

10. *Being Happy*

We spent a long time with death; now let's take a break and consider happiness. Choose an answer to this question:

Taking your life as a whole to this point, would you say that you are:

- a. Very happy.
- b. Somewhat happy.
- c. Not very happy.

Social psychologists have been asking questions like this of people for decades. Literally hundreds of thousands of people, randomly selected, in many nations, have answered this and more detailed questions. Their answers have been correlated with their answers to other questions of fact ("Are you married?" "How much money do you make?") and questions of attitude ("How well do you like your job?" "Do you feel in control of your life?").

When the psychologists analyze people's responses, the results sometimes confirm common wisdom (for example, money truly cannot buy happiness), but sometimes they contradict it (for example, the empty nest is often a happy nest). Out of all the analysis emerges a clear portrait of the happy person. Psychologists find they can reliably predict your answer to the question above based on the strength of four interrelated character traits. No external circumstances of life can predict the answer so well as these traits. Repeat, *no* external circumstance — not health, not age, not gender, not race, not physical beauty, not income, not country or place of residence, not job, not faith, not marital or parental status —

nothing predicts your answer to that question as reliably as the strength of four of your personal psychological traits.

There is good news and bad news in this. Good: it is possible to be happy no matter what circumstances you live in. Bad: changes in your circumstances, like more money or a better job, make little or no difference to your overall happiness. Bad: These personality traits that incline you toward or away from happiness are stable ones that normally persist over the decades, so if you are unhappy now, you are likely to stay that way. Good: Some schools of psychology emphatically claim that you can indeed change these traits, and teach how to do it.

In this chapter we will first survey the research on happiness. The research results clearly point to a number of practical strategies for being happier, and we examine many of them.

What's happiness?

There are at least four meanings to the word "happiness":

1. A pleasant, passing emotion that arises from immediate circumstances, for example being hugged by your lover, eating a chocolate, or finding money.
2. A pleasant feeling of anticipation: "Oh boy, tomorrow is Christmas."
3. A feeling of relief from stress and unpleasant feelings, as in "I'll be glad when this assignment is turned in," or "Good news, I don't have to go to the dentist today after all."
4. Retrospective satisfaction with a long-term situation: "We've had a pretty happy marriage," or "I'm happy in this job."

It is the fourth meaning that the psychologists try to study. It is called a "a pervasive sense of psychological well-being" in the literature¹. This is a reasonable choice. The first three kinds of happiness are fleeting. The second and third are set up by some preceding stress, so to create them you have to first create the stress. All these feelings are welcome when they come, but it wouldn't be practical to say "I want a life of more hugs, Christmas mornings, and cancelled dental appointments." However, it *is* practical to say, "I want a life such that, when I look back over it, I evaluate it as very satisfying."

Oddly enough, people's reports of this fourth kind of happiness turn out to be ridiculously flexible, easily influenced by their recent experiences of the first three. In one of the sneaky experiments of which psychologists are so fond, subjects were asked to make a copy of a document before they sat down to an interview. Some of the subjects found a small coin, apparently forgotten on the copy machine; others did not. During the interview, people who had just found a coin were significantly more likely to express satisfaction with their lives than those who did not! Other studies have found that people express greater life satisfaction on sunny days than on rainy ones².

This very flexibility suggests one general truth about happiness. Shortly we will see that our sense of well-being reflects a running balance between good things and bad things. These experiments show that the most recent events weigh most heavily on these scales. So it is not at all silly to say that, if we want to feel happy in a general sense, we should cultivate an appreciation of frequent, small pleasures. Simply making a habit of being aware of the small, available pleasures of daily life — arising in good health, meeting a friend, feeling sunshine — helps to tip our running account of life toward the happy side.

Are people's reports of their own happiness reliable? Besides pivoting in the wind of their recent experiences, people being interviewed tend to over-report the good and downplay the bad. Just the same, if you poll enough people, selected randomly, over a range of locations and times, their responses show reasonably stable statistics. And when you retest them, people's responses tend to be consistent over time. Besides, people who say they are happy often show signs of being happy:

They smile and laugh more during interviews. They have happier memories. They report more joy when their experience is sampled daily... their friends and family are more likely to see them as happy people.³

Very well, what makes happier people happy? And how do we get some?

Studying happiness

Here are some of the high points in the scientific study of happiness.

Happiness as a balance of feelings

One early milestone was that what people report as well-being or happiness is the net sum of two different sets of feelings, a set of positive feelings and a set of negative ones. An important second finding was that the sources of positive and negative “affect” (that is, feelings) are different, and are not related to each other:

...variations in negative affect are associated with difficulties in marriage and work adjustment, interpersonal tensions, and feelings of having a “nervous breakdown,” as well as with some of the more standard indicators of anxiety and worry. None of these variables, however, is related to positive affect.

...positive affect appears to be related to ... the degree to which an individual is involved in the environment around him, social contact, and active interest in the world ... such things as the degree of social participation, which is reflected in organizational membership, number of friends ... companionship with one’s spouse; and ... degree of variability in one’s life experiences...⁴

One confusion in this summary is that it mixes up external issues (“difficulties in marriage,” “number of friends”) with internal ones (“anxiety and worry,” “interest in the world”). The next milestone was to eliminate most of the influence of the external world. Costa and McCrea located the source of good and bad feelings in two clusters of personality traits:

Under the heading of E [extraversion] come sociability, warmth, involvement with people, social participation, and activity. Under N [neuroticism] come such characteristics as ego strength, guilt proneness, anxiety, psychosomatic concerns, and worry. Extraverted traits contribute to one’s positive enjoyment or satisfaction in life, although they do not generally appear to reduce the unpleasantness of adverse circumstances. Neurotic traits predispose one to suffer more acutely from one’s misfortunes, but they do not necessarily diminish one’s joy or pleasures.⁵

In this model, happiness is still the sum of good feelings and bad feelings, and the sources of the feelings are still separate, but now the feelings can be studied apart from the actual events that cause them. Each of us experiences a mix of good things and adversities.

Each of us reacts to these events with good feelings or bad ones. But people with strong extravertive traits extract more good feelings from good events. People with strong neurotic traits suffer more deeply from bad events. The strength of the traits determines the intensity of the good or bad reactions.

Consequences of happiness as a feeling balance

The revolutionary point in this is that both the overall intensity of our feelings and the balance point between good and bad feelings are more closely related to our personality traits than they are to the external circumstances of life. Happiness depends less on what happens than on how we feel about what happens.

If this is true, two things should follow. First, happiness should not change much when life circumstances change. That is just what was reported in a paper with the memorable title "Lottery winners and accident victims."⁶ Surveying the happiness of 22 winners of a state lottery and that of 29 people who had become paraplegics in recent accidents, the researchers found that the lottery winners were not significantly more happy, and the unfortunate accident victims were not a great deal less happy, than a set of matched control subjects. And the lottery winners got less satisfaction from ordinary pleasures of life.

If happiness is determined by personality, a second outcome should be that, because personality is relatively stable over time, people should report consistent levels of happiness after a long interval, without any regard to any changes in their lives during that time. That is just the result from a number of longitudinal studies.

We can predict future happiness far more accurately from measures of past happiness than from such significant life circumstances as marital status, sex, race, or age.⁷

In other words, there are happy people and unhappy people, and they tend to remain happy or unhappy throughout their lives, no matter what happens to them.

Personality traits of happiness

What are the personality traits that determine long-term happiness? The late Angus Campbell made a career of measuring the sense of

well-being. He identified two key personality traits. One was a sense of efficacy, or personal control; the second was self-esteem:

If we isolate that part of the population which expresses both a strong sense of personal control and a high level of satisfaction with self (about 15 percent of the total), we find that we have identified a group of people with extraordinarily positive feelings of well-being. Three out of five of these people describe themselves as "very happy," hardly any of them express themselves as dissatisfied with life in general, very few (4 percent) feel they have not received their reasonable share of happiness...⁸

Other studies isolated the balance of optimism versus pessimism as a key trait. David Myers, in his survey of happiness research⁹, settles on a list of four general traits:

- Extraversion: the tendency to be sociable and outgoing. Costa and McCrea included "warmth" and "vigor" in this heading.
- Self-esteem: the tendency to approve of yourself, to answer Yes to survey questions like "I am a loyal friend" or "People tend to like me."
- Efficacy: a belief that you can control the circumstances of your life, so you answer Yes to questions like "I usually achieve what I set out to do," or "An individual can affect some government decisions."
- Optimism: the tendency to see good events as likely to continue and to view bad events as temporary setbacks.

Now, I (who, I have to admit, have no psychological credentials whatever) see a kind of circularity in this list. It seems to me that these traits interact with each other, and it is not simple to separate them.

For example: If you are optimistic, when walking into a group of strangers you will expect to meet kindly people, and so will be ready to greet them openly and ready to make friends, in other words, to act like an extravert. If you are an extravert, you tend to have more friends and to get more public approvals, and as a result you will automatically think better of yourself than if you were an introvert. But if you think well of yourself you will naturally think you are skilled and likely to succeed in what you attempt, so you would naturally have a stronger sense of personal control. But if

you have a strong sense of personal control, you would of course tend to be optimistic about how things are going to work out.

In other words, it seems to me there might not be four distinct traits here; some of them might be the result of others. However many traits there are, it is clear that they interact in a positive way, sending the fortunate person who has them all into an upward spiral toward happiness. And the unlucky person who has the inverse traits of introversion, low self-esteem, helplessness, and pessimism is doomed to spiral into depression.

Optimism and pessimism

Martin Seligman made a specialty of the study of helplessness, depression, optimism and pessimism. He points to the fourth trait, optimism, as the one that is the key to happiness¹⁰.

Seligman analyzes pessimism and optimism this way. When any event, good or bad, happens to us, we tend to characterize it along three axes:

- Whether its effect is permanent and lasting, or transient and temporary.
- Whether its effect is pervasive, affecting many parts of our life, or limited, affecting only a specific situation.
- Whether the event is caused by our personal acts, or whether it is due to external causes and not rooted in ourselves.

When an adverse event happens, the pessimist interprets it as *permanent*, *pervasive*, and *personal*. The optimist, in contrast, sees an adverse event as *transient*, *limited*, and *external*.

Here is an example. You are hosting a party. Hurrying to serve your guests, you scoop up a tray of snacks and start into the room, trip, stumble, and scatter juicy stuffed mushrooms across the carpet and your guests' laps. How do you react?

A pessimist says (or thinks) things like: "Well, that ruins the evening" (permanent), "Everything always goes wrong" (pervasive), and "I am such a clumsy oaf" (personal).

An optimist thinks things like: "It'll take several minutes to mop this up, who else could serve the wine?" (temporary), "At least I didn't drop the shrimp cocktails" (limited), and "I caught my foot on that stupid throw rug" (external).

Just the reverse happens following a happy event. The pessimist thinks the good thing was transient and unlikely to recur, limited in scope, and due to external causes. The optimist, however, sees it as evidence that good times are going to continue (permanent), that they will spill over to the rest of life (pervasive) and that they are probably due to the optimist's own skill and hard work (personal). Seligman's book contains a test you can administer to yourself to learn how you score on these scales¹¹.

It seems at least plausible that people who are strongly optimistic would naturally tend to be extraverted (because they always expect other people to be friendly and helpful), to have high self-esteem (because they always credit good events to their personal qualities and bad ones to external causes), and to have a sense of personal control (because they expect their plans to work out, and when the plans don't, they blame the failure on external causes).

On the other hand, it could be that the inborn traits are extraversion and self-confidence, and that they result in an optimistic outlook. Let's just leave it that all four traits interact to support each other. Which means that working on your optimism/pessimism balance would be as good a starting point as any.

The limits of external factors

One of the most striking results of the study of happiness is that the actual circumstances of life make little difference to our sense of well-being. Here are some of the things that have been conclusively shown to have at most a weak correlation to happiness:

- Income (with an exception to be mentioned shortly). Richer people are no happier than poor ones, and people in wealthy nations are not necessarily happier than people in poorer nations.
- Age. Adolescents are not significantly less happy than the average; nor are the elderly. Properly-conducted studies find no evidence whatever for either a male mid-life crisis or a female empty-nest crisis.
- Race or social class. It is not true that disadvantaged minorities have lower self-esteem or happiness than the average.

- Gender. Men and women react to *unhappiness* in different ways (women more often with depression, men more often with violence or alcohol), but they report similar levels of happiness.
- Physical good looks. Handsomeness does not correlate to happiness, except among young women.
- Faith and religion. Freedman looked for this correlation specifically, and found:

Those who are religious are no happier than those who are not religious... Taken as a whole, there is no relationship between individual beliefs regarding the existence of God (and God's characteristics) and general happiness... we found no relationship between belief in an afterlife and general happiness.¹²

Money really doesn't matter

Money matters to happiness only in the following way: true poverty is hell, and almost always unhappy. By "true" poverty I mean an income so low that you cannot meet the basic needs of life: you cannot afford a secure place to sleep or to store your possessions, you cannot afford adequate food, adequate clothing, or needed medical care.

If you live in true poverty or on the edge of it, you are subject to constant, miserable stress. You aren't sure where you will sleep tonight, you need charity just to eat or clothe yourself, and so on. The stress of merely staying alive dominates your life. Everything conspires to hammer down your self-esteem. Everything works to prove you have no ability to control your life. If you are destitute, it is almost obscene to ask how "happy" you might be.

Raise your income to the level that meets the basic needs, so you have a secure place to live, enough to eat, adequate clothes and the ability to store them and launder them, and access to basic medical care. This is the condition of the great majority of American citizens. Beginning at this minimal level of income, and all the way up to the wealth of a professional ball-player, the amount of money you make does not correlate with the happiness you report. Furthermore, an increase in your income does not produce a matching increase in your happiness. A stark, obvious proof that increased affluence does

not produce increased happiness is right in front of us. Here is how David Myers expresses it (with his italics):

In 1957, the year John Galbraith was going to press with his famous book describing us as *The Affluent Society*, our per person income, expressed in today's dollars, was seventy-five hundred dollars. By 1990 it was over fifteen thousand, making us The Doubly Affluent Society... Compared to 1957, we now have twice as many cars per capita... and \$12 billion a year worth of brand-name athletic shoes. ... *We're twice as rich — not just 20 percent richer — yet we're no happier.* ... In fact, between 1956 and 1988, the percentage of Americans who reported they were "pretty well satisfied with your present financial situation" *dropped* from 42 to 30 percent.¹³

Could anything be clearer? A real and measurable increase in affluence did not create happiness — a decrease if anything. This is absolutely undeniable, yet it contradicts almost everyone's casual assumption. Quickly: what would make you happier? Odds are that even now, your first thought is "more money." *Wrong!* And there are two good reasons.

Adaptation levels

The reason that a raise in pay won't make you permanently happier is that your wonderfully flexible brain is designed to adapt to any change of condition. When a condition changes, our brains quickly reset our expectations to make the current situation the norm. This is "adaptation level theory," the idea that we continually *adapt* to label the existing *level* of any stimulus as the norm.

We can see this in all types of perception. It explains how we find it useful to keep our headlights on when driving at noon, yet can distinguish a faint star in a dark sky; or why our attention is drawn equally to a whisper in a silent room, or to a shout while crossing a busy street. Each is an incremental change above a local norm¹⁴.

It is built into us that what matters, what is worth focussing on, is a change from the current norm. It is also built into us that we are continually, and quite unconsciously, resetting the "norm-o-stat" to agree with current conditions. In any area, including income and social status, "what matters" is that things have changed. What is

not changing is the norm, and the norm is not worth noticing. This is how luxuries gained become necessities. And it explains why,

Even as we contemplate our satisfaction with a given accomplishment, the satisfaction fades, to be replaced finally by a new indifference and a new level of striving. This is, of course, a derivation from the fundamental postulate of adaptation level theory, namely, that the subjective experience of stimulus input is a function, not of the absolute level of that input but of the discrepancy between the input and past levels.¹⁵

Sliding standards

Various studies have shown that people's dissatisfaction with their income or status does not correlate with absolute income or social level. In other words, rich and poor are about equally likely to be satisfied or dissatisfied with what they have. Adaptation level theory explains some of this. The rest is explained by the fact that we do not judge our income or status on an absolute scale. We compare ourselves to three *relative* standards:

- People we take to be our peers.
- People a little above us on the ladder, who we hope to match.
- Our internal standard for how people our age ought to be doing.

The relativity of these standards explains how we could, as a society, become so much richer over the past 50 years and yet be no happier. We all got big-screen TVs, VCRs, and SUVs, and yet nothing changed, because we reset our standards of comparison to match. Everyone moved up together, so we still see the same relationship between ourselves and our peers and those better off than us.

If we are making less than our friends, or less than how much we think people of our age ought to be making, or if we aren't catching up with people who have a little more than we do, we get dissatisfied. That dissatisfaction can create bad feelings that feed into our overall balance of happiness. But getting a little more money will only ease that unhappiness temporarily; then it becomes a norm. And soon, our peers also move up, or we grow a little older and think we should be doing better, and we are dissatisfied once more.

This is why Brickman and Campbell dubbed adaptation to income as “the hedonic treadmill.” With adaptation levels and sliding standards, the only way you could maintain permanent satisfaction with income is to do the impossible: to continually increase your income without limit.

This permanent condition might be very bad news, but later I will share some thoughts on how the treadmill can be jammed.

Some factors do matter

Here are some factors that do correlate to happiness, although never as strongly as personality factors:

- Location. Campbell found a weak correlation with population density (the higher the density, the lower the happiness). There is little difference in happiness among the industrialized nations, although people in third-world countries are definitely less happy. Myers says that people in countries with a long history of democratic government average out slightly happier than people in countries with a history of instability¹⁶.
- Education level. The better-educated tend to be slightly happier.
- Occupation. People who are happy in their jobs tend to be happier overall.
- Marital status. Married people in general are happier than single or divorced people, and people who are happy with their marriages tend to be happiest of all.

It is interesting to speculate how these factors could relate to the happiness personality traits (but I have no sources for these speculations). Consider education level: Meeting the day-to-day challenges of classwork can only help your sense of personal control; and having a degree can only improve your self-esteem. Then, consider occupation: A satisfying job has many opportunities for socializing and for building self-esteem; and meeting the daily challenges of work contributes to a feeling of personal control.

As for marriage, we have already talked about how important your intimate family is to your health (“Intimate family” on page 35). Here we highlight your family’s importance to happiness.

Marriage, family, and friends are among the major contributors to the satisfaction of people’s need for relating,

and we find that satisfaction in these domains of life is affected very little by considerations of income, education, or other aspects of status.¹⁷

...a conclusion drawn from several large studies: Social support — feeling liked, affirmed, and encouraged by intimate friends and family — promotes both health and happiness.¹⁸

Myers is eloquent on the benefits of marriage, pointing out how in a good marriage you find a confidant, friend, supporter, and lover. In addition, marriage eases you into mastery of new social roles as spouse and parent. Success in taking on these roles helps build your sense of self-esteem and efficacy.

Building toward happiness

Has this discussion of happiness made you unhappy? Perhaps you responded to the question at the head of the chapter with “b. Somewhat happy” or even “c. not very happy.” If you did, everything that followed suggests that you are doomed by your personality to feel no happier, forever.

Wait! “Doomed?” “By your personality?” “Forever?” Why, that is precisely the pessimist’s view of adversity as pervasive, personal and permanent! Away with pessimistic thinking; let’s take the optimist’s view that bad things are transient and fixable. There are three general approaches: boosting the happiness traits, changing the balance of good and bad feelings, and jamming the hedonic treadmill.

Put on a happiness face

To recap, the four traits that strongly correlate with self-reported well-being are extraversion, self-esteem, efficacy, and optimism (“Personality traits of happiness” on page 173). They are not clearly separable, and it seems (at least to this layman) that an improvement in any one of them cannot help but feed into the other three.

Apply your creative imagination: what practical changes can you imagine making in your life that would make you stronger in any of these traits? Here are some possibilities¹⁹.

Exercise

Physical exercise nourishes all the happiness traits. If you set up and carry out an exercise plan, it gives you a sense of efficacy: You get daily proof that you can make plans and carry them out. The results of the exercise cannot help but improve how you feel about yourself. Learning in this intimate way that your body is capable of improvement boosts your optimism about the future. If you exercise with other people, you get chances to socialize and improve your extravertive abilities. At the least, you have a new subject of conversation.

Time management

Good time management supports efficacy and self-esteem. As with exercise, when you demonstrate your ability to set and meet deadlines on a daily and hourly basis, it improves your sense of efficacy and your self-esteem. One part of time management is breaking major goals down into small, doable sub-goals. This helps manage time, but it has the even more important result of giving you a constant flow of small successes to feed your sense of efficacy.

Another part of good time management is getting adequate sleep. Sleep deprivation is common in our culture, and it affects mood in negative ways.

Learning

Learning or improving any skill helps efficacy and self-esteem, and most learning situations put you in touch with new people, aiding extraversion. Learn photography; take up an instrument or join a chorus; take a course in astronomy or bird watching or web page design; join a hiking club; learn a new sport; take up any subject that remotely interests you. Or start a study, aiming toward becoming expert about anything: your town's history or your family's, local flora or fauna, civil war relics, dolls, Lhasa Apso dogs, stamps. Simply knowing a lot about anything raises your self-esteem, and the process of coming to know it feeds the sense of efficacy²⁰.

Volunteering

Involvement with other people makes extravertive behavior easier for a shy person, and volunteer activity is an easy way to get that involvement, as we already saw ("Volunteering" on page 40). Successful interactions with others improves your self-esteem.

Giving of yourself through volunteering makes you feel much better about yourself and your world, and contradicts feelings of helplessness.

Self-improvement

To conceive, plan, and carry out *any* intentional change in your life style is a powerful method of creating a sense of personal control and self-esteem. For example, at one point my wife and I, who were both then heavy smokers, decided as a couple to become nonsmokers. We got advice from a psychologist; we stocked up on nicotine gum (today it would be the nicotine patch), and on a selected day, we quit. Marian ritually smashed our biggest ashtray. And we haven't smoked since, except occasionally in dreams. It has been more than fifteen years, yet this still stands as a high point in our lives together and even now, recalling it gives satisfaction. Almost any positive change will do: you can make an intentional change in your diet, exercise, dwelling place, or occupation.

Shopping no recommended

There's one popular happiness technique that really can't be recommended. Some people, when something bad happens, try to compensate by buying things — "When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping." The relationship to the happiness traits is pretty plain: searching, comparing prices, choosing, and buying are all activities that make a person feel competent. Owning something new helps self-esteem. But compared to other techniques in this chapter, the cost is likely to be high for a small, temporary improvement. And getting (further) into debt is never a way to improve your happiness.

Psychological help

Recall how strongly the optimistic and pessimistic thinking patterns influence the other happiness traits. Do you tend to think like a pessimist, treating every aversive event as permanent, pervasive, and a personal failing? Or, have you have suffered from clinical depression? In either case, you might be able to benefit from a Cognitive Therapy approach to correcting negative patterns of thinking. Cognitive therapies focus on breaking habitual, negative, thought patterns and they aim at giving quick help without extended analysis²¹.

Changing the balance

Recall the analysis of happiness as the balance between good feelings and bad feelings. It is true that the feelings are primary in the happiness balance, and true that our personalities control the strengths of good and bad feelings. Nevertheless, those external events do exist and are to some extent in our control. You can look beyond your personality at the external triggers of good and bad feelings, and consider what you can do to increase the frequency of actual pleasant events in your life.

Many of the practical actions listed in the preceding section are also direct producers of good feelings. Exercise, for example: never mind what it does for your sense of efficacy or self-esteem; it feels good in the doing. It's a pleasure to make a schedule or a task list and a pleasure to check off the items on it. Getting a good night's sleep is a pleasure. Every step of learning or collecting is a small satisfaction.

Recall that your evaluation of your overall happiness is influenced by your recent, momentary experiences of pleasure or pain. With this in mind, a very practical way to improve your sense of well-being is to make a habit of collecting and valuing the transient pleasures of daily life in a mindful and deliberate way. Or, as Thich Nhat Hanh puts it,

When we have a toothache, we know that not having a toothache is happiness. But later, when we don't have a toothache, we don't treasure our non-toothache.²²

Do you have one of those digital watches that can be set to chirp on the hour? Set it to do that. Then, every time it chirps, look around and find something to appreciate or enjoy — even if it is no more than the pattern of sunlight on the carpet, or the fact that you are healthy, warm, and safe.

Jamming the hedonic treadmill

Dissatisfaction with income or status is a potent source of bad feelings. If you can control or eliminate this dissatisfaction, you can give your balance of feelings a healthy shove toward happiness.

Dissatisfaction usually comes from comparing our circumstances to relative standards: to our peers; to our notion of where people our age should be; and to people just above us on the ladder. As we have seen, this is deadly because such dissatisfaction can never be

cured. When we improve our standing a little, all those standards creep ahead to reopen the gap.

There can be only one answer: *change the standards*. But to attempt this is to enter a battle of epic scale. If you set out to change your standard of values, you will be like a character in a heroic fantasy, a lonely hero beset by powerful, amorphous forces. Yet, like a fantasy hero, you can call powerful allies to your side.

Beset by powerful forces

Consider: There are two huge industries that are totally dedicated to the single purpose of persuading us to accept standards that will leave us dissatisfied. The advertising industry comprises tens of thousands of bright, creative, industrious people who spend their working days figuring out ever more clever and subtle ways to make us *want stuff*. And the entertainment industry has battalions of energetic, talented people who know that what most entertains us: images of people living brighter, more exciting lives than we live.

The people in both of these industries would claim to be working for our benefit. But the inevitable outcome of their work is to school us in *how to evaluate our lives*. They supply us with colorful images of how people of our class or age ought to dress, act, eat, and drive, what kind of place we should live in, and how we should furnish it. Almost inevitably, that evaluation will leave us dissatisfied with our actual circumstances.

If we buy into these popular images — so convenient, so attractive — we automatically accept a dissatisfaction that, as we've seen, cannot be cured. We step onto the hedonic treadmill. But how can we detach from these standards, without also detaching from the comforts of our society, and from society itself? We admire the Amish their convictions; we don't envy their dowdy clothes, their hand tools, or their isolation.

Befriended by courageous allies

Popular culture is pervasive and powerful (oops, pessimistic words). Fortunately, like a fantasy hero going to war against vast evil, you can call on courageous allies. In this war, our allies are the people who, throughout history, have preached the value of

simplicity in life. One of the most eloquent American voices was Thoreau's:

Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind... None can be an impartial or wise observer of human life but from the vantage ground of what we should call voluntary poverty.

...the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run...²³

But Thoreau has descendants in modern life. Today, the "voluntary simplicity" movement has many eager advocates.²⁴

The findings of happiness research help us interpret the message from Thoreau and his modern counterparts. We get the same message from every advocate of simplicity: *We must replace our relative standards of comparison with absolute standards.*⁴

They all tell us to compare our circumstances, not to an ever-sliding relative standard, but to an absolute standard of human comfort. For example, learn not to ask "Is our house as good as the neighbors'?" and ask instead, "Is our house as safe, comfortable, and welcoming *as we need it to be?*" And of course, the same for the car, the salary, the clothes.

When we begin to judge our possessions by absolute standards, we learn, in Katy Butler's words,

...to sever the link
between consumption and happiness,
between consumption and self-worth.²⁵

And that puts sand in the gears of the hedonic treadmill.

There is freedom in this shift from relative to absolute standards! It brings freedom from having to purchase something only because other people have one and we don't want to be different or left out. It brings release from the pressure of striving for a standard of comfort invented by a script writer. It brings escape from the need to stay with a job because it has status. It brings relaxation from the pressure to own the things that properly express our personalities, in favor of owning the things that merely work.

There are more ways to seek happiness, but this is the first, the most radical, and the most difficult.

Summary

Happiness, defined as a pervasive sense of well-being, has been closely studied. It has been found to reflect a balance between the minute-to-minute flow of good and bad feelings, but these are strongly modulated by personality traits that are consistent over a person's life, the most important trait being optimism. There are lots of simple, practical strategies we can use to shift the balance of our emotions toward the side of well-being. The most revolutionary of these is to convert the unexamined, relative standards by which we judge our quality of life into deliberate, absolute standards; in short, to step off the treadmill of consumption.

