

The science of happiness

Being happy has always seemed like a good idea. But now science, with research to back it up, can finally show us how to get there.

By Marnell Jameson, Special to The Times

Los Angeles Times Monday September 8, 2008

Health

True or false:

___ I would be happier if I made more money, found the perfect mate, lost 10 pounds or moved to a new house.

___ Happiness is genetic. You can't change how happy you are any more than you can change how tall you are.

___ Success brings happiness.

Answers: False, false and false.

IF RECENT scientific research on happiness -- and there has been quite a bit -- has proved anything, it's that happiness is not a goal. It's a process. Although our tendency to be happy or not is partly inborn, it's also partly within our control. And, perhaps more surprising, happiness brings success, not the other way around. Though many people think happiness is elusive, scientists have actually pinned it down and know how to get it.

For years, many in the field of psychology saw the science of happiness as an oxymoron. "We got no respect," says Ed Diener, a professor of psychology at the University of Illinois, who began studying happiness in 1981. "Critics said you couldn't study happiness because you couldn't measure it." In the mid-1990s, he and a few other researchers started to prove the naysayers wrong. As a result, Americans now have an abundance of consumer books, academic articles, journals and associations to help them find happiness.

"Many of us have material things and our basic needs met, so we are looking for what comes after that," says Diener, co-author with his son, Robert Biswas-Diener, of the forthcoming "Happiness: Unlocking the Mysteries of Psychological Wealth."

"Materialism isn't bad. It's only bad if we use it to replace other things in life like meaningful work, a good marriage, kids and friends. People are recognizing that those who make money more important than love have lower levels of life satisfaction."

In recent months, the following titles have hit bookstore shelves: "What Happy Women Know," "The Happiness Trap," "The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want" and "Happiness for Two."

Christine Cardone, executive editor of psychology books for Wiley-Blackwell, whose titles include Diener's forthcoming book, points to 2000 as the tipping point: Happiness science began to mushroom and flood society with new, positive ways of thinking. That year, Martin Seligman, then-president of the American Psychological Assn., started the positive psychology movement, which focuses on what makes people mentally healthy. That concept got out to the media, spawning more interest and research. Meanwhile, neuroscientists were discovering better ways to measure what's going on in the brain.

"Popular interest in happiness is only one driver," says Seligman, a psychology professor at the University of Pennsylvania and director of the Positive Psychology Center there. "The books are coming out because the science is coming out." Academic publications have enjoyed a similar boon. Between 1980 and 1985, only 2,125 articles were published on happiness, compared with 10,553 on depression. From 2000 to 2005, the number of articles on happiness increased sixteenfold to 35,069, while articles on depression numbered 80,161. From 2006 to present, just over 2 1/2 years, a search found 27,335 articles on happiness, more than half the 53,092 found on depression.

The field of happiness also now has its own publications -- the Journal of Positive Psychology and the Journal of Happiness Studies -- and its own professional organization, which Diener started last year. The International Positive Psychology Assn. for academics and scholars already has 3,500 members.

The trend shows no signs of slowing. Sonja Lyubomirsky, a professor of psychology at UC Riverside and author of "The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want," believes that's because happiness is like the Holy Grail. "People around the world want it. If you ask people what they want for their children, they'll say for them to be happy. It's in our Declaration of Independence. It matters to and affects everyone."

Among the major findings of the last decade is that the pursuit of happiness is a worthy cause, Diener says. "Happiness doesn't just feel good. It's good for you and for society. Happy people are more successful, have better relationships, are healthier and live longer."

Seligman adds, "We've learned in 10 years that happy people are more productive at work, learn more in school, get promoted more, are more creative and are liked more."

And if that doesn't make you happy, here's more happy news: Around the world, happiness is on the rise.

Beyond your genes

Great if you happen to be one of the people born happy, right? Not exactly. Another major finding is that about half of our tendency toward happiness is genetic, while the rest is controlled by the individual.

Lyubomirsky and her colleagues analyzed studies on identical twins and other research and came to the conclusion that happiness is 50% genetic, 40% intentional and 10% circumstantial. "Half of your predisposition toward happiness you can't change," she says. "It's in your genes. Your circumstances -- where you live, your health, your work, your marriage -- can be tough to change. But most people are surprised that circumstances don't account for as much of their happiness as they think."

Life circumstances don't result in sustained happiness, she said, because we adapt. That new car, promotion or house feels great at first. Then we get used to it. An old but often-cited study found lottery winners were no happier than control groups after a year. That doesn't mean that getting out of a bad job or a terrible marriage won't give your happiness a boost. But sustaining that good feeling requires something else: deliberate control of how you act and think. That's the 40% intentional part that Lyubomirsky and others are most interested in.

In her research, Lyubomirsky led controlled studies to determine what behaviors positively affect happiness, and has come up with at least 12 strategies that measurably increase levels. For instance, one strategy she's tested is the practice of gratitude. In her gratitude study, she had a group of 57 subjects express gratitude once a week in a journal. A second group of 58 expressed gratitude in a journal three times a week. And a control group of 32 did nothing. At the end of six weeks, she retested all three groups and found a significant increase in happiness in the first one. (The participants who journaled three times a week showed less change, perhaps because the exercise didn't feel as fresh, she theorized.)

She and other researchers also recommend practicing forgiveness, savoring positive moments and becoming more involved in your church, synagogue or religious organization. "Not every strategy fits everyone," she says. "People need to try a few to find which ones work."

Happiness defined

Although Lyubomirsky likes to let people define happiness for themselves, clinically, she describes it as "a combination of frequent positive emotions, plus the sense that your life is good."

Seligman, who has written several books on the subject, including the bestselling "Authentic Happiness," says it's the pursuit of engaging and meaningful activities. By engaging, he means being in a state of flow or "at one with the music." You get so absorbed in what you're doing that you lose track of time. But one person's flow is another person's torture. What puts you in a state of flow is usually an activity that uses your strengths and talents. It's even better when it's part of your work.

"Meaningful" would be using what you're best at to serve others or to participate in a cause that's bigger than yourself. (To find out what you're good at, or your strengths, Seligman offers a free survey on his website, www.authentic happiness.org)

"Your purpose doesn't have to be giant," says Dan Baker, a psychologist who founded the life enhancement program at Canyon Ranch in Tucson and is the author of "What Happy Women Know." "If you're 17, your purpose can be getting into the college of your choice. When you're a parent, it can be getting your kids off to school safely and prepared for each day. You don't have to adopt a Romanian orphan or build a church in Chile."

What happiness isn't, Diener adds, is getting everything right in your life. "A man might think, 'If I get the right education, the right job and the right wife, I'll be happy.' But that's not how it works. For instance, once basic needs are met, the effects of income on happiness get smaller and smaller. That's because happiness lies in the way you live and look at the world.

"If you have no goal other than your personal happiness, you'll never achieve it. If you want to be happy, pursue something else vigorously and happiness will catch up with you."

External factors

Although happiness is largely up to the individual, new research shows that what's going on around you -- specifically how much personal freedom you have -- also plays a role.

In a paper published in the July issue of *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, lead researcher Ronald Inglehart, a professor of political science at the University of Michigan, refuted the long-held belief that happiness among societies is constant. His research concluded that significant and enduring changes in happiness can occur not only for individuals, but also for entire societies.

The study, which Seligman calls the best he's seen on happiness in five years, analyzed polls taken from 1981 to 2007 by the World Values Survey. The surveys consisted of 88 countries containing 90% of the world's population, and measured happiness and overall life satisfaction. Among the 52 countries that completed all the surveys over the 17-year period, happiness rose in 45 of them, or 86%. In six countries, it declined, and in one (Australia), levels showed no change. Overall, happiness increased 6.8 percentage points.

Inglehart credits economic development, democratization and increasing social tolerance for the happiness bump. Economic gains that bring more food, clothing, shelter, medical care and longer life can result in a substantial increase in subjective well-being for poor

societies, he says.

But once a society reaches a certain threshold, further economic growth brings only minimal gains. Among the richest societies, increases in income are only weakly linked with higher levels of subjective well-being.

While economic growth helps promote happiness for some, democratization and rising social tolerance contribute even more. Democracy provides more choice, which promotes happiness. Support for gender equality and tolerance of people who are different from oneself are also strongly linked, not just because tolerant people are happier, but because living in a tolerant society enhances everyone's freedom, Inglehart says.

The fact that happiness and our understanding of it are on the rise bode well. "In the future, more people will understand the nature of happiness and its process," Baker says. "They will understand that they have to take an active role if they want it."

Apparently, more people around the world are getting that message. "It's true," Seligman says. "We're happier. And more happiness in the world is a great thing."