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## 3 Happiness

### Overview

- Most people think having more money and possessions will make them happier, but these sorts of changes in circumstances seldom live up to expectations. Happiness is more reliably increased by less obvious things such as expressing gratitude and helping others.

- To develop habits that support happiness, five methods are valuable: awareness, valuing, understanding, endorsement and action.

- Most happiness efforts are oriented to individuals. Also important are collective efforts to structure social life to make happiness habits easier to maintain.<sup>1</sup>

Just about everybody wants to be happy — so that means happiness is a good thing, right? Well, not quite. Just because everyone wants something doesn't guarantee it's good for you. Nearly everyone likes ice cream, but it's not the healthiest food. Nearly everyone with the option chooses to drive a car rather than walk a few kilometres, but actually that's bad for people's health in the long term.

Happiness, though, doesn't seem to have a down side. There's evidence that being happy makes people healthier and

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Chris Barker, Sharon Callaghan, Rae Campbell, Lyn Carson and Ian Miles for valuable feedback on drafts of this chapter.

more productive at work, plus other side benefits. Most importantly, being happy seems worthwhile on its own.

It's possible to imagine exceptions. Laughing hysterically might make you fall and hurt yourself. Being happy at someone else's misfortune is bad taste. The idea of a happy murderer is repulsive. There are some things we shouldn't be happy about.

There are a few such exceptions, but in general happiness is largely considered to be a good thing. This is even more true if happiness is applied to both immediate pleasure — something that makes you smile — and a more general feeling of satisfaction with life or good will towards the world.

*Pursuing* happiness is another matter — craving things, including happiness, can be a trap and actually lead to more misery. Pursuing happiness is not the same as being happy.

How do you know when someone is happy? You can look at them and see whether they are smiling or laughing, though these can be faked. Happiness is an inner feeling, and usually you yourself are the best person to judge whether you're happy. So the obvious way to find out whether people are happy is to ask them. That's exactly how happiness researchers proceed.

I started reading about happiness research decades ago. One of the earliest books I read was *The Psychology of Happiness* by Michael Argyle. He summarised findings from many studies of happiness. One finding was that "Happiness does not vary much with age."<sup>2</sup> This is good news or bad news, depending on how you look at it: as you get older, things won't seem much better or worse. However, there was an exception: being a parent. On average, parents of growing children reported being less happy than non-parents. I remember a graph in Argyle's book plotting findings from several studies of parents' happiness as a function

<sup>2</sup> Michael Argyle, *The Psychology of Happiness* (London: Methuen, 1987), 156.

of the age of their children.<sup>3</sup> The happiness deficit became larger as children grew older and was largest when they were teenagers. Then, after the children left home, parents' happiness levels returned to roughly the same as before the children were conceived.

This result was fascinating because it was unexpected. Talk to parents and most of them will tell you that having children is a wonderful blessing. Then again, some will reveal the terrible struggles they've had — especially with teenagers. Very few parents will admit being unhappier or wishing they hadn't had children. The closest to this is a comment that, though they love their darling children Johnny and Sally, if they were starting again they might make a different decision.

How can the research findings about parents' happiness deficit be reconciled with most parents' defence of their decision to have children and their fond memories of a growing family? The answer is straightforward: the research measures what people say about their feelings *right now* whereas parents, when commenting on the virtues or otherwise of parenthood, are reflecting on the past. There's a systematic bias in views about past happiness.<sup>4</sup>

But can we trust data on happiness? The way happiness is usually measured is simply by asking people whether they're happy right now or whether they are generally satisfied or

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>4</sup> This is called a focusing illusion. For a more recent discussion of research on children and happiness, see Nattavudh Powdthavee, "Think having children will make you happy?" *The Psychologist*, 22(6), April 2009, 308–310. Many parents were hostile to Powdthavee for claiming they might be less happy than non-parents: see Nick Powdthavee, *The Happiness Equation: The Surprising Economics of Our Most Valuable Asset* (London: Icon Books, 2010), 146–148.

contented with their life. This seems extremely subjective. Your judgement of what counts as 7 out of 10 on a happiness scale might be quite different from mine. When you start comparing happiness between people in their 60s versus those in their 20s, the potential for systematic error seems large.

Then there are comparisons between happiness in Nigeria and Brazil. Cultural differences in the way terms are used or the way people respond to questions might undermine the validity of any observed difference. Indeed, the very idea that happiness is a universal phenomenon shouldn't be taken for granted. The question "What is happiness?" has vexed philosophers for millennia. Today's researchers, through their questions and analyses, use and create a particular sort of answer to this question — and it is largely based on asking people whether they are happy right now or generally satisfied with their lives.

The alternatives aren't any better. Can you tell whether someone is happy? Their smile might be faked or their bland expression might hide an inner joy.

Actually, asking people how happy they are is surprisingly reliable. If you pick someone and ask them how they feel at different times during the day, the figures can be plotted in a graph showing ups and downs, and these are pretty regular across different days. Many people's moods start low on waking up after a night's sleep, increase to a peak mid-morning, decrease a bit around the middle of the day, reach a lesser afternoon peak and then decline until going to sleep.<sup>5</sup> Whenever observations fit a regular pattern, this gives confidence in the results.

Back in 1987, when Michael Argyle wrote *The Psychology of Happiness*, happiness research was in its infancy. The field

<sup>5</sup> Robert E. Thayer, *The Origin of Everyday Moods: Managing Energy, Tension, and Stress* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

grew rapidly in the 1990s and boomed in the 2000s. In 2002, I visited Virginia Tech and, on leaving, was stuck in the airport for about six hours — flights had been cancelled due to a snowstorm. But I didn't mind: I had picked up the new book *Authentic Happiness* by Martin Seligman, a prominent US psychologist, and sat down to enjoy every page.<sup>6</sup>

Seligman is often called the father of positive psychology, because he has given authoritative endorsement of the importance of looking at desirable emotions like happiness. The majority of psychological research has looked at negative states like depression and anxiety. The aim of most people in the field, researchers and therapists of all types — including Freudian psychotherapists, practitioners of cognitive behavioural therapy and dispensers of therapeutic drugs such as antidepressants — has been to move people who are unhappy or disturbed closer to average. This can be called negative psychology because it focuses on treating negative emotions. Positive psychology looks instead at valued emotions and says, let's see if we can help someone who is average or above to become even better.<sup>7</sup>

In the remainder of this chapter, I look at some findings from happiness research.<sup>8</sup> I start with things that seldom make

<sup>6</sup> Martin E. P. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness* (New York: Free Press, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Prior to positive psychology, positive emotions did receive quite a bit of attention, just not nearly as much as negative emotions.

<sup>8</sup> Worthwhile non-technical treatments include Daniel Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness* (New York: Knopf, 2006); Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom* (New York: Basic Books, 2006); Sonja Lyubomirsky, *The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want* (New York: Penguin, 2008); Matthieu Ricard, *Happiness: A Guide to Developing Life's Most Important Skill* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007).

people much happier and then turn to things more likely to make a difference. I then relate these findings to five methods for protecting and promoting good things: awareness, valuing, understanding, endorsement and action. The connection between happiness research findings and these five methods can be made at the level of individuals, groups and society. In the appendix, I comment on a particular critical view about positive psychology.

### Do we know how we feel?

Timothy Wilson has written a provocative book titled *Strangers to Ourselves*.<sup>9</sup> It summarises fascinating research on the relationship between the unconscious and conscious mind. One example: you're watching a popular film and afterwards the friend you're with asks, "What'd you think of that?" You respond, "I didn't think much of it" and your friend says (or thinks) "That's strange — you were laughing the whole way through." What's going on here? The laughter was spontaneous, an unconscious reaction, whereas your post-film comment is a considered judgement. Your stern assessment is that the film was light-weight, indeed trashy, so how could it be good?

The key point here is that your friend might be a better judge of your response during the film than your own post-film critical self. Numerous ingenious experiments have been designed to test this proposition. A famous one involved a questionnaire administered to young men in two conditions. Half the men were approached and questioned in the middle of a

<sup>9</sup> Timothy D. Wilson, *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002).

rickety walking bridge across a chasm. The other half of the men were questioned on firm ground on the far side of the bridge.<sup>10</sup>

The questionnaire was a ruse. What the experimenters wanted to study was how the young men responded to the attractive young woman administering the questionnaire who gave the participants her phone number in case they had any subsequent questions. In which experimental condition — on the bridge or on solid ground — would more of the men ring her? The answer: far more of those interviewed on the bridge. Why? Because, the experimenters proposed, the young men are more aroused not by the young woman but by fear caused by crossing the swaying bridge. But this was unconscious. As Wilson interprets this experiment, the men couldn't consciously distinguish between arousal due to fear and arousal due to the woman. An attractive woman was present, so they attributed their arousal to her.

Wilson cites many such experiments. He eventually comes to an astounding conclusion: if you are with someone else, the other person is — on average — as good a judge of your feelings right now as you are yourself.

This conclusion should apply to happiness. The implication is that most people have only a partial insight into their own feelings and that others around them may have just as much insight. Most happiness research, though, continues to rely on people's self-assessments. It would be valuable to collect assessments by others in a person's life, but this is more complicated, so it isn't often done.

<sup>10</sup> Donald G. Dutton and Arthur P. Aron, "Some evidence for heightened sexual attraction under conditions of high anxiety," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 30(4), 1974, 510–517.

### What usually doesn't make you happier

According to the research, some things widely thought to increase happiness in fact don't usually make people much happier. One is climate. You might think that people living in a warm, sunny place would be happier than those in a cold, cloudy, rainy place, where the weather is commonly called miserable. Although the weather might be miserable, people report being just about as happy. This is a statistical finding. Some individuals might be happier moving to a place where it's warm and sunny but, if so, just as many will be happier moving to the cold and overcast place.<sup>11</sup>

Another thing that seems not to make much difference in happiness levels is having a formal education. It's true that some students at university are there to have a good time, but others find it stressful. Furthermore, education doesn't do much to make students happier after they graduate. Many students pursue degrees so they can obtain a better job at the end — and they expect a better job will make them happier. They are in for disappointment.

The most surprising finding from happiness research is that higher income doesn't bring greater happiness — at least not by very much.<sup>12</sup> Yet nearly everyone assumes that more money

11 David A. Schkade and Daniel Kahneman, "Does living in California make people happy? A focusing illusion in judgments of life satisfaction," *Psychological Science*, 9(5), September 1998, 340–346.

12 Gregg Easterbrook, *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse* (New York: Random House, 2003); Bruno S. Frey and Alois Stutzer, *Happiness and Economics: How the Economy and Institutions Affect Well-being* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); Bruno S. Frey in collaboration with Alois Stutzer, Matthias Benz, Stephan Meier, Simon Luechinger and Christine Benesch,

makes you happier. That's why people strive to get a high-paying job and why they put in long hours to get a promotion. It's why people go to court seeking a larger share of estates of deceased relatives. It's why people buy lottery tickets: winning the lottery is thought to be a dream come true. You suddenly have loads of money and can live happily ever after.

Back in the 1970s, Philip Brickman and collaborators decided to find out whether this common belief was actually true. They interviewed lottery winners months after their big wins and discovered they were not any happier, on average, than control subjects who had not won.<sup>13</sup>

When you win the lottery, it's tremendously exciting. You may literally jump for joy. You might be on a high for days, weeks or months. But eventually you settle down — and things are different, but maybe not any better. The obvious difference is that you have lots of money and all the things money can buy. But some things aren't as good as they used to be. Maybe you used to enjoy having breakfast. But after the win, breakfast isn't as satisfying as before. Winners found ordinary activities less fulfilling: they didn't measure up to the massive excitement of the lottery win.

Everyone has the same sort of experience in little ways. For example, suppose you've been drinking ordinary coffee for years, and enjoying it, and then you start drinking a really fine coffee for a while. If you go back to the ordinary coffee, it seems less satisfying than before. Now you have higher expectations. Perhaps this is why so many people complain about coffee.

*Happiness: A Revolution in Economics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

13 Philip Brickman, Dan Coates and Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, "Lottery winners and accident victims: is happiness relative?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 36(8), 1978, 917–927.

They've had really good coffee and subsequent coffees seldom measure up.

The experience of lottery winners is found pretty much across the board: more money doesn't make you much happier — on average. It makes some people happier and some people less happy.

The explanation for this is a process called adaptation. After a while you get used to your higher income so it become routine, and you revert back to your usual happiness level. This process is also called the hedonic treadmill. "Hedonic" refers to happiness. The treadmill is the endless quest for better jobs and higher incomes but, like a treadmill, you're running in the same place the whole time, trying harder but never changing position on the happiness scale.

There is an exception. If you're poor, then more money is more likely to make you happier. But once you're out of poverty, on a decent if modest income, extra income doesn't make such a difference. It does make a slight difference though: the super-wealthy are a little bit happier than those with average incomes. But, as we'll see, the difference is not very great compared to other ways of increasing your happiness.

The data supporting the adaptation process are dramatic. People in Britain have been surveyed for decades about their life satisfaction. Income per person has risen dramatically but average satisfaction levels have stayed pretty much the same. The same thing has been found in other countries, such as Japan and the United States.

The findings concerning income apply to all the things that go along with it: fancier cars, larger houses, the latest electronic gadgets, expensive jewellery. None of these reliably increases happiness, because you adapt to your new situation. Before long

it seems normal and your happiness level is back to where it was before.

The implications of this finding are profound. The whole rat-race of striving for the highest-paying job, buying the most prestigious house and wearing the most trendy clothes is illusory: people think having more will make them happier but they end up feeling much the same as before.

Many young people pursue occupations they believe will be lucrative, putting in long hours to become lawyers, doctors or corporate executives. They don't realise they would be just as satisfied in careers with lesser incomes such as teaching, nursing or community work. Some students study accountancy even though they find it tedious, because they think they'll have better prospects for well-paying jobs than studying physics or philosophy.

Research indicates that the search for happiness through making money is misguided. Indeed, evidence suggests that people who are more materialistic — who are especially keen to obtain more money and the things it can buy — are somewhat less happy than average.<sup>14</sup>

The adaptation process leads to some radical policy implications. To improve the overall happiness of a society, a promising approach is to eliminate poverty. The people who move from poverty to a decent income will be quite a bit happier, whereas those already on reasonable incomes will not be much affected by a relative decline in wealth — even if some of them complain mightily. Furthermore, research suggests that greater equality has many collective benefits for health and

<sup>14</sup> Leaf Van Boven, "Experientialism, materialism, and the pursuit of happiness," *Review of General Psychology*, 9, 2005, 132–142.

welfare.<sup>15</sup> But governments seldom make it a top priority to eliminate poverty and promote greater equality.

Good looks — surely being attractive makes you happier. There's research showing that good-looking people have advantages in life: they are judged more favourably and end up with better jobs.<sup>16</sup> More people want to know them. Just look at models and movie stars and how people are attracted to them.

Many people spend lots of time making themselves attractive, styling their hair, putting on make-up, removing unwanted hair, maybe even having cosmetic surgery. Some work out in the gym so they'll look slim or muscular. So does all this effort lead to greater happiness?

There's not a lot of research on this, but what there is suggests that if happiness is your goal, putting effort into becoming more attractive is not a particularly good investment.<sup>17</sup> One study even found that women who had their breasts enlarged committed suicide at a higher rate than other women. It's unlikely that having larger breasts makes women more suicidal: possibly the women who were so dissatisfied with their bodies that they sought surgery were more prone to suicide.<sup>18</sup>

The process of adaptation no doubt applies to your looks — if you have cosmetic surgery, then you get used to your new

15 Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better* (London: Allen Lane, 2009).

16 Daniel S. Hamermesh and Jeff E. Biddle, "Beauty and the labor market," *American Economic Review*, 84(5), 1994, 1174–1194.

17 Ed Diener, Brian Wolsic and Frank Fujita, "Physical attractiveness and subjective well-being," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69(1), 1995, 120–129.

18 Eero Pukkala et al., "Causes of death among Finnish women with cosmetic breast implants, 1971–2001," *Annals of Plastic Surgery*, 51(4), 2003, 339–342.

looks, and your happiness level reverts to your norm. What is the norm? It varies from person to person and seems to be pretty well fixed after early childhood experiences. Some people are persistently gloomy: good fortune seemingly cannot cheer them up for long. Others are perpetually positive about their life, being cheerful even in the most oppressive circumstances. Each person apparently has a "set point" for happiness: whatever their ups and downs, it's the point to which they return. This seems unfair, and it is, because people can't choose their genetics and upbringing.<sup>19</sup> But this is not the end of the story. There are things anyone can do that reliably increase happiness levels above set points.

So far I've commented on the things that don't do much to increase happiness, like a pleasant climate, more education, a high income and good looks. Yet these are exactly the sorts of things that many people believe will make them happier. A typical vision of bliss is having oodles of money, looking fantastic, being really intelligent and relaxing on a tropical island. How did so many people end up with such a misguided sense of how to achieve that elusive goal of happiness?

Rather than try to answer this question — which might involve an excursion into the controversial field of evolutionary psychology, or some heavy political economy — I turn now to things that, according to research, reliably make people happier.

19 The set point may not be as fixed as often assumed. Any genetic factors can be affected by environmental conditions, and the effect of these conditions can be especially great in infancy and early childhood. See Felicia A. Huppert, "Positive mental health in individuals and populations," in Felicia A. Huppert, Nick Baylis and Barry Keverne (eds.), *The Science of Well-being* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 307–340.

Many of them involve the way people think about the past, present and future.

### Thinking about the past

A friend of mine — I'll call her Greta — has a very negative attitude towards life, especially in her attitude to the past. She holds a grudge against every boss she's had and regrets her lost opportunities, which she attributes to prejudice from others. She broods over these perceived slights and inequities. I used to try to talk her out of this, pointing to the positives in her career and life, but it was no use: Greta seemed almost to relish her bitterness. Her attitude was a prescription for unhappiness.

Research shows that if you dwell on past problems, this simply accentuates them in your mind. Essentially you are reinforcing the circuits in your brain about those particular memories, elaborating and deepening them so they become magnified beyond their original significance. Grudges are maintained this way.

If, on the other hand, you don't spend too much time thinking about bad things that happened to you, they gradually decline in salience and you may forget about them entirely. If you are this sort of person, it can be difficult to have a relationship with a grudge-keeper: the other person is resentful about something that happened years ago while you can't remember what it was all about.

I once experienced this at a committee meeting when "Alice" suddenly accused me and a couple of others of undermining her. The incident she referred to had occurred a decade earlier and she had never said a thing about it to me, either at the time it happened or in subsequent years. I had only the vaguest recollection of the issues. Until that meeting, I had no idea she was seething with resentment over a perceived slight.

Holding grudges is an excellent way of fostering unhappiness. All you have to do is recall memories of when someone did something that harmed you, rehearse exactly what happened and reignite your sense of outrage. Pretty soon you'll become so resentful and bitter it will be hard to crack a smile.

There's a very different way of relating to past events. Two key mental processes are gratitude and forgiveness. Gratitude is thinking about good things and acknowledging them.<sup>20</sup> Everyone has much to be grateful for. It can be major things like having a loving family, trusting friends, a decent job and good health. It can be small things like enjoying a snack, greeting a neighbour or feeling the breeze as you walk along the street.

For everyone, life is filled with experiences positive and negative. By noticing and reflecting on the positives, you become happier. A simple exercise is to reflect on three things you are thankful for, and do this once a week.

Studies show that people with religious beliefs are happier, on average, than those without. Perhaps part of this is because giving thanks is an integral part of a number of religions. You don't need to be religious to express thanks, but developing the habit is easier if you engage in a collective ritual.

Many people, in their daily lives, have little to encourage an orientation to gratitude. It's possible to establish a personal habit, for example reflecting on good things at a regular time or place, but this can be disrupted. Rituals can be useful, like saying grace at meals, but can become so routine that there is little emotional impact.

Meanwhile, there are many temptations to focus instead on negatives, for example emphasis on longstanding grievances promoted by some groups or the culture of complaint in some

<sup>20</sup> Robert A. Emmons, *Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007).



organisations. Mass media usually concentrate on what is happening now and emphasise conflict, disasters and atrocities; appreciation for the past has relatively little visibility in the media. No wonder individuals often dwell on resentments rather than what they have to be thankful for.

The positive psychology movement is promoting the value of gratitude, but so far it has had a limited influence, mainly on individuals. There is no popular movement to promote gratitude rituals.

If expressing gratitude is a good thing, then the goal is to make it a regular practice. At an individual level, this is fairly straightforward, whereas changing the external conditions is far more difficult.

Forgiveness is another key process for relating to the past. You've suffered a hurt. If you blame someone or something — which may be quite reasonable — and keep on blaming, you are putting yourself in an ongoing negative mental state. Forgiving the perpetrator, on the other hand, releases the negativity — or some of it, at least.

There are some amazing examples of forgiveness, for example parents forgiving the murderer of their daughter. Forgiving doesn't mean saying it was okay or that the events are forgotten. Forgiving is about understanding what has happened and letting it go mentally. The primary benefits are for the person who does the forgiving.

Like gratitude, forgiveness needs to be practised; it can be quite difficult to achieve. It can be helpful to start with small things, like when a friend didn't return your call. Maybe she was preoccupied or just forgot. When she wouldn't do something you really needed, maybe she was overwhelmed or just not ready for that level of commitment. Maybe she's not perfect. If you forgive, you can move on to the next step, whether it's building

the relationship, continuing it at a modest level, or separating. Whatever happens, forgiveness can be valuable.

### Thinking about the future

What's the future going to bring? Financial risks? Poor health? Relationship problems? Potential disaster? If you constantly worry about what's going to happen, you can hardly be all that happy.

Seligman says some of the positive emotions about the future are “faith, trust, confidence, hope, and optimism.”<sup>21</sup> He focuses on optimism; one of his earlier books was the widely acclaimed *Learned Optimism*.<sup>22</sup>

Seligman analyses optimism using two dimensions: permanence and pervasiveness. Consider permanence first. When something good happens to you, for example getting on well with a new friend or making progress mastering a challenging skill, do you think this is likely to continue — or do you worry that it will all go sour? If you think the good thing will continue, indeed get even better, that's an attitude reflecting permanence: you believe that whatever is going well will be a permanent feature of your life. This can be expressed in a generalisation, for example “I'll always have good friends” or “I'm good at learning.”

If you're good at one thing — perhaps maintaining friendships — then do you think you are good at all relationships? If so, your attitude is pervasive: you apply it to all sorts of areas. You could start with “I get along with Jane” and generalise to “I can get along with nearly anyone.”

21 Seligman, *Authentic Happiness*, 83.

22 Martin E. P. Seligman, *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life* (New York: Free Press, 1998).

If your attitude towards good things involves both permanence and pervasiveness, then if one good thing happens — you make friends with Jane — then you think you'll always be able to make friends with lots of people. That's certainly optimistic!

The opposite side is your attitude towards bad things. Let's say you forget an important date and offend a friend. If you think pessimistically, you might say to yourself, "My memory is hopeless; in fact, I'm just a loser." An optimistic person takes the opposite orientation, treating the incident as an exception, applying only to the particular circumstances: "I forgot then but I was distracted so it won't happen again; I'll make it up to my friend."

In summary, an optimistic person assumes good things will continue and apply to all parts of their life, while treating bad occurrences as temporary and of no wider relevance. That's all easy enough to say, but how can you enter this optimistic way of thinking? Seligman recommends arguing with yourself whenever you start to enter a pessimistic line of thinking. He has a process involving several stages: adversity, belief, consequences, disputation and energisation.<sup>23</sup> Basically it means becoming aware of the bad thing that happens, articulating your beliefs about it and the likely consequences, disputing the negative line of thinking and coming out on the positive side.

### Living in the present

You can think *about* the past and *about* the future, but this thinking occurs in the present — right now — just like all experience. How you feel moment to moment is the key to happiness.

<sup>23</sup> Seligman, *Learned Optimism*.

So what is it like? Are you mentally relaxed and contented, excited and engaged, or perhaps frustrated by the children, annoyed at a neighbour, enraged by an incompetent driver or anxious about an upcoming meeting?

I've met people whose whole lives seem oriented to the weekend. At work during the week they look forward to Friday and on Friday they go drinking with the aim of becoming oblivious to the world. On Saturday they recover from their hangovers and look forward to a repeat bout. Sunday is another recovery and dread of the coming week.

In mental terms, these ostensible pleasure-seekers seldom enjoy the present moment: during the week they are preoccupied with the coming weekend and so not fully experiencing the present; during their drinking episodes they momentarily feel the pleasure of liberation from the self<sup>24</sup> before succumbing to diminished awareness.

Bodily pleasures are one way to obtain happiness in the present. For some people alcohol is the means whereas for others the route is via sex, chocolate or hot baths. To maximise pleasures of this sort, the key is to savour the experience, namely to spread it out over time and become intensely aware of it.<sup>25</sup> Savouring a drink would mean taking a sip now and then, focusing on the taste and other sensations. It's the opposite of chugging down one glass after another.

<sup>24</sup> Roy F. Baumeister, *Escaping the Self: Alcoholism, Spirituality, Masochism, and Other Flights from the Burden of Selfhood* (New York: BasicBooks, 1991).

<sup>25</sup> Fred B. Bryant and Joseph Veroff, *Savoring: A New Model of Positive Experience* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007).

Savouring means paying attention to what's happening in your body and mind. It is a form of heightened awareness. It is mindful experience.

Another way of enjoying life in the present is called flow. One example is when athletes are pushing themselves to the limit of their skills and capabilities. It might be a soccer player who, in a game, is fully extended, using well-developed skills deftly and confidently. In such a situation, the player's attention is fully engaged with the game — there is no opportunity for day-dreaming. Neither is there anxiety due to being overwhelmed, because the player is coping. Athletes in this sort of fully-engrossed mode sometimes say they are “in the zone.” This means their mind is totally engaged in the activity, typically for an extended time.

This sort of experience can happen in training, too — whenever the player's capacities are fully extended, so every bit of attention is on the activity. In such a state, time can pass with little awareness. Most players find it immensely satisfying.

People in all walks of life, from carpenters to singers, can have the same experience. It usually involves exercising well-developed skills at the limit of one's capacities, giving a feeling of challenge and achievement.

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi called this mental state “flow.”<sup>26</sup> It's as if you are flowing along in a satisfying experience. Worries about the past or thoughts about the future disappear because you're entirely in the activity, in the present.

Flow is so satisfying that people will seek opportunities to repeat the experience. This often means constantly pushing to new levels of performance. Imagine a child who learns the violin at a young age. Most violin pupils don't continue, but a few push

<sup>26</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990).

on. After learning the basics and developing a routine of daily practice, this child finds satisfaction in mastering ever more challenging repertoire, providing the incentive to practise even more. Further challenges come from playing in orchestras, chamber groups and solo performances. Performing can be a source of anxiety, but if the challenge is not overwhelming, even a solo performance can be satisfying.

For young musicians, there is a standard development path, moving to more difficult pieces and to a higher desk in an orchestra and then to other orchestras or chamber groups playing at a higher level. Eventually the youthful violinist gets a job in a professional orchestra, providing a terrific challenge. But the thrill of performing great works with fellow professionals may fade after a number of years, if the violinist continues to improve her skills and becomes familiar with the pieces played by the orchestra. So, in search of a new challenge, she might attempt to launch into a solo career or find players of a similar standard to form a string quartet. After an activity becomes routine — performing Beethoven's 5th symphony for the hundredth time — it may no longer provide the challenge needed to enter the flow state.

The state of flow doesn't just happen to you — effort is required to develop skills and exercise them at the limit of your ability. Flow is possible for someone just beginning on the violin, but becomes more likely at higher levels of performance.

Flow can be seen as a good thing in two ways. First, it can be deeply satisfying, worthwhile in itself. Second, it can be harnessed to valuable goals. A skilled violinist can bring joy to listeners and play an important role in an orchestra or chamber group. Like other aspects of happiness, flow states are not guaranteed to be beneficial to society. A person might experi-

ence flow when exercising anti-social skills, such as a surreptitious break-and-enter or an elaborate financial scam.

Flow has not been all that widely recognised until recently. While religions have recommended gratitude for millennia and connoisseurs have recognised the value of savouring, it is only with Csikszentmihalyi's work that the widespread significance of flow has been documented. His work has laid the basis for better understanding and valuing the flow state.

How can you find a way to enter the flow state regularly? Seligman developed a questionnaire to assess your personal strengths. For example, you rate yourself 1 to 5 on statements like "I am always curious about the world" and "I am easily bored." After you've done lots of ratings — typically requiring 30 minutes or so in the web version — then a score is calculated for each of 24 areas of potential strength. If you answered 5 for "I am always curious about the world" and 1 for "I am easily bored" then you'll have a high score on "curiosity/interest in the world" and vice versa if you answered 1 and 5 respectively.

The point of this survey is not to score highly on every strength, but rather to figure out which of your strengths are strongest, for example "curiosity/interest in the world," "valour and bravery" and "leadership." (All the strengths are couched as positive attributes.) Seligman says you should pursue a life in which you have regular opportunities to express your greatest strengths, which he calls character strengths.<sup>27</sup>

Some people know their interests when very young, but others take a while to find their calling — and some never find it at all. When students in my class took the character-strength survey, a number of them were sceptical about the results because they felt their answers weren't firm, but could have

<sup>27</sup> Authentic Happiness, <http://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/>.

varied quite a bit depending on how they were feeling at the time. Most of them were about 20 years' old, so their strengths may become more pronounced a few years down the track.

Seligman recommends finding and developing strengths as the basis for a good life. It will be a life in which you can enter the flow state regularly, because you are exercising a well-developed skill at the limit of your capacity. That's a good life for you in terms of satisfaction.

In summary, most people believe happiness is something that happens to you, due to your situation in the world, such as making a lot of money, looking beautiful, living in elegant surroundings or eating chocolate. Research shows that these sorts of things seldom have a lasting effect, because people adapt to their situations. Increasing your satisfaction from life in a sustained fashion is far more likely through changing your thoughts and actions, for example by fostering gratitude and forgiveness, developing skills to enable entering the flow state, and cultivating an optimistic attitude.

Happiness research is surprising because so many of its findings are counterintuitive. People think that they will be happier with more money, but actually spending more time with friends is far more likely to increase happiness.

### **Happiness tactics**

For sustained happiness, it's valuable to turn practices fostering happiness into habits. In a sense, then, happiness itself becomes habitual. Most of the things required for long-term contentment require practice. The happiness habit is mostly mental and behavioural: ways of thinking and acting that foster satisfaction.

To be sure, brief moments of pleasure are possible for everyone without particular effort, such as eating ice cream or laughing at a joke. But even these apparently natural activities

require a certain attitude or orientation to be fully appreciated. Some people gobble down ice cream without really thinking about it; others seldom laugh at jokes, much less tell them. So to really take advantage of pleasurable moments, some preparation or effort may be useful to get in the right frame of mind.

Some people are lucky enough to be happy a lot of the time: they have a high happiness set-point. Others have to work at becoming happier: the happiness habit has to be developed through effort. Those with high set-points might become even happier through suitable habits.

To increase happiness levels at an individual level, what methods should be used? The aim is to increase things like gratitude, optimism, savouring and flow. For all of these, the five standard methods are important. These are the same methods relevant for promoting other good things such as health and honour codes, as discussed in chapter 1.

**Awareness** It helps to be aware of the desired mental state, so you can try to enter it and know when you're in it. For example, you might occasionally express gratitude without thinking about it; by becoming aware of expressing gratitude, it's easier to build it into a more powerful habit.

**Valuing** You need to believe these states of mind are valuable. That seems obvious enough, but many people don't have this sort of belief. For example, some people are aware of savouring, but don't pursue it, instead gobbling down food, drink and other experiences.

**Understanding** You need to understand how these states of mind operate. This helps to resist beguiling arguments to pursue other courses of action. For example, it helps to know about adaptation so that you're less tempted to pursue

happiness by seeking job promotions and more expensive cars.

**Endorsement** When authority figures support happiness habits, this provides powerful support for relevant habits. Until recently, the most important authorities endorsing happiness-promoting habits have been religious figures, in relation to gratitude and forgiveness. The positive psychology movement has added a secular endorsement with authority figures like researchers Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.

**Action** The key to happiness habits is to practise them. All the other elements are fine but don't accomplish much without practice. Happiness is in the doing.

### The how of happiness

In describing research on happiness, I've drawn on the framework used by Seligman in his book *Authentic Happiness*. Another excellent practical treatment of happiness research, oriented to the general reader, is Sonja Lyubomirsky's *The How of Happiness*.<sup>28</sup> Her opening chapters give an overview of findings about happiness. She makes a strong point that there are many ways to improve happiness, such as expressing gratitude and finding flow, but that for an individual, some of these may be more attractive and effective whereas others are not.

The main body of her book treats 12 different strategies to achieve happiness, such as relationships and forgiveness, providing exercises for developing habits to make these a personal practice. All her recommendations are backed up with plenty of references.

<sup>28</sup> Lyubomirsky, *How of Happiness*.

*The How of Happiness* can be readily related to the five happiness tactics.

**Awareness** Lyubomirsky's book is itself an exercise in promoting awareness. She is a happiness researcher herself and therefore has an in-depth understanding of studies in the field, especially the ones she's been involved with directly. She wrote *The How of Happiness* because she wanted to make research findings known to a wider audience. Anyone reading the book will become aware of the 12 happiness strategies, as well as the more basic point that to achieve happiness it is worthwhile putting effort into well-chosen activities.

**Valuing** Lyubomirsky says that if anything is the secret of happiness, it is to find happiness-promoting activities that you personally value: "the secret is in establishing which happiness strategies suit you best."<sup>29</sup>

**Understanding** Lyubomirsky says that understanding why happiness strategies work helps in pursuing them: "I describe *why* these strategies work and *how* precisely they should be implemented to maximize their effectiveness using evidence from the latest research."<sup>30</sup>

**Endorsement** Lyubomirsky uses scientific research to add credibility to her recommendations: "I have selected for this book only those activities (from among many) that have been shown to be successful through science, rather than conjecture."<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

**Action** Central to Lyubomirsky's recommendations is to turn happiness strategies into habits.

The five happiness tactics thus are quite compatible with *The How of Happiness*: every one is integral to Lyubomirsky's approach.

### Social obstacles

Most happiness research focuses on individuals: it looks at things that make individuals happy. This partly reflects its home in psychology — which as a discipline tends to focus on individuals — and perhaps that many prominent happiness researchers are from countries high in individualism, especially the US.

It is certainly true that individuals can do an enormous amount on their own and with support from family and friends. But left out of this picture is the role of society, namely the way society is organised, which has an enormous influence on what individuals decide to do.

In setting up a habit — such as meditating or expressing gratitude — it's possible to rely on personal willpower. But it's far easier to maintain a habit if the external conditions are favourable. Setting aside a daily time for meditating when no one around you is doing it can be a challenge; it's far easier if everyone else meditates at the same time. That's one reason why people go to meditation retreats: meditation is the thing to do and doing anything else requires going against expectations.

A glance at western culture immediately reveals a range of obstacles to happiness. The most obvious is consumerism, the orientation to buying goods and services. A consumer culture involves pervasive advertising, status built on conspicuous

consumption, and personal values oriented to consuming as the road to a better life.

Consumerism is not just a fashion: it is deeply entrenched in contemporary capitalist economies, which are built on ever-growing production that requires ever-increasing consumption to maintain profits. The belief system underlying consumerism is that the more you buy and use, the happier you will be. Happiness research shows this is misguided.

In a consumer society, people expect happiness to come from the outside. They work to make money and then spend their earnings on houses, cars, clothes and entertainment, all in a frenetic quest for a better life, seldom stopping to question whether the whole enterprise is built on a false premise.

There are critics of course. Members of the group Adbusters promote what they call subvertisements, which are fake advertisements that challenge the assumptions of consumer culture.<sup>32</sup> But you'll never see an Adbusters ad on television. Station managers have refused to broadcast them. Even if they did allow Adbusters segments, they would be a token opposition given the enormous money behind conventional advertising, some of which uses irony and parody as a marketing angle anyway.

Canberra, Australia's national capital, is a small city with a difference: there are no public advertisements — well, not many. There are no billboards. It makes a difference, but then public ads are only one part of the environment. The media are filled with ads.

Advertising is just one environmental influence hindering happiness habits. Perhaps more influential is peer pressure, often exerted through witnessing what others have or do. The

<sup>32</sup> Kalle Lasn, *Culture Jam: The Uncooling of America* (New York: Eagle Brook, 1999) and the magazine *Adbusters*.

neighbours have a bigger house or a fancier car, send their kids to an expensive school and take extended overseas holidays. Keeping up with the Joneses still plays an important role in the culture of materialism.

People can opt out of this system. The so-called downshifters choose lifestyle over greater affluence. But this remains a minority choice. The dominant influences encourage greater consumption.

What psychological states are fostered in a consumer society? The most obvious is greed, the desire to have more no matter how much you have already: money, high-status jobs, expensive clothes, a private jet. Greed has a long history<sup>33</sup> but it is not conducive to satisfaction: even billionaires may want more. Another thing stimulated by consumerism is envy, the resentment of others because of what they have. Like greed, envy is a destructive emotion that, at its worst, can lead to antisocial behaviour including hurting others. An everyday example is spreading rumours about co-workers to damage their reputations, sabotage their chances for promotion or just to cause them a hard time.

To the extent that greed and envy are fostered, gratitude is neglected. Being thankful for what you have is undermined when you want more and resent the possessions and accomplishments of others.

Consider another element of contemporary societies, the criminal justice system. In the United States since the 1980s, the prison population has dramatically increased so that by 2010 over two million people were incarcerated. Per head of population, this is the highest rate of any country in the world. In the

<sup>33</sup> For an examination of greed, envy and jealousy, see Joseph H. Berke, *The Tyranny of Malice: Exploring the Dark Side of Character and Culture* (New York: Summit, 1988).

prison system itself, there are conflicting priorities that, in simplest terms, can be classified as rehabilitation versus retribution. Much of the US system is oriented to retribution, which basically means punishment.

The explosion in the prison population can be linked to competition between politicians to be seen as tough on crime, to heavy media coverage of crime, and to what critics call the prison-industrial complex, namely the influence on government from companies that make money out of prisons.<sup>34</sup> Campaigners for more compassionate policies have been marginalised in the past several decades; indeed, even those who present the rational argument that higher rates of imprisonment don't reduce crime have had little influence. The overwhelming impression is that criminals do not deserve compassion. The orientation is to blaming and vengeance, not forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a key element in happiness about the past. Individuals can pursue forgiveness. But public policy, especially in the US, sends a different message: perpetrators are not forgiven but rather treated harshly and then left to fend for themselves. This is an example of how a structural feature of US society, namely prison policy and practice, is contrary to the goal of greater happiness.

I haven't even mentioned the prisoners themselves. For most people, prison is one of the last places to go to become happier.

Next consider flow, the state of full engagement in a challenging task. Flow states are encouraged by opportunities for people to develop skills and exercise them. For some people, flow is becoming easier to achieve because more is known about how to develop high-level skills. Athletic training, for example,

<sup>34</sup> See for example Nils Christie, *Crime Control as Industry: Towards Gulags, Western Style*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1994).

is vastly more sophisticated than a century ago, so young swimmers, runners, gymnasts and many others are coached to develop their skills and their capacity to focus, for extended periods, on tasks at just the right level of challenge. This undoubtedly promotes flow.

The trouble is that much of this coaching is oriented to competitive sport. After the prime years of a person's competitiveness are over, often by the age of 30, there are fewer opportunities for maintaining athletic involvement. Furthermore, many older athletes have jobs that restrict time for training.

At young ages, parents, teachers and peers can provide a supportive environment for the pursuit of expert performance: training becomes a routine part of daily life, encouraged by key authority figures. But after leaving home and competitive leagues, more willpower is required to keep developing skills: there are competing priorities and authorities — bosses or family members — with different priorities. In other words, the environment is no longer as supportive of sporting activities that promote flow.

Flow requires extended periods of engagement. No interruptions please! The new personal communication technologies built around mobile phones and the Internet — texting, Twitter, Facebook and the like — encourage users to constantly shift their attention. It's stimulating, to be sure, and exercises the brain much more than staring at a wall, but it may also make flow more difficult to achieve. Of course you can switch off your phone for a few hours while you swim or paint or read, but many users become so entranced by being constantly in touch that these interludes become rarer.

A high-paced society makes it harder to savour experiences as they happen, because nothing lasts all that long before an interruption. Rather than slowing down to enjoy the present,



users seek the next bit of information in the hope that it will be more exciting than the previous one, or at least provide a diversion from the seeming emptiness of no contact.

In contemporary Western societies, choices have massively expanded — consumer choices, that is, as a visit to a supermarket will reveal. Barry Schwartz, in his thought-provoking book *The Paradox of Choice*, reviews evidence that excess choice reduces happiness.<sup>35</sup> For example, if you buy a product with the option of returning it if you don't like it, you are less likely to be satisfied than if there's a no-return policy and you are stuck with the product. The same applies to relationships: if it's easy to start and terminate close personal relationships, people are less likely to put the effort into maintaining their relationships through difficult periods and more likely to trade in their partner in the hope of finding a better one. With plenty of choices in a seemingly wide-open market, the emphasis shifts to searching for a better option rather than transforming yourself to be satisfied with something that is good enough and becomes better through your own efforts.

I've mentioned several of the features of contemporary individualised societies that make it more challenging to regularly enter a contented state: consumerism, competitiveness, unforgiving criminal justice systems, continual interruptions and excessive choice. These features discourage some of the practices that foster happiness, but it's still possible for individuals to achieve a happy life and to adopt personal practices that foster it. For some, this means opting out of the rat-race, for example finding a satisfying occupation, perhaps lower-paying, away from the frantic pace of urban living. For others, it means learning a new way of dealing with the pressures of typical life.

<sup>35</sup> Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004).

However, the point here is that the onus is on the individual to find a way of achieving happiness, and even for those who try there are many temptations to divert efforts. The result is that acquiring happiness habits can be quite difficult.

If the goal is greater happiness for everyone, then it makes sense to act on two fronts, namely for individuals to adopt happiness habits and for individuals and groups to pursue social changes that make it easier to develop happiness habits. This is a very big topic so I'll just give a few ideas.

People overall will be happier if income levels are more equal. That's because bringing poor people out of poverty will improve their happiness levels quite a bit, whereas lowering the income of the extremely wealthy won't make very much difference to their happiness. In fact, they might end up being happier in a more equal society.<sup>36</sup> So the goal should be greater equality. This can be pursued on various fronts. One approach is to help those who are worse off, for example alleviating homelessness and giving greater support for people with mental illness and intellectual disability. Another approach is to provide more facilities available to everyone such as low-cost public transport, parks, museums, neighbourhood centres, music clubs and a range of venues where people can gather to pursue activities that are challenging but not overwhelming at their

<sup>36</sup> See for example Alberto Alesina, Rafael Di Tella and Robert MacCulloch, "Inequality and happiness: are Europeans and Americans different?" *Journal of Public Economics*, 88, 2004, 2009–2042; Robert H. Frank, *Falling Behind: How Rising Inequality Harms the Middle Class* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007); Johannes Schwarze and Marco Härpfer, "Are people inequality averse, and do they prefer redistribution by the state? Evidence from German longitudinal data on life satisfaction," *Journal of Socio-Economics*, 36, 2007, 233–249.

competence levels. Yet another approach is to promote building designs that foster community interaction and mutual help, for example co-housing, as developed in Denmark and adopted elsewhere, in which people live in complexes with small private rooms and extensive collective areas for eating, child care and socialising.<sup>37</sup>

It's also possible to promote social rituals that foster happiness. Some holidays are ostensibly about gratitude, for example Thanksgiving in the US, but have been so highly commercialised that they have been divested of nearly all content. Rather than concentrate gratitude in occasional big events, it would be better to promote regular small occasions.

The slow food movement aims to encourage people to take time in preparing meals and eating them. Slow food is the embodiment of savouring, something that is discouraged through fast food. The slow movement applies this approach to a wide range of activities.<sup>38</sup>

If promoting happiness becomes a social goal, it has innumerable implications for the way society is organised and runs. I've mentioned a few. This isn't only an issue of policy for governments but rather a matter for everyone.

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37 Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett, with Ellen Hertzman, *Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves*, 2d ed. (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 1994).

38 On the slow movement, see Carl Honoré, *In Praise of Slow: How a Worldwide Movement Is Challenging the Cult of Speed* (London: Orion, 2004).

## Social action

As well as spelling out happiness-promoting alternatives, such as greater equality, it's also essential to think about how to promote them. This is a big task.

One way forward has been well laid out by social movements, such as the peace, labour, feminist and environmental movements. They have been campaigning for decades. Activists know an incredible amount about analysing problems, presenting arguments, getting messages to audiences, building organisations, holding meetings, finding allies, developing strategies, and organising actions such as rallies, strikes and boycotts.<sup>39</sup>

In fact, some of these movements are part of the quest for greater happiness. For many decades, peace movements have campaigned against war, which is a major source of sorrow and angst. The labour movement, when it pushes to help those in greatest need — workers receiving extremely low wages or suffering abuse on the job — helps bring people out of poverty, counter exploitation and give workers dignity, thereby increasing overall happiness. (On the other hand, when labour organisations mainly look after well-paid members and neglect the unemployed or non-unionised sectors of the economy, they do not address key areas of unhappiness.)

Campaigners for social change that fosters happiness habits can work in alliance with other movements. They can also learn a lot from the experience of movement activists. But happiness itself seems an unlikely basis for a social movement of the

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39 For example, Saul D. Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals* (New York: Random House, 1971); Virginia Coover, Ellen Deacon, Charles Esser and Christopher Moore, *Resource Manual for a Living Revolution* (Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers, 1981); Randy Shaw, *The Activist's Handbook: A Primer* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001).

traditional sort. The usual rationale for a movement is opposition to a problem such as war, exploitation of workers, male domination or environmental degradation. Given the presence of social evils, a movement promoting a good thing such as happiness may seem self-indulgent, perhaps even a misdirected effort when social problems are so pressing.

In this context, pro-happiness movements have three things to contribute. Firstly, promotion of happiness is likely to bring more people into traditional movements. One of the key elements of happiness is helping others. When people realise that helping is a greater source of satisfaction than acquiring goods or status, they are more likely to join organisations or choose careers that allow helping on a sustained basis. This could be a welfare organisation or it could be a campaigning organisation concerned about refugees, homelessness, people with disabilities, or any number of worthy causes. One possibility is becoming an activist in a social movement. Promotion of happiness as a social goal thus is likely to swell the numbers of activists in movements.

Secondly, happiness promotion requires rethinking goals. Established labour organisations, for example, have devoted a great amount of their effort to gaining increased salaries, including for workers who are already well off. Taking on board insights from happiness research, a labour activist might well suggest redirecting effort towards greater equality, including support for those outside the labour force, increases in wages for those in the lowest-paid jobs, a focus on conditions rather than wages for those already reasonably well off, and designing work to foster flow.

Thirdly, ideas from happiness research can be used to develop what might be called happy activism. This would be a change from the standard approach in many social movements.

Activists aspire to a better world. They want to challenge and, if possible, eliminate poverty, exploitation, war and other social problems. Most movements are oriented negatively: they are against something. The peace movement, for example, despite its name, is principally an antiwar movement, with protests against nuclear weapons, particular wars, arms manufacture and so forth. There is a lot more activity — at least in the most visible part of the movement — against the problem of war than in creating a more peaceful world in places where there aren't any wars.

A lot of campaigning is negative in orientation, emphasising the problems: “There are no winners in nuclear war”; “thousands of children are killed and maimed by land mines every year.” With these negative messages, it's natural for activists to adopt a serious tone. Activism can come across as a grim business. Where is the fun?

Happy activism is an alternative.<sup>40</sup> Rather than wait to be happy until after the social problem is fixed — which may be never, or at least many decades hence — the idea is to live the sort of future being sought, which includes being happy in campaigning. That means making activities fun, being more oriented to positive outcomes than the current dire situation, and adopting an optimistic mindset.

Many activists are driven by anger. They are outraged by injustice and want to do something about it, often by blaming those they see as responsible. A happiness-driven activist would instead draw on and seek to develop different psychic resources, including gratitude, mindfulness, optimism and a commitment to helping others.

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<sup>40</sup> I thank Sharon Callaghan, Karen Kennedy and Yasmin Rittau for valuable discussions on this topic.

An antiwar activist who cultivates gratitude might seem disrespectful to all the people killed and maimed in the operation of the war system. But gratitude can be a tool for more effective action. What is there to be thankful for? To start, there are other committed activists, past and present. There are successes in campaigns, however minor. There are absences, such as no nuclear attacks since 1945. There are harmonious relations in many communities around the world. By focusing on what there is to be thankful for, it's possible to gain ideas about building the movement, for example thinking of what sustains commitment and how campaign successes were achieved.

An orientation to happiness in campaigning should make activist groups more attractive — others will want to be involved. Some activists do this already: they focus on positive alternatives, design activities that will be satisfying for everyone and make their meetings and interactions a joy.

## Summary

The strange thing about happiness is that nearly everyone desires it but so many people are misguided in the way they pursue it, continuing to seek it in the same ways despite repeated failures. This is most obvious with money: most people think more money will make them happier although research shows extra money will have only a small effect, at least when you have enough to start with.

More generally, people pursue happiness through external things like possessions, holidays, awards and entertainment. However, research shows that the biggest increases in happiness can be achieved by changing thinking and behaviour. Some of the valuable mental states are gratitude, forgiveness, optimism, flow and mindfulness. Achieving these states is not quick and easy: practice is needed to develop and maintain mental habits.

Likewise, happiness-promoting behaviours, such as fostering relationships and helping others, require practice.

If sustained happiness is based on habits in thinking and behaving, then what are the ways to promote the habit? For the individual, there are several important ways.

**Awareness** You need to be aware of what really makes you happy. Continually bringing these things to your conscious mind helps cement your habits.

**Valuing** You need to value what really makes you happy. This sounds obvious enough, but many people dismiss meditation or savouring because they seem to clash with cultural norms.

**Understanding** You need to understand what really makes you happy. This helps you to identify temptations and false claims and respond effectively. For example, if you understand the process of adaptation, you're better prepared to make wise choices.

**Endorsement** When people whose opinion is important to you support things that really make you happy, you're more likely to maintain happiness habits. This could be peers you respect or a prominent authority figure.

**Action** You need to do the things that make you happy. This is the most important step in developing and maintaining a happiness habit.

This all seems straightforward, but there's a major obstacle: the way the world is organised. It's harder to be satisfied with what you have when you're bombarded with advertisements cleverly designed to make you dissatisfied unless you purchase some

product or service. It's harder to practise forgiveness when ritual events — like crime reporting — foster a sense of grievance.

So promotion of happiness requires action at two levels: the individual level and the social level. Not that these are independent: every step you take to develop gratitude or optimism has some effect on those around you, while some campaigns, for example for humane treatment of prisoners, have direct effects on individuals.

Happiness research has mainly focussed on the individual level. Taken seriously, it has some radical implications and can lead to people dropping out of the rat-race and choosing a different lifestyle. But these changes will affect relatively few unless there are some big changes in the way the economy, the political system and social life are organised.

If big changes are going to occur in the way society is organised, this will require a lot of time and effort. At the campaigning level, the same five ways are relevant: awareness, valuing, understanding, endorsement and action.

Social change is a topic much wider than happiness research. Nevertheless, there are few things that an orientation to happiness can bring to activism. One of them is the idea of happy activism, namely making campaigning a joyful process, something lots of people will want to join and that will help achieve its goals through the means of pursuing them.

## **Appendix**

### **Ehrenreich's critique of happiness promotion**

Before getting carried away with happiness as the ultimate goal, it's worth looking at contrary arguments. A good place to start is Barbara Ehrenreich's book *Bright-sided: How the Relentless*

*Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America.*<sup>41</sup> Ehrenreich is the acclaimed author of more than a dozen books, most famously *Nickel and Dimed*, in which she reports on working in several low-paying jobs to reveal the hardships of those on a minimum wage in the US. She is a long-time critic of social inequality and exploitation.

In *Bright-sided*, she targets the positive thinking movement in the US, illustrating how it ends up blaming the victims of the political and economic system for their own failures. She examines positive thinking in several domains: cancer treatment, in which optimism is virtually mandated as an aid to survival; business, in which retrenched workers are exhorted to be positive about their futures (and not blame their former employers); religion, when material success replaces obedience and good works as a road to salvation; and positive psychology, the science of happiness.

I read *Bright-sided* after completing the first draft of this chapter, so I was eager to discover how Ehrenreich — whose writings I first encountered and respected in the 1970s — would tackle the positive psychology movement. Conveniently, her central target is none other than Martin Seligman, whose book *Authentic Happiness* I used as a launching point for the themes in this chapter.

Ehrenreich and I have approached Seligman in rather different ways. She begins by recounting his election as president of the American Psychological Association, a platform from which he promoted positive psychology. She obtained an interview with Seligman, but was frustrated by his behaviour: instead of talking in his office, he took her to a museum and

<sup>41</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, *Bright-sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009).

interrupted their time together by various promotional activities, such as a phone call to schedule an interview. In Ehrenreich's eyes, Seligman comes across more as a preoccupied prima donna than as either a hard-nosed scientist or a contented practitioner of his own recommendations about happiness. Ehrenreich also tells of Seligman's conservative politics and consulting work for business, seemingly at odds with his emphasis on positive thinking rather than material success as a road to happiness.

In *Bright-sided*, Ehrenreich is highly critical of the excessive promotion of positive thinking, especially when it serves to distract from a realistic understanding of problems and to discourage collective action to address them. So in addressing positive psychology, she is especially critical of researchers when they cross the line from objective assessment of the evidence and become uncritical boosters of the virtues of happiness. Anything smacking of hucksterism is suspect in her eyes. As a prime target she scrutinises claims that happiness contributes to better health and longevity, picking flaws in several studies.

I am sympathetic with Ehrenreich's criticism of exaggerated claims that go beyond the research findings concerning happiness. But this is hardly a special sin of positive psychology. Scientists in all sorts of fields regularly tout their findings as breakthroughs as a tool for obtaining more research funding. Great advances in the study of cancer have been announced for decades. Within psychology itself, hype for findings is routine, including in the mainstream research what can be called "negative psychology," namely the study of how to bring people in negative states, like depression and anxiety, closer to normal. In the US, television viewers can watch lengthy advertisements for prescription antidepressants. So far, there's no equivalent promotion of positive psychology.

In one of my articles, "Scientific fraud and the power structure of science," I included deceptive promotion of research findings as a type of fraud — but one so commonplace that it is not normally classified as fraud.<sup>42</sup> It is convenient to scientific elites to treat this sort of hype as normal while stigmatising a few narrow behaviours, such as altering data, as fraud. Ehrenreich has not shown that positive psychologists have engaged in exaggerated promotion any more than other scientists — though this is hardly to excuse such promotion.

Ehrenreich criticises Seligman's formula  $H = S + C + V$ , in which H, happiness, is the sum of S, an individual's set point, C, the particular circumstances of a person's life, and V, factors under voluntary control. She says H cannot be a simple sum of the three variables S, C and V, but is instead a more complex function of S, C and V, which should be written  $H = f(S, C, V)$ . Of course she is correct. When I saw Seligman's formula in *Authentic Happiness*, I assumed it was illustrative rather than literal. Anyone familiar with science would readily see that the formula cannot be additive, especially given that Seligman does not begin to operationalise any of the factors, namely show how they can be measured. Ehrenreich is technically correct in her criticism, but I don't think it says much about positive psychology.

More important is Ehrenreich's critique of claims that happiness leads to improved health and longevity. She examines several studies, pointing out limitations. However, I would question Ehrenreich's initial statement that "The central claim of positive psychology, as of positive thinking generally, is that happiness — or optimism, positive emotions, positive affect, or positive *something* — is not only desirable in and of itself but

<sup>42</sup> Brian Martin, "Scientific fraud and the power structure of science," *Prometheus*, 10(1), June 1992, 83–98.

actually useful, leading to better health and greater success.”<sup>43</sup> That is not how I read the research on happiness. Most authors see happiness as the key goal. Better health and greater success might be spin-offs, but they are hardly the main purpose. Seligman, for example, says that the objective state of one’s health has relatively little effect on one’s happiness, but the way you think about your health has a significant effect. He is more concerned about the effect of health on happiness than the effect of happiness on health.

More generally, what is the point of being successful — career, wealth, fame, accomplishments — without happiness? The positive psychology movement is more about psychological states as ends in themselves than as means to some other goal.

Key areas in positive psychology — a few of which I discussed in this chapter — deal with thinking about the past, present and future. An example is the role of gratitude in happiness, including how fostering gratitude can increase happiness. Ehrenreich does not address this research and therefore, as I see it, has missed the crucial core of positive psychology.

Where Ehrenreich hits the mark is in criticising the individualistic orientation of positive psychology, and the resulting bias in favour of adjusting to current social conditions rather than challenging and changing them: “Like pop positive thinking, positive psychology attends almost solely to the changes a person can make internally by adjusting his or her own outlook.”<sup>44</sup> This is precisely my view. However, an orientation to the individual is not inherent in the findings of happiness research but may simply reflect contingencies, in

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43 Ehrenreich, *Bright-sided*, 158–159.

44 *Ibid.*, 171.

particular the individualistic orientation of psychology more generally. Ehrenreich might just as well criticise negative psychology for treating depression as a defect solely of the individual, ignoring the role of social arrangements.

Ehrenreich treats Seligman as the personification of positive psychology, or at least as the prime illustration. Following the quote above, she states:

Seligman himself explicitly rejects social change, writing of the role of “circumstances” in determining human happiness: “The good news about circumstances is that some do change happiness for the better. The bad news is that changing these circumstances is usually impractical and expensive.” This argument — “impractical and expensive” — has of course been used against almost every progressive reform from the abolition of slavery to pay equity for women.<sup>45</sup>

Rather than throwing out positive psychology because of a Seligman-style dismissal of social change, I think it is more productive to make a different interpretation of positive psychology or, in other words, to draw different implications from its findings. Firstly, Seligman focuses solely on large-scale circumstances; it is quite possible for individuals to change their own circumstances, to some degree, to foster their own happiness.

Secondly, Ehrenreich ignores a key research finding, that helping others can be a great source of lasting satisfaction. Helping others can occur at the individual level, such as helping someone across the street, but also at the collective level, through organisations such as Amnesty International or social movements such as the labour or feminist movements. Partici-

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45 *Ibid.*

pating in a movement for social betterment can be rewarding in itself as well as helping change the circumstances that affect many people's lives and therefore their happiness.

Thirdly, Seligman's statement that "changing these circumstances is usually impractical and expensive" is correct only on the individual level: for an individual to end a war, single-handed, is indeed impractical and expensive. But Seligman's statement is incorrect at the collective level: when large numbers of people combine their efforts to change circumstances, a good outcome is far more feasible and the per-person costs are minimised. That is the experience in numerous countries where popular nonviolent action has overthrown repressive regimes.<sup>46</sup>

Ehrenreich's critique of positive thinking would, in my opinion, be better formulated as a critique of positive thinking in service of the establishment. Towards the conclusion of *Bright-sided*, she says

Over the last couple of decades, as icebergs sank and levels of debt mounted, dissidents from the prevailing positive-thinking consensus were isolated, mocked, or urged to overcome their perverse attachment to negative thoughts. Within the United States, any talk of intractable problems like poverty could be dismissed as a denial of America's greatness. Any complaints of economic violence could be derided as the "whining" of self-selected victims.<sup>47</sup>

Ehrenreich is really complaining about the way powerful and wealthy interests have turned positive thinking into a tool for maintaining their privileges, so that being positive is synony-

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<sup>46</sup> Peter Ackerman and Jack DuVall, *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

<sup>47</sup> Ehrenreich, *Bright-sided*, 201.

mous with accepting the system and trying to adapt to it. However, this connection between positive thinking and power isn't inherent in positive thinking. It's just as possible to be positive about workers, women and the disadvantaged and to be positive about efforts by trade unions, feminists, environmentalists and other social movements.

Ehrenreich might be right that "realism" is needed, namely objective thinking rather than positive thinking. However, it is hardly realistic to think about eradicating war or world poverty. Positive thinking can play a valuable role when harnessed to efforts for social change. Perhaps, given the long-standing connection between positive thinking and defence of the status quo, it might be better to use a different word, such as commitment or dedication. There could, though, be a perverse delight in adopting the idea of positive thinking to radical ends.