenty-six). A quarter (26 percent) reported having experienced three or more adverse life events, and 17 percent had had major depressive episodes.

Not surprisingly, overall the more stress and trauma the New Zealanders had experienced during their last five years, the more likely they were to become depressed. The critical finding, however, was that the stressful experiences led to depression *only* among those participants who carried the "bad" short allele of the 5-HTTLPR gene. Interestingly, the same result was found for stress suffered in childhood. Those participants who were maltreated between ages three and eleven were more likely to

become depressed at age twenty-six, but again, *only* if they carried the ill-fated short allele.

So, our genes play an important role in depression, as they do in happiness, but they need to be “expressed”—or turned on or off. The findings of the New Zealand study, which was voted by the editorial board of *Science* magazine as the second-biggest finding of that year (the biggest was on the origins of life!), suggest that the short allele variant of the 5-HTTLPR gene is activated by an environmental trigger—namely, stress. Similarly, the long “good” allele appears to *protect* us from responding to a stressful experience by becoming depressed—that is, by making us resilient. The fact that many of us may carry genes for a particular vulnerability (be it PKU or cardiovascular disease or depression or happiness) therefore does not mean that we will express that vulnerability in our lives. If the New Zealanders with the short “bad” allele of the 5-HTTLPR gene were able to avoid highly stressful situations or to engage psychotherapists or supportive confidants when they anticipated stress, their genetic propensity for depression might never be triggered. Furthermore, new research has shown that individuals unfortunate enough to possess the “bad” gene yet fortunate to have had either supportive family environments or several present-day positive life experiences do *not* become depressed.⁵⁷ In order to express or *not* to express themselves, genes need a particular environment (e.g., a happy marriage or job layoff) or a particular behavior (e.g., seeking out social support). This means that no matter what your genetic predisposition, whether or not that predisposition is expressed is in *your* hands.

WHAT ELECTRODES CAN TEACH US

A better understanding of the happiness set point comes from perhaps the most exciting laboratory right now in the area of well-being, that of Richard Davidson at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Like the behavior geneticists, Davidson argues that each of us has a natural set point, which he defines as a baseline of activity in the prefrontal cortex (front part)

of the brain. In a fascinating discovery, he noticed that happy people show greater activity in one side of their brain than the other, and unhappy people show the reverse pattern.

Davidson uses the procedure called electroencephalography (EEG) to measure a person’s brain activity.⁵⁸ He finds that happy people, those who smile more, and who report themselves to be enthusiastic, alert, and engaged in life show a curious asymmetry in their brain activity; they have more activity in their *left* prefrontal cortex than in the right.⁵⁹ Although no researcher would claim that the left side of the front region of the brain is the “happiness center,” clearly this region is associated with positive emotion. Even newborns who are given something nice to suck display increased activation in the left sides of their brains, and so do adults who are shown funny film clips. The right prefrontal region, by contrast, is activated during unpleasant states and negative emotions.

What does it mean to any of us that the left side of a happy person’s brain lights up more than the right side? Perhaps only something as seemingly ineffable as the fact that happiness appears to be hardwired in the neural circuitry. Thus, although Davidson’s work doesn’t offer proof for the notion of a happiness set point, it certainly supports it. If the set point is genetically determined, it’s presumably rooted in our neurobiology.

IMPLICATIONS FOR YOU

Some of us simply possess higher set points for happiness, more cheerful dispositions, and higher potentials for well-being. Perhaps “the sun shines more brightly for some persons than others.”⁶⁰ Having a high set point may feel as if more of our days were sunny ones. It may mean never having to work very hard at being happy. But this is not the situation facing most of us. So let’s start with the premise that we may have a disappointingly *low* set point and then ask ourselves: First, precisely how low *is* that set point, and second, what can we do about it?

To address the first question, it's impossible to know exactly what your set point is unless you evaluate it over time. You need to record the date that you first completed the Subjective Happiness Scale (see p. 33). Your score on that scale is your *preliminary estimate* of your set point. The reason it's preliminary is that it's somewhat sensitive to what's happening around you. For example, your score could have been influenced by a recent event, by your stress level that day, even by the weather. You will need therefore to fill out the Subjective Happiness Scale again, ideally at least two weeks after initially taking it but *before* you begin the happiness building program described in this book. If you intend to begin straightaway, then retake the scale the day before you start; the *average* of your two scores (or three scores, if you take it three times, and so on) will serve as the estimate of your set point. The more often you take the Subjective Happiness Scale, and the further apart in time you take it, the more reliable the estimate of your set point.

What can you do if your happiness set point is lower than you like? (Although the average is around five, your own hoped-for yardstick may be a lot higher or a lot lower.) To begin with, I must stress that if you desire to become lastingly happier, the answer is not to try to change your set point. By definition, the set point is constant, immune to influence, and wired in your genes. Analogously, if you are born with brown eyes, your eyes will forever remain truly brown. However, as you saw earlier, you are not doomed to obey the directives of your genes, because your genes need a specific environment, a particular set of life experiences, in order to be expressed. Many of these life experiences are indeed under your control, and their potential for influencing your happiness lies in the activities and strategies that make up the large 40 percent of our happiness "pie." Through these activities we can change our happiness *levels*, if not our set points, much as we can change our eye colors (through tinted contact lenses), if not the innate colors of our eyes.

The Promise of Intentional Activity

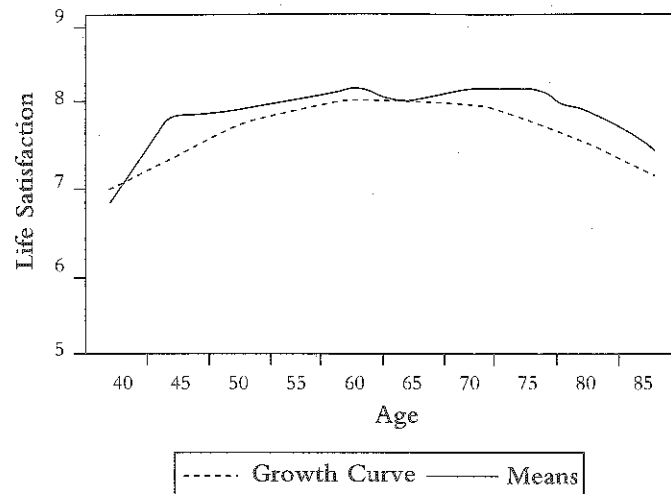
Happiness consists in activity. It is a running stream, not a stagnant pool.

—John Mason Good

Many are familiar with the Serenity Prayer, written by German philosopher Reinhold Niebuhr and widely adopted for use in twelve-step programs: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." But how *can* you know the difference?

It should be obvious by now where the secret to happiness does *not* lie. The fountain of happiness lies *not* in changing our genetically determined set points, for they are, by definition, resistant to change, influence, or control. We are also unlikely to find lasting happiness by changing our life circumstances. Although we may achieve temporary boosts in well-being by moving to new parts of the country, securing raises, or changing our appearances, such boosts are unlikely to be long-lasting. The primary reason, as I have argued, is that people readily and rapidly adapt to positive circumstantial changes. I would furthermore be remiss if I failed to point out other reasons why circumstantial changes may prove unsuccessful in making us permanently happier: because they can be very costly, often impractical, and sometimes even impossible. Does everyone have the money, resources, or time to change her living situation, her job, her spouse, her physical appearance?

If the secret to happiness does not lie in increasing our set points or in positively impacting the circumstances of our lives, what is left? Is it possible to attain greater happiness and sustain it? To be sure, most of us do become happier at some point during our lives. Indeed, contrary to popular belief, people actually get happier with age. A twenty-two-year study of about two thousand healthy veterans of World War II and the Korean War revealed that life satisfaction increased over the course of these men's lives, peaked at age sixty-five, and didn't start significantly declining until age seventy-five (see p. 64).⁶¹



This is heartening news. But what precisely can we do to hasten or bolster such increases in happiness? The answer lies in the pie chart theory of happiness. Recall that 50 percent of individual differences in happiness are governed by genes, 10 percent by life circumstances, and the remaining 40 percent by what we *do* and how we *think*—that is, our intentional activities and strategies. The secret of course lies in that 40 percent. If we observe genuinely happy people, we shall find that they do not just sit around being contented. They make things happen. They pursue new understandings, seek new achievements, and control their thoughts and feelings. In sum, our intentional, effortful activities have a powerful effect on how happy we are, over and above the effects of our set points and the circumstances in which we find themselves. If an unhappy person wants to experience interest, enthusiasm, contentment, peace, and joy, he or she can make it happen by learning the habits of a happy person.

MARKUS AND ROLAND: THWARTING ADAPTATION

Let's return, for a moment, to the massive German study in which researchers followed 1,761 people over the course of fifteen years, starting

when they were single, then continuing after they became married and stayed married. On average, as this remarkable study found, people were no happier during the years after marriage than before marriage, and the average "marriage boost" in happiness lasted for only two years. Notably, however, there was significant variability in people's responses to tying the knot. Consider Markus and Roland, two somewhat unusual participants who both happened to wed their girlfriends while the study was going on. Markus's happiness increased more than average when he got hitched, and eight years later he is *still* happier being married (just declining a tiny bit from his high point) than when he was single. Roland, on the other hand, ended up *less* happy during the first two years of marriage and has become even less happy in the five years since.

What is unique about these two men? Well, Markus didn't want the effects of marriage to "wear off"; he didn't want to adapt to the rewards of marriage and take it for granted. So he decided to dedicate himself to be the best husband he could be and *not* take his wife and their relationship for granted. He consciously remembers to say, "I love you," to bring her flowers, to initiate plans, trips, and hobbies, to take an interest in his wife's challenges, successes, and feelings. In contrast, Roland was disappointed at the outset that matrimony did not live up to his idealistic expectations and since then has failed to observe the slow and steady deterioration of his relationship.

The lesson from Markus and Roland is that while it's true that we tend to adapt to positive changes in our lives, it's in our power to apply effort to try to inhibit or slow down the adaptation process. Markus tried to inhibit adaptation to his marriage by actively and creatively behaving in ways that preserved his and his wife's love and affection for each other, a strategy that we can learn from as an example of a conscious goal that we can undertake and commit to practice. For example, I have argued that moving to a new location, however magnificent it may be initially, eventually leads to a dampening of enthusiasm. This will undoubtedly occur, but only if you passively accept your situation. It doesn't have to be that way. When I moved to California from New England, I recall waking up every morning and saying to myself, What a beautiful day! But just like Steve

Martin's parody of the weatherman in *L.A. Story* announcing every day that "it's going to be sunny . . . again!," this recognition of beauty eventually grew old. Like most people around me, I became accustomed to the splendor of my surroundings and the serenity and blueness of my skies, no longer deriving the extra boost in happiness they initially afforded me. However, in the last few years, still living in California, I have been taking my own research advice to heart. Most mornings I go running on a path overlooking the Pacific Ocean, and I make a conscious decision to take a moment and look at the beach and the mountains in the distance more attentively, to breathe extra deeply the salty air. The other day some Swedish tourists asked me in the middle of a run to take a photograph of them in front of the ocean view. Instead of being annoying, the interruption made me thankful to these tourists for unknowingly deepening my appreciation for the singular special lovely place where I live.

JUDITH: CHOOSING TO BE HAPPY

Judith was born and raised in Indiana, but has been living in Edmonton, Alberta, for more than thirty years. I interviewed her outdoors, at one of her favorite neighborhood restaurants. She is sixty years old, divorced, with a grown daughter. Once upon a time in life Judith was deeply unhappy. She grew up in a dysfunctional, abusive family. Her mother used to beat her with anything she could get her hands on—a paddle, a hairbrush—and wouldn't stop until the object broke. As an adult Judith illustrated perfectly the toxic triangle of food, alcohol, and depression that Susan Nolen-Hoeksema describes in her book *Eating, Drinking, Overthinking*⁶²: She had a major weight problem, turned to alcohol, and was clinically depressed and insecure.

Today Judith admits to being "an incredibly happy person." She has a fulfilling job, volunteers widely, and cares for a fourteen-year-old foster boy. She decided to return to college at age fifty-two. She is spiritual, and she is forgiving, now referring to her troubled mother as "poor thing."

"I chose to be happy," Judith said. "I learned to simply change my mind. What a concept." Indeed, she purely exemplifies the value of focus-

ing on the 40 percent of our happiness that we have the power to control. "The beginning for me was to look into the mirror and say (in Barbra Streisand's accent): 'Hellooo, gorgeous!' I kept saying it until I didn't burst into laughter every time I said it." This may seem easy or trivial, but it's not when you appear ugly and worthless to yourself. "I also worked very hard," Judith told me, "to stop the negative thoughts (I called them the bad thoughts) by simply saying in my mind, STOP! and then I would say to myself, You are okay right now."

Judith was likely born with a low set point for happiness, and starting early in life, she was saddled with difficult life circumstances and damaging experiences. Even today there are trying times. Recently a dear friend of hers committed suicide, and she failed to get her job renewed. But Judith has risen above both her circumstances and her nature by striving for a life-transforming goal—to change how she thought about herself and the world around her, to build her self-esteem and nurture optimistic thinking—by choosing to be happy.

Conclusion

The media are constantly telling us about the latest newfangled strategy shown to "really" work in boosting health and well-being. These strategies keep changing, each one evidently bested by the next, such that every new pronouncement becomes harder to believe. If the new kind of yoga or meditation or marital therapy technique were as effective as the reports claim, then wouldn't everyone be doing it and benefiting from it? Well, no. Any major life-changing endeavor must be accompanied by considerable sustained effort, and I would speculate that the majority of people do not or cannot continue putting out that kind of effort. What's more, all new happiness-enhancing or health-boosting strategies have something in common; each one bestows on the person a specific *goal*, something to do and to look forward. Moreover, as I explain later on, having goals in and of themselves is strongly associated with happiness and life satisfaction. That's why—at least for a time—any new happiness strategy does work!

In a nutshell, the fountain of happiness can be found in how you behave, what you think, and what goals you set every day of your life. "There is no happiness without action."⁶³ If feelings of passivity and futility overcome you whenever you face up to your happiness set point or to your circumstances, you must know that a genuine and abiding happiness is indeed within your reach, lying within the 40 percent of the happiness pie chart that's yours to guide.

3.

How to Find Happiness Activities That Fit Your Interests, Your Values, and Your Needs

Different men seek after happiness in different ways and by different means,
and so make for themselves different modes of life. . . .

—Aristotle

If 40 percent of our happiness is rooted in intentional activity, then precisely which activities or strategies can help you reach your desired level of well-being? Many of us persist in searching for "the one" true secret path to happiness (or to career success or to spiritual fulfillment and so on), like the one diet that will work when all others have failed. In truth, there is no one magic strategy that will help every person become happier. All of us have unique needs, interests, values, resources, and inclinations that undoubtedly predispose us to put effort into and benefit from some strategies more than others. For example, an extravert may be more likely to stick with an activity that brings her into regular contact with other people, and a very nurturing person may benefit more from an activity that grants him opportunities to take care of others. Furthermore, some people are best served by working on an area of specific weakness (whether it's pessimism or overthinking or problems with friendship), and others profit from engaging in a happiness strategy that meshes with their personal ideal of happiness (be it positive thinking or gratifying relationships or fulfilling work). This general "matching" notion is supported by much recent research.¹

The Five Hows Behind Sustainable Happiness

It's relatively easy to become happier for the short duration, just as it's a piece of cake to quit smoking for a day or to temporarily keep a tidy desk. The challenge lies in *sustaining* the new level of happiness. You know this intimately if you've tried to turn your life around before (perhaps numerous times) but have found that "nothing works." I would wager that your previous attempts *have* worked, just not for long. Why not? This chapter explains that long-term increases in your level of happiness can be attained, but only if you abide by the five hows (or keys) behind sustainable well-being. The six chapters of Part II described in detail a set of twelve activities from which you can adopt one, or two or four, to launch the process of making yourself a happier person. On the other hand, some of you may choose to read about all twelve activities and benefit from each and every one.

With the intentional activities, you have the power to harness the promise of the 40 percent of our feelings of well-being that are within our control, to improve that large part of your happiness that *can* be improved. You may have begun carrying out these happiness activities

already or you may have not. In either case, you may be wondering about the essential secrets of their success. If you understood better *how* and *why* the happiness strategies worked, would you be more effective in practicing them? Would you be more likely to persist in engaging in them? Absolutely. In this chapter, I describe the critical mechanisms of action (or reasons) for the success of the book's core program. The five hows, grounded in the scientific literature, are assembled and interpreted together here for the first time.

The First How: Positive Emotion

Happiness consists more in small conveniences or pleasures that occur every day, than in great pieces of good fortune that happen but seldom.

—Benjamin Franklin

Say that you are reasonably comfortable materially. You may not have everything you desire, but you have a roof over your head, plenty of food to eat, clothes that fit and keep you warm, and some security in your income. What if seventy-five thousand dollars suddenly fell out of the sky and onto your fortunate head. How should you spend the money to maximize the happiness that you will obtain from it?

This is by no means a frivolous question; the answer gets to the heart of one of the primary ways that particular happiness activities, or behaviors, make people happier, and that is by creating many happy moments. Indeed, frequent positive emotions—feelings of joy, delight, contentment, serenity, curiosity, interest, vitality, enthusiasm, vigor, thrill, and pride—are the very hallmark of happiness.¹ Although all human beings endure negative emotions, happy people experience positive states more frequently than do their less happy peers. It can even be said that positive emotions make happy people who they are.

Fortunately, each of the twelve intentional happiness activities described in Chapters 4 through 9 has the ability to generate a cascade of positive experiences. To be sure, one of the desirable features of such activities is

that they can be frequently initiated, reinitiated, and adjusted to yield a continual flow of positive experiences and positive feelings. For example, a person who has resolved to undertake the twin strategies of committing to goals and increasing flow may decide to return to school in middle age. Accordingly, he may vary his reading choices and course selections in order to develop expertise in multiple areas. In the process he will feel strong intrinsic motivation and flow and experience the joy of discovering fascinating new areas of knowledge, the pride of mastering new skills, and the enjoyment of meeting new people. These ongoing positive experiences, brought about by conscious effort on his part, may help him remain particularly happy over a long period of time.

Consider another individual who embarks on practicing the three strategies of gratitude, kindness, and religion. If she places sincere effort into these activities, she will feel the gratification and peace that come from appreciating life's blessings, the satisfaction that comes from helping others and from forging new relationships, and the serenity and awe that come from being in the presence of God. Notably, however, these surges of positive feeling won't be singular but recurrent. No happiness-enhancing strategy would be capable of successfully sustaining happiness if it made a person feel happy only once and only briefly.

If you contemplate each of the twelve happiness-boosting activities, you will observe that every one of them has the potential to produce a stream of positive experiences, to increase the number of transient bursts of happiness in your life. Because positive emotions are typically short-lived, many people believe they are trivial. This is a mistake. As Barbara Fredrickson has eloquently argued, moments of pleasure don't just make you *feel* good. They broaden your horizons and build your social, physical, and intellectual skills.² In this way, positive emotions beget upward spirals. For example, you feel invigorated after aerobic exercise, which boosts your creativity, which gives you a new idea about how to enchant your partner, which strengthens your marriage, which shores up your satisfaction and commitment, which leads you to be more grateful and forgiving, which fuels optimism, which creates a self-fulfilling prophecy, which buffers the sting of a setback at work, and so on. Some of the changes produced by small boosts of positive

emotion are small, and some are big, but they add up. Positive emotions truly *make* you into a happier person. "We live in an ascending scale when we live happily," said the author of *Treasure Island*, Robert Louis Stevenson, "one thing leading to another in an endless series."

So, if you suddenly experienced a financial windfall, you would ultimately be much happier if you spent the money on numerous pleasant, mood-boosting things occurring on a day-to-day or weekly basis—a daily lunch of expensive sushi, a weekly massage, a regular delivery of fresh flowers, or Sunday-morning calls to your best friend in Europe—rather than spend it all on a single big-ticket item that you believe you would really love, like a new top-of-the-line Jaguar or the remodeling of a bathroom with hand-painted tile. By now you should appreciate the fact, as Ben Franklin did, that you would swiftly adapt to the new automobile or bathtub but not to the bursts of intermittent happiness.

But why do we continue to *believe* so strongly that it's the large and dramatic events of our lives—the earthquake, the overseas adventure, the wedding, and the divorce—that are the ones that matter? Because those are the events we anticipate, remember, chew over, and discuss with others. We tend to notice and recall only special and important episodes from our lives, the one day that something went very wrong (or extremely right) instead of the remaining 364 ordinary days. However, don't underestimate the positive emotions experienced during those ordinary days, because properly understood, they can change your entire perspective and open your mind to new possibilities that you hadn't known were there just moments before. Consider the famous madeleine cookie consumption experience of French novelist Marcel Proust:

I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory—this new sensation having had

on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me, it was me. I had ceased now to feel mediocre, contingent, mortal.³

Yes, Proust definitely feels a positive emotion upon eating the madeleine, perhaps more intense and transcendent than that experienced by most of us ordinary folk, but we all have had our share of positive emotions. The fact that the experience feels *good*, however, doesn't end there. It changes him, providing new insight and new understanding. It prompts him to look at the world in an entirely different way. This is an elegant analogy for what happens when you resolve to craft daily kindnesses or smile more or consider the brightest possible future for yourself. By enacting these strategies, you will create happy moments in your life that will not only make you feel happier but alter your whole way of thinking and being. They will create a sense of possibility and promise, and who knows where that will take you?

POSITIVE EMOTIONS AND DEPRESSION

If you've ever had long-lasting or intense periods of feeling down or blue, you may be surprised at the role that positive emotions can play in depression. To be sure, depression has been described as a syndrome distinguished by a *deficit* of positive emotions: a lack of joy, curiosity, contentment, enthusiasm—that is, an empty cup.⁴ Indeed, inability to take pleasure in joyful events is a hallmark of depression. This positivity deficit is also evident in how depressed people think about the future and the past. Their problem, it turns out, is not so much that they anticipate bad things will come to pass as that they cannot believe that good things will.⁵ They also have great difficulty recalling anything pleasant that has ever happened to them.⁶ The experience of positive events is also important; surprisingly, recovery from depression appears to be jump-started by positive events even more than it's thwarted by negative events. For example, researchers in the UK carefully analyzed forty-nine instances when women improved or recovered from depressive episodes.⁷ These changes of fortune were found

to be galvanized by a positive experience, especially something that gave these women the feeling of a "fresh start."

All these observations and findings point to multiple ways that happiness-enhancing activities can alleviate the symptoms of depression. The activities that will be most effective in lifting depressive symptoms should be those that increase positive emotions (e.g., joy and relief at overcoming an obstacle), their surrounding positive thoughts (e.g., "I'm tougher than I thought"), and positive experiences or events (making an important deadline at work). It's worth noting that in our day-to-day lives, emotions, thoughts, and experiences are connected and typically occur together. Researchers, however, usually disaggregate them, so that they can show the value of each separately. In any case, it's no coincidence that the twelve happiness strategies described in Part II of the book—activities like practicing daily gratitude, focusing on the best person you can possibly be, being generous, and spending quality time with loved ones—all are designed to accomplish exactly what is needed to ward off depression: Increase positive emotions, foster positive thoughts, and fuel positive experiences.

First, we have already seen that happiness activities boost positive emotions, but researchers have also shown that positive feelings can foil the effects of negative feelings.⁸ In one study, participants were given only one minute to prepare a speech on the topic "Why you are a good friend." (Unbeknownst to them, the speech never actually took place.) Immediately, these participants reported being extremely anxious, felt their hearts racing and their blood pressures rise. Then they were divided into four groups, and each group was simply shown a movie that made them feel joyful, content, neutral, or sad. After the films, all the groups eventually returned to their original emotional and physiological states (i.e., no anxiety, normal heart rate, etc.), but the two groups that had experienced positive emotions—namely, joy and contentment—showed the fastest recovery in their cardiovascular symptoms.⁹ Recent data from my lab extended this finding to depression.¹⁰ People who were instructed to practice various happiness activities reported experiencing more frequent positive emotions, such as contentment and pleasure, for as long as

three months after our study had ended. Critically, our analyses revealed that those very positive emotions, in turn, led the same individuals to show reduced depressive symptoms as long as six months after the study.

Researchers argue that positive emotions possess the ability to undo the lingering cardiovascular effects of negative emotions. Indeed, feelings of joy, satisfaction, or pride can help people see the "big picture" of their lives and provide a sort of "psychological time-out" in the midst of stress or trauma, thus lessening the sting of any particular unpleasant event. In these ways, positive feelings marshaled in the face of adversity can build resilience, by helping people bounce back from stressful experiences.¹¹

A second benefit of happiness activities is that they boost positive thinking. As I discuss in the "Postscript," the most widely held theories of depression posit that negative, dysfunctional thoughts are at the root of this disorder.¹² This is because pessimistic, downbeat attitudes and memories fuel negative emotions—sadness, anger, jealousy, fear—which spawn more negative thoughts, and so on, in a vicious downward spiral. In contrast, happiness activities can counteract the negative bias by helping us unlearn our patterns of negative thinking. For example, hopeful predictions that result from the optimism strategy replace thoughts of hopelessness and powerlessness. Joyful memories brought to mind by the savoring strategy replace bitter and angry recollections about old hurts. Pleasant, distracting thoughts prompted by the avoiding overthinking strategy replace fretful ruminations about current troubles. Indeed, a study from my laboratory confirmed this reasoning. People who actively and regularly practiced either gratitude or optimism over an eight-week period came to regard their routine experiences in more positive ways and to find everyday events (meeting a friend, commuting to work, cooking dinner) more satisfying.¹³ These more positive thoughts and interpretations, in turn, triggered improvements in well-being.

Third, happiness activities encourage positive experiences. Practicing the nurturing relationships activity yields periods of relaxation and contentment in the company of family and friends. Practicing acts of kindness produces moments in which we suddenly feel efficacious and appreciated. Having more flow at home, school, and work can lead us to

be more successful and productive, producing greater engagement and enjoyment of our daily life.

The majority of conventional depression therapies aim for "remission"—or the virtual absence of depressive symptoms—as their end point.¹⁴ Most people recognize, however, that relief of symptoms is not the depressed person's ultimate objective. If you are depressed, your goal is not just *not* to be depressed; your goal is to be happy. However, even after therapy has successfully assuaged sadness, guilt, fatigue, and apathy, you still may not be happy, and you almost certainly wouldn't be flourishing or thriving. The latest estimate is that 11 percent of us are "languishing"—that is, not clinically depressed yet living stagnant, empty lives or, to quote Thoreau, leading "lives of quiet desperation."¹⁵ Thus recovery from depression will likely return you to a hedonic "neutral" point, to "languishing" at best. The goal of practicing happiness activities is to bolster positive emotions, thoughts, and experiences, such that they eventually lift you and sustain you above that neutral point.

If you are currently receiving treatment for depression, the combination of the treatment and the use of happiness-increasing strategies will, I hope, have the double whammy effect of relieving depressed mood and elevating happiness. The reasons should be plain by now. The happiness strategies are expected to trigger pleasant emotions and uplifting thoughts, which serve as an antidote to depressive symptoms. They are also expected to bring about a stream of positive experiences, which are inconsistent with depression.

POSITIVE EMOTIONS VERSUS LIFE MEANING

Are transient positive emotions really as important to strive for as honor, integrity, or meaning in life? The answer is that the very question is misleading. It sets up a false dichotomy between so-called hedonistic pleasures and the well-deserved gratifications of the mind, heart, and soul. In truth, positive emotion is positive emotion, joy is joy, contentment is contentment. Who is to compare the thrill of a helicopter ride with the ecstasy of spiritual awakening, the joy of a lemonade in the high desert to the delight of hearing your baby's first laugh? Experiences that forge a

sense of life meaning, whether they involve helping a friend in need, worshiping a higher power, or developing a superior expertise, are *happy* moments, even if the positive emotions surrounding them may not always be evident immediately or if they differ (as they undoubtedly do) from the positive emotions induced by a sugar high.

So don't pooh-pooh pleasure. You can find pleasure in a silly TV show or in being wholly absorbed in a lecture on astrophysics. Both types of pleasure contribute to a happy life, and both types of pleasure can give rise to the multiple benefits of positive emotions, like feeling more sociable, more energetic, and more resourceful. An avalanche of studies has shown that happy moods, no matter the source, lead people to be more productive, more likable, more active, more healthy, more friendly, more helpful, more resilient, and more creative.¹⁶ This means that positive emotions actually help us achieve our goals (reinforcing the feeling that we are working toward something important) as well as help us strive for meaning and purpose in life. Indeed, a series of intriguing studies at the University of Missouri found that happy moods lead people to perceive their lives as more meaningful; for example, the more positive emotion people experience during a particular day, the more meaningful they judge that day.¹⁷ That seriousness and greatness must be accompanied by grumpiness is a myth.

WHENCE THE SOURCE

I confess now that I did gloss over something. The *source* of the happy moments does in fact matter, for it influences the ability of the experience to be self-sustaining. Although the bliss of a sinful pleasure can trigger the same kinds of intellectual, social, and physical benefits as the bliss of hard-earned effort, the sinful pleasure is over quickly and, what's more, can leave guilt or other negative feelings in its wake. But the pleasure borne of any of the dozen happiness-inducing strategies described here, whether they involve practicing optimism, nurturing relationships, developing coping strategies, or living in the present, is lasting, recurring, or self-reinforcing. One of the chief reasons for the durability of happiness activities is that unlike the guilty pleasures, they are hard won. You have devoted time and

effort to meditating or avoiding overthinking or committing acts of kindness. You have made these practices happen, and you have the ability to make them happen again. This sense of capability and responsibility is a powerful boost in and of itself. When the source of positive emotion is yourself (as opposed to a televised World Cup game or chocolate or a glass of wine), it can continue to yield pleasure and make you happy. When the source of positive emotion is yourself, it is *renewable*.

The Second How: Optimal Timing and Variety

To be interested in the changing seasons is a happier state of mind than to be hopelessly in love with spring.

—George Santayana

Discovering which exact strategies you can undertake to become happier won't necessarily blow your mind. Many people intuitively grasp that being grateful for what they have, savoring the moment, strengthening relationships, and coping well with hardship all are activities that ultimately bolster happiness. Knowing what to do is an important step, but you also need to know precisely *how* to do it. Fortunately, research has something to say about specifically how a happiness-increasing program must be carried out to achieve maximum success. In this section, I describe two elements that are critical, timing and variety.

TIMING IS IMPORTANT

Love is brief, but frequently recurring.

—François de La Rochefoucauld

The pie chart theory of happiness predicts that no attempt at making yourself happier can work if you eventually adapt to the happiness-boosting

effects of your effort. This is why, as we see in Chapter 2, the strategy of changing one's circumstances—earning more money or switching jobs—is ultimately fruitless. But can't you also adapt to the *activities* you do in order to be happy—for example, to counting blessings, to dispensing kindnesses, or to pursuing life goals? Yes, you can, unless you respect the second how of sustainable well-being. As the French author La Rochefoucauld intuited, activities, by definition, are episodic; they happen at irregular intervals. Intentionally cultivating optimism, for instance, might be something that you do on mornings that you wake up gloomy, or on your way to social get-togethers, or each time you receive an e-mail from your boss. Alternatively, you might choose to practice optimism every Sunday night by writing in a journal about your best possible future self. The bottom line is that for happiness activities, as for humor, timing is important. Accordingly, it's essential to consider your strategies' frequency and duration and to strive to time them in ways that deliver you greatest satisfaction, serenity, or joy—in other words, to time them in ways that thwart adaptation. For example, you might choose to count your blessings only after braving a difficult period, or only when you're especially needful of a boost, or only at week's end. A friend of mine actually keeps a handwritten list of the strategies that work especially well for her during particular times (e.g., meditate and practice gratitude before in-laws visit, focus on goal pursuit and avoid overthinking when dealing with supervisor, etc.) and consults that list during those times. This way you strive to discover the optimal timing for each activity—that is, a frequency of engagement that allows each activity to remain fresh, meaningful, and positive.

How do you accomplish this? Through self-experimentation. Earlier I described a couple of experiments from my laboratory in which we induced people to practice different happiness-boosting strategies.¹⁸ These experiments offer some ideas for how one might achieve optimal timing. One study showed that people were more successful at increasing their happiness when they counted their blessings every Sunday night than when they did it three times a week. A second study showed that people were more successful at increasing their happiness when they committed five acts of kindness on a Monday than when they spread them

throughout the week. Both these observations may be true for you as well. However, these findings represent averages—that is, *on average*, people who count their blessings only on Sundays and those who do five acts of kindness in one single day are happiest—and they may not apply to every reader of this book. Furthermore, these general rules may not apply to *other* ways of expressing gratitude or kindness (such as writing gratitude letters or volunteering weekly for a charitable organization) or to other happiness activities (such as learning coping strategies or practicing optimism, forgiveness, or flow). You need to try different ways of timing your happiness activity, manipulating when and how often you perform it, until something clicks and it begins to work for you.

Interestingly, religious practices and prohibitions make clever use of optimal timing. Orthodox Jewish married couples, for example, are forbidden to touch each other—let alone be intimate—during the seven days surrounding the woman's menstrual period. To ensure that inadvertent physical contact doesn't occur, even such mundane acts as passing the salt must be conducted with forethought and care; the wife must place the salt shaker on the table in front of her husband, leaving just enough time to pull back her hand before his comes close to hers. This might seem absurd to some of us, but the unintended (or perchance intended?) fringe benefit is the maintenance of the flames of love and passion. How wonderful it must be to be able to resume physical contact after the period of prohibition each month! Notwithstanding the origins for such practices, we can borrow their spirit, if not their substance, to enhance the love and happiness in our own lives.

VARIETY, THE SPICE OF LIFE

Activities, by definition, are also dynamic—that is, they don't tend to stay the same.¹⁹ Being generous and charitable to others on a regular basis requires a multitude of diverse behaviors every week: One day you might leave an extra-large tip for a weary waiter; another day you might visit a grieving friend; the following week you might do the dishes even when it's not your turn. The same applies to expressing gratitude or striving for

goals or any other strategy you might undertake. This is why we don't adapt very quickly or easily to an activity (and its shifting nature), and this is why another important way that you can bolster the effectiveness of a happiness activity is to vary it. By varying it, we ensure that we don't adapt to it. For example, by alternating attention among several projects at work, by changing the route, time of day, and speed of your running regimen, or by exploring a variety of software programs and Web sites, your activities could remain intrinsically enjoyable and conducive to many rewarding flow experiences. Or if in expressing gratitude, you choose to vary the domains of life in which you count your blessings (i.e., in relationships, in your profession, in your health, or in whatever area of life you've recently been fortunate), then the strategy may remain fresh and meaningful and work indefinitely. Conversely, if you count the very same blessings every day, in a nonvarying routine, you may become bored with the routine and cease to extract any meaning from it. Supporting this notion, psychological research suggests that people tend to seek variety in their behavior, perhaps because change, in both thoughts and actions, is innately pleasurable and stimulating.²⁰ No doubt aware of this, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant was said to shift his routine on his daily walks, in order to forestall boredom.

The importance of variety is demonstrated by both empirical and anecdotal evidence. In a kindness intervention from my laboratory, participants given the opportunity to vary their acts of kindness over a ten-week period (do an extra household chore, help a stranger change a tire, help a niece with homework, etc.) became happier and stayed happier. For the participants who performed similar acts each week, however, the kindness strategy completely backfired.²¹ An analogous observation was made by "obesity czar" Robert Jeffery.²² Having developed an obesity intervention that is incredibly effective, he soon learned that it works great for about six months, at which point his clients get burned out or bored with the regimen and can't stick to it. Consequently, he has begun to retool the intervention every six months or so in order to give a booster shot for its effectiveness, encouraging his clients to try new and different weight loss routines.

These observations underscore the notion that a crucial method of maximizing the impact of an activity is to attend to its variety. So sprinkle a little of this and a little of that, revivify your happiness strategies on a regular basis, surprise yourself sometimes. Regard finding happiness as an adventure, full of enterprise, developments, and detours. Work on several happiness activities at once, so if one is not going so well, you can relish another.

I was reading a novel not long ago and came upon the assertion that "to be happy you have to find variety in repetition."²³ It may seem like puzzling phrasing, even an oxymoron, but it actually comes close to what I mean here by the suggestion to vary the way you implement your happiness activities. On the one hand, there's routine and habit—the habit of initiating the behavior in the first place—and on the other hand, there's *how* you do it, which cannot always be the same or you'll adapt to it and end up feeling the same as when you started.

My friend Stephanie told me of a guy in her acting class who had "tried everything" in his attempts to become a happier person. Every day he listened to motivational tapes, he prayed, he wrote in a journal, and he went on a bike ride to the beach. He was incredibly assiduous about this routine and never wavered from it. But it wasn't working. He was sinking lower and lower, and my friend was just bewildered. Then a lightbulb went off. The guy had created such a rigid routine that he was going through the motions in exactly the same way every day. He listened to the same tapes every morning, and using identical words, he prayed for the same individuals. His route to the beach never strayed. When you take up a happiness activity, be sure to jazz up your routes to the beach, both literally and figuratively. Effort matters, without question, but so does *how* you put it into practice.

The Third How: Social Support

Most of us are involved in a wide web of relationships and social connections. We are dependent on other people, and we could not accomplish many of our goals if we didn't receive help and cooperation from others. It's not surprising, perhaps, that the third critical factor underlying the

success of a happiness activity is social support. This jargon is used by psychologists to represent all kinds of help and comfort provided by others, especially those with whom we have strong, meaningful relationships. Say you are embarking on a happiness-enhancing program, which involves the three strategies of regularly expressing gratitude, avoiding overthinking, and engaging in regular aerobic exercise. Having a buddy with whom to carry out the program, or simply the validation of people close to you, is an enormous benefit. Social support partners can offer informational support (e.g., suggesting a new way to show gratitude or cautioning that your current approach might lead you to get stuck), tangible support (e.g., giving you rides to the gym), and emotional support (e.g., providing reassurance, solace, and inspiration).

We learned in Chapter 6 that social support is invaluable in helping people cope with life's challenges and misfortunes. Women who have at least one friend are better able to cope with problems than those without friends.²⁴ Whether you're suffering a breakup, a chronic illness, or the threat of layoffs, talking to a caring friend or family member can significantly ease the pain and provide a push to address problems. Confiding your worries and troubles to others can reduce stress if you learn that they have endured similar experiences and have survived or thrived. It can reduce anxiety when other people comfort and reassure.

Emotional or tangible support, whether this involves a sole confidant, a circle of friends, your family, or a psychotherapeutic group, may also be crucial in helping people persist at and realize their goals in general.²⁵ Social support helps motivate and guide you along your path, thus ultimately promoting the realization of a wide variety of goals, including those concerning work, relationships, and personal growth. Indeed, many organizations, such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and some large religious congregations, emphasize the importance of having "teammates" or "small-group members" who work together toward goals, be they abstaining from alcohol or worshipping. Whether they are teammates, buddies, mentors, or big sibs, supportive and validating others can make the difference between short-term success and long-term success in your goal of becoming happier. Indeed, group support, such as the kind found in AA, can be

extraordinarily powerful in galvanizing conviction, commitment, and perseverance: "An alcoholic could lose his job and his family, he could be hospitalized, he could be warned by half a dozen doctors—and go on drinking. But put him in a room of his peers once a week—make him share the burdens of others and have his burdens shared by others—and he could do something that once seemed impossible."²⁶

What does this have to do with trying to become happier? Any change in behavior that requires effort and dedication will be made easier if your spouse, children, friends, parents, siblings, and coworkers are supportive. They can motivate you and remind you to continue to practice your happiness activities, an indispensable boost when you start to lose momentum or simply forget. They can offer positive feedback, encouragement, and warmth: "Hey, you seem so much happier lately," "You look great," or "I know what it's like to feel like quitting." Sometimes it's necessary to establish ties with a new group of people—perhaps from happiness-relevant chat groups or Web sites—who might share similar goals and concerns as you. Or you might want to seek out new friends in your own work, school, and neighborhood communities, as a way to find partners who support each other's efforts. Remember, you don't need a posse; often just one caring friend will do.

THE RESEARCH EVIDENCE

The importance of social support is demonstrated in copious empirical investigations. In the domain of health, for example, sick patients who have strong social support are relatively more likely to cooperate with their medical treatment.²⁷ Studies have found that patients with hypertension (who must take medication every day and eat low-salt diets) are much more likely to adhere to their strict regimens if they have family support, especially from spouses.²⁸ Those with social support are more motivated to cooperate with their doctors' orders, more knowledgeable about their treatments, and more likely to maintain their blood pressures.

In the self-help domain, people who make New Year's resolutions are much more likely to persevere for two years, and even for six years, if they

have social support.²⁹ One of my favorite studies investigated the extent to which social support can help people with the goal of losing weight.³⁰ Participants undertook a four-month-long weight loss program (involving diet, exercise, and behavioral changes) either alone or with three acquaintances, friends, or family members. Of those who embarked on the program alone, 76 percent completed it, and 24 percent maintained their weight losses in full for an entire six months. In contrast, of those who engaged in the weight loss program with social support, 95 percent completed it, and 66 percent maintained their weight losses in full. Furthermore, those with social support lost more weight and kept more of it off. These numbers are compelling, to say the least.

Like these participants, I expect that those of us who attempt happiness-enhancing programs without much social support are unlikely to commit for very long, to carry it through. Think of social support as essentially a force that works with the behavioral change. Your spouse, friend, life coach, or other buddy can encourage you to work hard toward your goals and serve as a sounding board when you lose motivation or get stuck in a rut.

The Fourth How: Motivation, Effort, and Commitment

You have to participate relentlessly in the manifestations of your own blessings. And once you have achieved a state of happiness, you must never become lax about maintaining it, you must make a mighty effort to keep swimming upward into that happiness forever, to stay afloat on top of it.

—Elizabeth Gilbert

Another vital key to a successful happiness-increasing program, as you already well know, is committed and dedicated effort. When it comes to achieving greater happiness, the steps you need to take are not altogether different from those required for learning French or changing careers or any other goal you might pursue.

1. You must *resolve* to undertake a program to become happier.
2. You must *learn* what you need to do.
3. You must put weekly or even daily *effort* into it.
4. You must *commit* to the goal for a long period of time, possibly for the rest of your life.

The first and second steps you have already initiated by picking up this book or others like it. They are critical steps because the sense of mastery and possibility that accompanies the launch of a new chapter for yourself is immensely powerful and transporting. Just think of it, you are on the threshold of altering your life! "Every time you make a choice," wrote C. S. Lewis, "you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before."

The third and fourth essential steps in this process—concerted effort and commitment—may be the hardest. Without them, your journey will be altogether brief. You may become happier for a day, a week, perhaps a month, but it won't last. Most people have had such experiences with New Year's resolutions; come January 1, they know exactly what they need to do, they're determined and motivated to do it, they try for a time, and then they give it up. Following through on new intentions isn't easy, but neither is the work required for all the best and most meaningful things in life.

THE WONDERS OF MOTIVATED AND COMMITTED EFFORT

Motivation, or the drive and inspiration to accomplish something, plays an indispensable role in all four steps of resolving, learning, effort making, and committing. You know that you have high motivation for a new endeavor when you find yourself brimming with enthusiasm and ideas about it. You know that you have high motivation when you do something because you truly believe that the experience (or its consequences) will ultimately be interesting and challenging and enjoyable. The desire comes from deep within you. My collaborators and I have tested directly the question of

whether the more motivated a person is to become happier, the more successful he or she will be. For example, in one study we directly recruited participants who wanted to improve their happiness levels (e.g., "Do you want to be happy? This is the study for you!") and compared them with participants who signed up for a generic psychology experiment.³¹ The effects were striking. Regardless of whether they were asked to write gratitude letters on a regular basis or to keep a journal about their best possible futures, the motivated participants became a great deal happier, whereas the nonmotivated participants improved only slightly or stayed the same. Another happiness intervention that we did, in which we also induced people to practice either gratitude or optimism, corroborated this result.³² Those participants who found the happiness-enhancing activity most motivating and rewarding were those most likely to practice it and therefore the ones most likely to benefit from it.

There you have it, the secret ingredient of motivation: The more motivated you are to do something, the more likely you'll invest effort in it! And it doesn't take a rocket scientist (or a social psychologist) to persuade you that without effort, there is no result. Plenty of studies confirm this intuitively obvious observation. Even, after the experimenter has hung up her coat and packed up the lab, those participants who continue to perform the happiness-enhancing activity and integrate it into their lives are more likely to show long-term benefits than those who quit.³³ Without effort, without trying, without striving, without tenacity, without constancy of purpose, there is only failure, hesitation, "a faint heart and a lame endeavor."³⁴

When my students and I first started conducting happiness interventions, it didn't take long for us to notice that the benefits lasted only as long as the participants practiced their assigned strategies. We initially received tough criticism for this: "Gee, your interventions must not be very strong." But my colleague down the hall (and the acclaimed methodologist) Robert Rosenthal came to our rescue. He pointed out that the pattern of our results characterizes every single kind of pharmaceutical, including lifesaving meds and therapeutic drugs taken by millions. The drug may be lifesaving while you take it, but interestingly, the moment you stop, it "fails" to work. Yet I've never heard someone argue that

insulin, aspirin, Lipitor, Claritin, Vicodin, and Viagra must be weak because they don't have long-term benefits. Again, the lesson here is the importance of practicing the life-changing program you have undertaken, whether that program involves your becoming a happier person, quitting smoking, or treating an illness. Effort and commitment are king.

WHAT IF YOU'RE TOO BUSY?

"I'm too stressed out to think about anything else but how to get through the day," a not-so-happy acquaintance told me when I suggested that she try some happiness activities. She was indeed busy, with two teenagers in the house, volunteer work, and a real estate practice taking off. I empathized. But when it comes to the important things in life, are we ever really too busy? When you decided to have a baby, did you reserve just one hour a month to contemplate it? When you fell in love, did you set your relationship aside to make more time for your job? When you obtained an incredible career opportunity, did you say no because it would spoil your schedule? I hope not. Besides, many of the happiness activities do not actually require you to make time. They are simply ways of living your life: observing your job, partner, and children with a new, more charitable and optimistic perspective, saying a kind word to your spouse, distracting yourself when you find yourself dwelling on something, uttering a short prayer before a meal, smiling at strangers during your commute, empathizing with someone who has hurt you, and so on. Most of these strategies aren't a time drain but, by deliberate choice and with some effort, can be woven seamlessly right into your day.

WHAT IF YOU BACKSLIDE?

There surely will be times when your commitment wavers, when you forget, and when you fail to practice the happiness-enhancing strategy you have determined to undertake. This is normal and inevitable and human; none of us is perfect. Furthermore, know that circumstances will arise when being ungrateful, unforgiving, self-focused, pessimistic, traumatized,

lethargic, or indecisive is completely understandable and acceptable. A continual and perfect state of bliss is not only impossible to achieve but also maladaptive.³⁵ Plenty of situations (deaths, failures, abuses of power) call for negative emotions, which have the valuable function of promptly triggering action and reaction, whether it's grieving, persistence, or work toward reform.³⁶ In any case, the point for you to remember is that when you lose motivation to continue engaging in your happiness activity, and when you stop engaging in it, you need not feel that all is lost and that your individual situation must be hopeless. There is no crisis here. Your complicated life likely interfered, or maybe the strategy you were using lacked variety, or maybe you needed more encouragement from friends. Simply renew your motivation—reconsider the reasons that you want to become happier—and get back on track. Sometimes at this point substituting a new happiness-enhancing strategy might be of value, and sometimes it's altering how you practice the strategy you originally chose. Research suggests that the right combination of optimal timing and optimal variety, strong social support, and determined effort can be effective for the vast majority of people.

RECOMMIT TODAY . . . AND TOMORROW

I'm not usually in the habit of quoting Oprah Winfrey, but here I go. When she was reportedly once asked how she is able to run five miles per day, even when traveling, she replied that she has to recommit to the goal every day of her life. The same applies to strategies to make yourself a happier person. Renew your commitment every day. Not only the strategy but the very act of recommitment will become easier and more automatic with time.

The Fifth How: Habit

I hope you are now convinced that it takes a great deal of effort and determination to become happier. This may be disappointing news for some, especially if lately you've been feeling disheartened, insecure, or

overwrought and simply aren't sure if you have the energy that this effort calls for. Here I get to deliver the good news, which is that the effort is greatest at the beginning, but it diminishes with time, as your new behaviors and practices become habitual through repetition.

HOW DO HABITS FORM?

We all have habits—some good, some bad. Most people associate the word *habit* with annoying behaviors like chewing fingernails, sucking thumbs, twisting hair, or interrupting conversations. Smoking is a familiar habit, and so is changing lanes without using blinkers or buying a latte every morning on the way to work. Healthy or “good” habits are behaviors like always cutting the fat off a piece of chicken, flossing after every meal, carrying a water bottle wherever you go, or recycling.

What do these behaviors have in common? They are labeled “habitual” because you don't have to make the decision to do them. They are not intentional acts. When I wake up in the morning, I immediately get out of bed and put my running clothes on. I don't usually—well, not often—ever think, “Should I get up and go running, or should I stay here under the bed sheets?” There's really no decision to make. Similarly, if you have the habit of singing show tunes in the car or getting takeout every Friday night, you don't debate the act—“Should I sing this time or not?”—you just do it.

Habits form with repetition and practice. Researchers theorize that every time you repeat a behavior (such as going jogging in the morning), associations develop in your memory between the behavior and the context in which it occurs.³⁷ For my morning jogging, that context would be the alarm clock going off, my bedroom, my running gear by the door, etc. With repetition, the contextual cues (the alarm clock ringing) automatically trigger the habitual behavior (donning running shoes), such that the behavior eventually switches from the direction of controlled processing to automatic processing.³⁸ To apply this to happiness strategies, the more often you initiate a positive activity—for example, savoring meals with family or appreciating your life during bad moments—the stronger the connection becomes between that activity (savoring or appreciating)

and the cues around you (family dinner or daily hassles). So the next time (or more likely the tenth time) you get together with your family, you might be prompted into savoring simply by the situation of being around your loved ones, and the next time you get stuck in traffic, you might be prompted into an appreciative mode by the surrounding cues. Of course, such connections take time and a great deal of practice to build. As you might expect, habits take time to form and endure.

BUT AREN'T HABITS HARD TO ESTABLISH?

When it comes to losing weight or quitting smoking, media reports and research articles are full of failure stories. Indeed, well-controlled treatment studies show incredibly high recidivism rates for people who try to change their behavior. We're told that 86 percent of those who try to quit smoking eventually take it up again, and 80 to 98 percent of those who try to lose weight gain it back (and often gain more than they lost).³⁹ However, don't we all know people who've successfully turned their lives around, people who have successfully lost weight, quit drinking, given up drugs, renounced lives of crime, gone back to school, or become less grouchy? How can we reconcile these two facts, the high recidivism rates from studies of weight control and smoking cessation programs and the relatively high success rates among our acquaintances and friends?

In a classic study, social psychologist Stanley Schachter tried to resolve this paradox.⁴⁰ Talking to staff at his Columbia University office and to acquaintances and strangers on the beach at Amagansett, where he spent his summers, he observed that a large percentage used to be overweight or smokers. So the anecdotal evidence—the “real-world” evidence—suggests that lots of people successfully kick bad habits and form new ones. Indeed, this is what Schachter found in his wide-ranging beach and office interviews—namely, a 63 percent success rate for self-cure of smoking and obesity. He concluded that the published recidivism data are biased by the fact that they represent the outcomes of the “hard-core cases”—that is, people who come in for treatment. The rest, who are able to cure themselves, don't seek treatment. In addition—and this is a seemingly obvious

but very important observation—in trying to accomplish something (like quitting smoking), people may try (and fail) many times before they ultimately succeed. The 63 percent of success stories that Schachter found had tried several times before finally accomplishing their goal.

Schachter's informal investigation was replicated in a more recent, much larger, and more representative study of 784 people with extensive histories of being overweight.⁴¹ These individuals were able to keep off a minimum of thirty pounds for at least five years. Most tried many weight loss methods and yo-yoed in their weights until they were finally successful. It took most of them until their forties to lose the weight and to maintain it; however, once they found what worked for them, the task became much easier. Indeed, the researchers were surprised to learn that 42 percent of the sample reported that maintaining the weight was much easier than losing it. By the time they reached their weight goal, their weight loss strategies likely had already turned into true habits.

TWO KINDS OF HABIT

Clearly, everyone's goal should be to turn positive thinking and behavior strategies into habits. But be wary of the wrong kind of habit! Your aim should be to create the habit of *instigating* a happiness activity: Go ahead and forgive, savor, thrive, look on the bright side, and count your blessings. Aim to do it unconsciously and automatically. This kind of habit helps you get over the hump of implementing a happiness activity on a regular basis. Conversely, the other kind of habit—doing the activity the same way each time (contemplating forgiveness for the same person in the same way at the same time each day)—eventually becomes monotonous, prone to adaptation, and deficient in any happiness-boosting potential.

Conclusion

This book's message can be understood as the exhortation to establish new, healthy habits. Because such activities as looking on the bright side,

savoring the moment, practicing forgiveness, and striving for important life goals make a difference in your happiness, it is certainly a good idea to make a habit of doing them. It may be exasperating to know that naturally very happy people, those fortunate to have high set points, seem to have inherited such habits. They don't need to *try* to be optimistic or grateful or forgiving; it's second nature to them. However, if your set point for happiness is not as high as theirs and you were blessed with fewer of those good habits, know that with some time and determination, you can develop the same exact habits for yourself.

In the past you may have felt trapped in the tunnel of your unhappy inheritance, your pessimistic thoughts, or your maladaptive habits. I hope the journey that this book has introduced you to will liberate you from the heavy weight of those negative perceptions. You'll find that there's a tremendous freedom in understanding the unifying theory of happiness put forth here, not only in knowing what are the most powerful determinants of happiness but in recognizing how to access that portion of happiness that's in your power to achieve a real and lasting change.