

## Book Review

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# The How of Happiness: A New Approach to Getting the Life You Want

Edited By :Sonja Lyubomirsky

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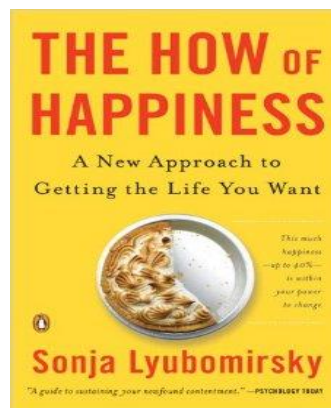
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### Overview

Sonja Lyubomirsky is a professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of California, Riverside and is a distinguished researcher in the field of Positive Psychology. The How of Happiness begins on a strong and assertive note. In just a few pages, Sonja Lyubomirsky convinces the reader that the book is not a self-help book and she emphatically describes the book as the brainchild of extensive scientific research in positive psychology with special regard to the area of happiness across many related dimensions (such as personality, genetic endowment, environmental factors, etc.). The emphasis of the book is on what one can do to get happier—that 40% of your happiness is in your control.

### Global impressions

Almost every assertion, conclusion, suggestion and prediction is backed by scientific findings and notes as well as references are provided for the same. The book is neatly organized into 3 sections and the roadmap for understanding the book's full potential is in the introduction.

Titles, headings, subheadings and strategically placed quotes make the reading experience engaging as well as help building a mnemonic for organizing the author's content.

The determinants of total happiness are

1. Set point i.e., genetic endowment (50%),
2. Circumstance (10%),
3. Intentional activity (40%).

That is, 40% of our happiness is in our capacity to create! Each activity described aims at boosting and bolstering happiness in this 40%. This is the basic tenet of the book.

The first section elucidates a few basic concepts and lays the groundwork for understanding later chapters. It starts with some intriguing cases of people at the extremes on the happiness continuum. Then, it turns to busting 3 widely accepted myths. To paint a clear picture, a test to calculate the reader's set point is included. The 'Person - activity fit diagnostic' tool helps in selecting the happiness activities for an individual to undertake as the reader begins the happiness increasing programme as suggested by the author. For those who feel they are unhappy, or even depressed, the book offers further instructions and a bonus chapter at the end.

The second section speaks about quantifying happiness (which yields a number right away) and lets the reader track his or her progress as the chapters unfold. This section also introduces strategies in which a person can work towards building a happier life. A total of 12 strategies are discussed with respect to implementing them efficiently and their likelihood of working well for the reader. At the end of each activity, other compatible strategies, which are likely to work for the reader, are listed.

The third section, which is the last one, takes a different turn and explains the mechanisms of *How* the previously described strategies would work. A total of five headings address the scientifically found reasons why such techniques work and explain the internal clock-work of sustainable happiness.

Catering to the needs of a cynic, the book justifies persuasively why happiness is important, what fringe benefits it entails and how most of us have learnt an incorrect approach to happiness. She maintains that happiness is not a pursuit or goal, it is a state of mind. Each strategy for happiness described comes with an explanation of its working and tonnes of supporting evidence. For stripping happiness off its socially (and falsely) attributed elements, she uses the more psychologically accurate term 'Subjective Well Being'. To quote John Mason Good, *'Happiness consists in activity. It is a running stream, not a stagnant pool.'*

### **The Strategies**

The 'Person - activity fit diagnostic' tool helps in selecting the happiness activities for an individual to undertake as the reader begins the happiness increasing programme as suggested by the author.

Eight ways for expressing gratitude are elaborately discussed with examples. The author shares that cultivating optimism enhances happiness by prompting us to engage in active and effective coping while acknowledging the reality and strive to grow from tough events. To avoid overthinking and social comparison is another strategy as overthinking could distort one's reality rather than providing insight.

The author has quoted writers, philosophers and religious thinkers claiming that kindness and helping others make individuals happy, as the focus shifts from themselves (and their problems) to others, thereby enhancing self-esteem. Acts of kindness can start from home, workplace or the community and one doesn't have to be Mother Teresa. Nurturing Social relationships serve many vital needs primarily, the provision of social support in times of stress, distress and trauma. The author has described ways of maintaining social relationships.

Turning to social support for comfort and contact in times of distress and trauma, is one of the most effective coping strategies that exist with scientific acclaim. Thinking about the times we were forgiven by others helps us develop empathy and forgiveness. This skill is a powerful strategy. Writing allows us to unburden ourselves through chronicling our emotions, thoughts and memories outside of ourselves. This allows us to move past our troubles and find new meaning.

The author speaks of a concept called 'flow' which is basically being enthralled by and actively engage in something with intense focus. And, the idea of savoring positive experiences from the past as well as generating new experiences. Continuous reinforcement of being in flow or savoring is intrinsically rewarding and can significantly increase happiness. The author also suggests that we should allow ourselves to truly admire an object of beauty or a display of talent, genius or virtue.

Pursuing goals adds structure and meaning to our daily lives. Having meaningful goals bolsters our self-esteem, stimulating us to feel confident and efficacious. Accomplishment of every sub goal is yet another opportunity for an emotional boost. This becomes a positive feedback loop. We are happier and more likely to persist at a goal when our striving towards it consistently makes us feel good.

Subscribing to divinity, god and spirituality suggest that practicing religion, moderately or fully espousing the institution, is linked to better physical health, coping in trauma, prosocial behavior, aversion to unhealthy behaviors (smoking, etc.) and having security, meaning and purpose in life. Thus, actively participating in religion and spirituality is recommended. Broadly under the theme of taking care of your body, meditation and physical exercise are explained as strategies. Lastly, expressive feedback is recommended. For example, by pretending to have a happy emotional expression, one can trick the mind into feeling happy.

At last, the book focuses on *How* these strategies work along with their correlates by exploring five mechanisms:

1. positive emotions
2. Optimal timing and variety
3. Social support
4. Motivation, effort and commitment
5. Habits

The common hurdles and related issues are tapped into and workarounds are proposed.

### Comments

The goal of this book is twofold. One, to highlight ways in which we are in control of 40% of the total happiness we can potentially experience and two, to get the reader to develop good habits which will result in sustained happiness. The book is fully equipped to deliver on this.

The user-friendliness of the book makes it is easy to refer to the psychological tests used and track the reader's own progress. The Author's strategy of letting the reader adopt the most suited strategy by cross referencing through the scales and appendix is smart and very useful. Ideally, up to 4 best fitting (for the reader) strategies can be implemented as per the book's instruction (nonetheless, the reader can take home all 12). The choice of strategies depend on the Person-Activity Fit Diagnostic score described in chapter 3. The appendix further tabulates what may work for the reader if some other activity is already working.

The book is convincing with its approach and the provided evidence but it isn't devoid of limitations. Most of the provided research relies on 'self-reports'. This may not always accurately portray the truth. It cannot be an assumption that the general population is expert at introspection. Research suggests that many self-reports aren't representative of reality. Not enough neuro-scientific evidence is provided which bolsters the psychological theories. What people consider true may not be true owing to confounding variables, self-fulfilling prophecies, cognitive biases and unique perception of concepts. For instance, people may label themselves as 'happy' because they do things which indicate happiness in their socio-cultural context. Otherwise, people may do things which they think will actually make them happy. In both cases, it is hard to know if they are really happy and not just calling themselves happy. This is addressed in the book but it is unknown if this has been addressed in the research supporting the author's claims. God-fearing may also lead to a facade of happiness where the happiness is portrayed at the social level while maintaining an internal conflict in the form of intrusive thoughts. These issues are poorly addressed in the book.

It is strikingly noted that the strategies described are not very different from, at least in principle, the commonplace suggestions we make to our dear ones. For example, meditate every day, try putting on a smiling face, show gratitude whenever you can, formulate goals and commit to them sincerely, etc. Although, the nature of the book's recommendations may at first seem jejune, the evidence is compelling and largely reliable.

The book's success has spawned the development of an iPhone application called Live Happy, produced by Signal Patterns (Lyubomirsky is on the advisory). It has also led to the inception of a song called '*The how of happiness*' which is a mnemonic aid to understand the book's content.

**Summary**

The book delivers on its promise of empowering the reader with the most appropriate strategies to cultivate happiness in his or her life while painting a very clear picture of how those strategies work. The exhaustive nature of provided evidence is sufficient for the reader to be enthralled and adopt most recommendations right away. The author seems to have done an impeccable job in grounding happiness in the psychological sciences.

**Rating**

4 out of 5

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