

It is possible to be happier, but not for the reasons you may think

Re-reading Sonja Lyubomirsky's *'The How of Happiness'* I was reminded of the evidence that to be happier, we should look to ourselves, not to others, nor to our circumstances [1].

It is possible, and desirable, for each of us to be happier. Here's why and how.

The nature of happiness

First, we need to understand the nature of happiness and why happiness is important.

Happiness has been intensively researched and some really useful books and videos are available on for those wanting to delve deeper. Martin Seligman [2] is the authority best known in Australia through his work in this country and his book, *Authentic Happiness*. Professor Ed Diener's *Happiness: Unlocking the Mysteries of Psychological Wealth* is another recent and very readable text.

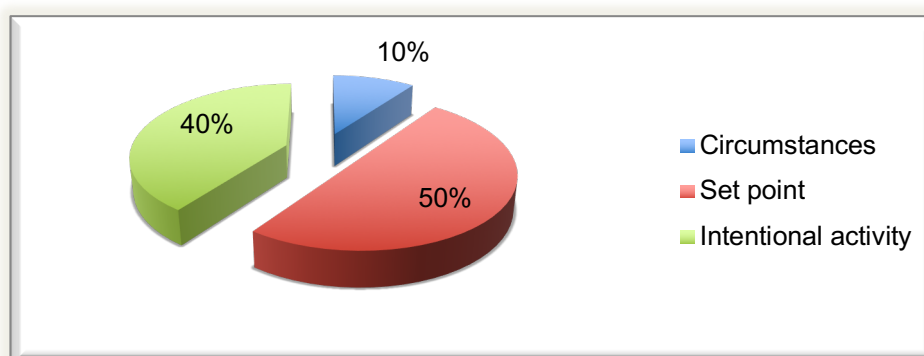
Happiness is a sense of 'subjective well-being' about life in which one experiences more positive than negative emotions. It has three parts: pleasure, engagement, and meaning. Pleasure is about 'feeling good'. Engagement is about living a 'good life' involving work, family, friends, and other interests. And meaning comes from using our talents to contribute to a higher purpose. Of the three, Martin Seligman believes that engagement and meaning contribute the most to our happiness.

It may seem self-evident, but is worth remembering that happiness contributes to our ability to cope with stress, it broadens our outlook on life and enables us to explore the world, and it bolsters our resilience. Being happy is good for you.

Sources of happiness

Too many of us look in vain for greater happiness in our external environment, in other words outside ourselves. How often have you said to yourself 'If only I had more time, more money, a more understanding boss, more diligent children, a more interesting job'? The list goes on. We have all made these mental wish lists for ourselves and heard them from others.

If you believe you can find more happiness in ways like these, then you're going to be disappointed as you read on. Attaining these things will *not* make you happier. You are looking in the wrong places. What changes in our circumstances we tend to believe will make a big difference to our happiness, will not. And in searching for them we are overlooking the true sources of substantial improvements in our happiness.



The accompanying chart is based on research by Sonja Lyubomirsky and her colleagues [1]. It shows that half of our happiness is innate, that is we are born this way; this 50% is known as the set point. For some the set point is high and for others, low. We can't change our set point. Only

10% of our happiness is circumstantial; that is the external things cited above that contribute to a very small proportion of our happiness. And therefore seeking to change one or more of them makes very little difference. The real difference to your level of happiness lies in how you manage the 'intentional activity', as the accompanying chart shows. 'Intentional activity' contributes 40% of your happiness – it is the part that you control.

The key take-out from the research is this. You can be happier. It's up to you.

You can be happier

Here is a list of strategies you can work on that will contribute positively to your happiness. These are intentional activities in the 40% of your happiness that you control and they include the following. The ideas are based on chapters in *The How of Happiness* by Sonja Lyubomirsky.

- Practising being grateful and thinking positively. In *Paradise Lost* John Milton wrote '*The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.*' You can transform your life by deliberately finding things to be glad about and by not sweating the small stuff.
- Investing in social connections. Research shows happy people have better social relationships than those who are less happy. By investing in others through being kind, giving and by nurturing relationships you build social capital and are repaid with belonging to groups, friendship, and the gratitude of those you help.
- Consciously managing stress and hardship. Stress, crisis and adversity are inevitable in life. How we manage with these events determines our level of happiness. Learning deliberate coping mechanisms and being able to forgive are keys to dealing constructively with the hand life sometimes deals you.
- Living in the present. I remember a cartoon in my father's *New Yorker* magazine. The first of the three panels shows a man at work dreaming of being on the golf course. The second shows him on the fairway fantasising about having sex. And the third panel portrays him in bed with a woman thinking about work. Too many of us don't recognise the fact that the only life we live is in the moment. The past has passed. And the future hasn't arrived.
- Pursuing your own goals. People who strive for something personally meaningful – whether running a marathon, reading *War and Peace*, or getting a promotion – are far happier than who do not have dreams and ambitions.
- Taking good care of your body and soul. Happiness is a by-product of how well you care for your body (diet, weight, exercise), your spirit (beliefs and faith), and mind (being intellectually stimulated).

Conclusion

'It's never too late to be what you might have been' wrote George Eliot, a pseudonym of Mary Ann Evans who died in 1880. So it is with happiness. If you have learned just one way to be happier, this post has achieved its purpose. I encourage you to re-read it, practise what you have learned, reflect and share your experience with others. Happiness is infectious.

[1] Lyubomirsky, S., Sheldon, K. M., and Schkade, D. (2005). Pursuing happiness: The architecture of sustainable change. *Review of General Psychology*, 9: 111-31.

[2] Watch this engaging video of Martin Seligman explaining the meaning and sources of happiness; it is well worth your time.

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