

THE BIG IDEAS

Why Be Happy?
Compelling reasons.

The 40% Solution
Focus here!

The Work of Happiness
It takes consistent effort.

12 Happiness Activities
What's your favorite?

Happiness Activity #1:
Expressing gratitude.

Barrier Thoughts?
Challenge them.

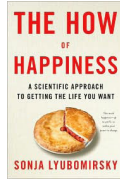
Rumination + Bad Mood
= Toxicity.

Exercise
vs. Zoloft.

Social Comparisons
Stop making them, please.

Projects
Happy people like 'em.

Best Possible Selves
GREAT exercise.



The How of Happiness

A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want

BY SONJA LYUBOMIRSKY · PENGUIN PRESS © 2007 · 384 PAGES

“All of us want to be happy, even if we don’t admit it openly or choose to cloak our desire in different words. Whether our dreams are about professional success, spiritual fulfillment, a sense of connection, a purpose in life, or love and sex, we covet those things because ultimately we believe that they will make us happier. Yet few of us truly appreciate just how much we can improve our happiness or know precisely how to go about doing it. To step back and consider your deep-seated assumptions about how to become a happier person and whether it’s even possible for you—what I hope this book will spur you to do—is to understand that becoming happier is realizable, that it’s in your power, and that it’s one of the most vital and momentous things that you can do for yourself and for those around you.”

~ Sonja Lyubomirsky from *The How of Happiness*

People often ask me what ONE book I would recommend they read that I think best captures how to create an ideal life. I’ve never given an answer as nothing’s ever really met *that* standard. Now I can: [The How of Happiness](#).

This is the 87th Note I’ve worked on and it’s been fascinating to see the same Big Ideas repeated by philosophers, mystics and modern-day self-help gurus. It’s even more exciting, in fact, EXHILARATING (!!!), to see so many of these Ideas SCIENTIFICALLY TESTED and *PROVEN* to be effective.

(Pardon the yelling. This book gets me a little excited. :)

And that’s what this book is all about. As a research psychologist and University of California professor of psychology, for the last 18+ years [Sonja Lyubomirsky](#) has been testing various ways we can increase our level of happiness as she’s played a leading role in the nascent positive psychology movement that’s creating a science of optimal living.

SUPER COOL stuff.

I HIGHLY HIGHLY HIGHLY recommend you get the book. It’s packed with happiness assessments and scientifically proven strategies for boosting your level of happiness that I think you’ll really dig. For now, we’re gonna barely scratch the surface of all the goodness in this great book with a look at some of my favorite Big Ideas. Fun! :)

WHY BE HAPPY?

“In sum, across all the domains of life, happiness appears to have numerous positive by-products that few of us have taken the time to really understand. In becoming happier, we not only boost experiences of joy, contentment, love, pride, and awe but also improve other aspects of our lives: our energy levels, our immune systems, our engagement with work and with other people, and our physical and mental health. In becoming happier, we bolster as well our feelings of self-confidence and self-esteem; we come to believe that we are worthy human beings, deserving of respect. A final and perhaps least appreciated plus is that if we become happier, we benefit not

“It is a truism that how you think-about yourself, your world, and other people-is more important to your happiness than the objective circumstances of your life.”

~ Sonja Lyubomirsky

"If an unhappy person wants to experience interest, enthusiasm, contentment, peace, and joy, he or she can make it happen by learning the habits of a happy person."

~ Sonja Lyubomirsky

only ourselves but also our partners, families, communities, and even society at large."

That a good enough set of reasons for me to be happy. You? :)

THE 40% SOLUTION

"In a nutshell, the fountain of happiness can be found in how you behave, what you think, and what goals you set every day of your life. 'There is no happiness without action.' If feelings of passivity and futility overcome you whenever you face up to your happiness set point or to your circumstances, you must know that a genuine and abiding happiness is indeed within your reach, lying within the 40 percent of the happiness pie chart that's yours to guide."

Through remarkable studies with identical twins separated at birth, scientists have discovered that about 50% of our happiness is determined by our genetics and that we have what they call a "happiness set point"—a level of happiness we tend to gravitate toward.

So 50% is FIXED. We can't do anything about it.

Now, there's another 10% of our happiness that's determined by our life circumstances. Most people spend all their energy on this variable but research shows that increasing our wealth, attractiveness and stuff like that has both a negligible and a temporary impact on our well-being.

Which leads us to the 40% we want to focus on: "What makes up this 40 percent? Besides our genes and the situations that we confront, there is one critical thing left: our behavior. Thus the key to happiness lies not in changing our genetic makeup (which is impossible) and not in changing our circumstances (i.e., seeking wealth or attractiveness or better colleagues, which is usually impractical), but in our daily intentional activities. With this in mind, our pie chart illustrates the potential of the 40 percent that is within our ability to control, the 40 percent for room to maneuver, for opportunities to increase or decrease our happiness levels through what we do in our daily lives and how we think."

This 40% is what it's all about.

In fact, Sonja tells us she was originally going to call the book "The 40% Solution"—highlighting the fact that if we wanna sustainably increase our happiness we've gotta focus on the 40% that's within our control.

THE WORK OF HAPPINESS

"It may be obvious that to achieve anything substantial in life—learn a profession, master a sport, raise a child—a good deal of effort is required. But many of us find it difficult to apply the notion of effort to our emotional or mental lives. Without effort, we might 'get lucky,' but like a long-forgotten New Year's resolution, the success will be short-lived. Consider how much time and commitment many people devote to physical exercise, whether it's going to the gym, jogging, kickboxing, or yoga. My research reveals that if you desire greater happiness, you need to go about it in a similar way. In other words, becoming lastingly happier demands making some permanent changes that require effort and commitment every day of your life. Pursuing happiness takes work, but consider that this 'happiness work' may be the most rewarding work you'll ever do."

Newsflash: It takes EFFORT to create our ideal lives!!!

We talk about this ALL. THE. TIME.

I love hearing a scientist remind us though. :)

So, how committed are *you* to *your* happiness?

You willing to put in the effort?!? (Sweet! :)

"If you're not happy today, then you won't be happy tomorrow unless you take things into your own hands and take action."

~ Sonja Lyubomirsky

"One of the great obstacles to attaining happiness is that most of our beliefs about what will make us happy are in fact erroneous."

~ Sonja Lyubomirsky

"If you want to reap long-term emotional benefits from a happiness activity, you need to devote persistent effort. Of course, if you identify with and enjoy what you are doing, you'll be more energized and committed."

~ Sonja Lyubomirsky

12 HAPPINESS ACTIVITIES

While Part I of the book establishes why we should be interested in being happy along with the variables involved in why we're as happy as we are, Part II of the book delivers 12 Happiness Activities that've been scientifically proven to increase our happiness levels.

You'll wanna get the book to explore the various studies that have established why these activities work and we'll highlight a few of my favorites below.

For now, here they are:

1. Expressing Gratitude
2. Cultivating Optimism
3. Avoiding Overthinking and Social Comparison
4. Practicing Acts of Kindness
5. Nurturing Social Relationships
6. Developing Strategies for Coping
7. Learning to Forgive
8. Increasing Flow Experiences
9. Savoring Life's Joys
10. Committing to Your Goals
11. Practicing Religion and Spirituality
12. Taking Care of Your Body: Meditation + Physical Activity + Acting Like a Happy Person

(Another cool point Sonja makes again and again (!) throughout the book is that it's *essential* for us to choose activities that inspire us as we're much more likely to follow through on those activities than doing something we think we "should" do.)

HAPPINESS ACTIVITY #1: EXPRESSING GRATITUDE

"People who are consistently grateful have been found to be relatively happier, more energetic, and more hopeful and to report experiencing more frequent positive emotions. They also tend to be more helpful and empathic, more spiritual and religious, more forgiving, and less materialistic than others who are less predisposed to gratefulness. Furthermore, the more a person is inclined to gratitude, the less likely he or she is to be depressed, anxious, lonely, envious, or neurotic."

Those all sound like great reasons to cultivate gratitude, eh?!

In the book she talks about the research demonstrating the fact that people who kept a weekly gratitude journal for 10 weeks in which they noted five things for which they were thankful were significantly happier than those who didn't.

So, for what are you grateful?!? Let's start week #1 now, shall we? :)

I'm thankful for these five things in my life:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

" All that is required to become an optimist is to have the goal and to practice it. The more you rehearse optimistic thoughts, the more 'natural' and 'ingrained' they will become. With time they will be part of you, and you will have made yourself into an altogether different person."

~ Sonja Lyubomirsky

BARRIER THOUGHTS

"Write down your barrier thoughts, and then consider ways to reinterpret the situation. In the process, ask yourself questions like... What else could this situation or experience mean? Can anything good come from it? Does it present any opportunities for me? What lessons can I learn and apply to the future? Did I develop any strengths as a result?"

Barrier thoughts. They're those pesky thoughts we have that keep us from feeling good.

Are you currently stressed? Challenges with work? A relationship? Money? All the above? Write down your "barrier thoughts"—the negative ways you might be interpreting the situation(s) and then ask yourself those questions above and get your optimism muscles pumping while raising your level of happiness!

And, if you want to learn more about these strategies, I think you'll particularly enjoy the Notes on [Learned Optimism](#) and all my Notes on Abraham-Hicks books, including [Ask and It Is Given](#); [Money, and the Law of Attraction](#); and, [The Amazing Power of Deliberate Intent](#).

Plus, know this: "Essentially, all optimism strategies involve the exercise of construing the world with a more positive and charitable perspective, and many entail considering the silver lining in the cloud, identifying the door that opens as a result of one that has closed. It takes hard work and a great deal of practice to accomplish effectively, but if you can persist at these strategies until they become habitual, the benefits could be immense. Some optimists may be born that way, but scores of optimists are made with practice."

RUMINATION + NEGATIVE MOOD = TOXICITY

"The combination of rumination and negative mood is toxic. Research shows that people who ruminate while sad or distraught are likely to feel besieged, powerless, self-critical, pessimistic, and generally negatively biased."

Imagine you're in a bad mood—frustrated, anxious, whatever. Research tells us unequivocally that that's NOT the time to ruminate on what's going on. In fact, ruminating/overthinking while feeling crappy is likely gonna make you feel WORSE.

So, when you find yourself sliding down the slippery slope of over-thinking something while you're stressed, remember that rumination + a negative mood = toxic trouble.

The solution?

Distract yourself. Go pet your dog or play with your baby or dance or run or whatever you need to do as you remember this wisdom: "I have found that truly happy people have the capacity to distract and absorb themselves in activities that divert their energies and attention away from dark or anxious ruminations."

[Pema Chodron](#) says pretty much the same thing in her great book [The Places That Scare You](#) (see Notes): "Acknowledging that we are all churned up is the first and most difficult step in any practice. Without compassionate recognition that we are stuck, it's impossible to liberate ourselves from confusion. 'Doing something different' is anything that interrupts our ancient habit of indulging in our emotions. We do anything to cut the strong tendency to spin out... Anything that's non-habitual will do—even sing and dance or run around the block. We do anything that doesn't reinforce our crippling habits. The third most difficult practice is to then remember that this is not something we do just once or twice. Interrupting our destructive habits and awakening our heart is the work of a lifetime."

Again, next time you start mixing up some rumination with your negative mood, remember: "If you are someone plagued by ruminations, you are unlikely to become happier before you can break that habit."

"No one in our society needs to be told that exercise is good for us. Whether you are overweight or have a chronic illness or are a slim couch potato, you've probably heard or read this dictum countless times throughout your life. But has anyone told you—indeed, guaranteed you—that regular physical activity will make you happier? I swear by it."

~ Sonja Lyubomirsky

EXERCISE VS. ZOLOFT

"An impressive study of physical activity was published in the Archives of Internal Medicine in 1999. The researchers recruited men and women fifty years old and over, all of them suffering from clinical depression, and divided them randomly into three groups. The first group was assigned to four months of aerobic exercise, the second group to four months of antidepressant medication (Zoloft), and the third group to both. The assigned exercise involved three supervised forty-five-minute sessions per week of cycling or walking/jogging at moderate to high intensity. Remarkably, by the end of the four-month intervention period, all three groups had experienced their depressions lift and reported fewer dysfunctional attitudes and increased happiness and self-esteem. Aerobic exercise was just as effective at treating depression as was Zoloft, or as a combination of exercise and Zoloft. Yet exercise is a lot less expensive, usually with no side effects apart from soreness. Perhaps even more remarkably, six months later, participants who had "remitted" (recovered) from their depressions were less likely to relapse if they had been in the exercise group (six months ago!) than if they had been in the medication group."

—> Before we go into the splendor of this study, I want to be clear that Sonja has an entire section on depression and what to do if you're feeling super funky where she articulates her perspective on the importance of medication to support individuals in the grips of depression. So, if you're feeling like you may be clinically depressed, she'd recommend you see a professional for support.

Having said that, this research is AMAZING. Having gone through a couple phases of strong funkilisciousness, I KNOW the power of sweat. These days, you couldn't pay me enough to make me stop exercising. :)

How about you? Time to get out there and sweat?!? :)

SOCIAL COMPARISONS AND HAPPINESS

"We found that the happiest people take pleasure in other people's successes and show concern in the face of others' failures. A completely different portrait, however, has emerged of a typical unhappy person—namely, as someone who is deflated rather than delighted about his peers' accomplishments and triumphs and who is relieved rather than sympathetic in the face of his peers' failures and undoings."

How about you? Are you celebrating other people's successes?

In his great book *The Secrets of the Millionaire Mind* (see Notes), [T. Harv Eker](#) tells us to "Bless that which you want. If you see a person with a beautiful home, bless that person and bless that home. If you see a person with a beautiful car, bless that person and bless that car. If you see a person with a loving family, bless that person and bless that family. If you see a person with a beautiful body, bless that person and bless their body."

The scientific fact is that: "You can't be envious and happy at the same time. People who pay too much attention to social comparisons find themselves chronically vulnerable, threatened, and insecure."

Plus: "The happier the person, the less attention she pays to how others around her are doing."

HAPPY PEOPLE LIKE PROJECTS

"In 1932, weighed down by the sorrows and agonies of his self-absorbed and aimless clients, an Australian psychiatrist named W. Béran Wolfe summed up his philosophy like this: 'If you observe a really happy man you will find him building a boat, writing a symphony, educating his son, growing double dahlias in his garden, or looking for dinosaur eggs in the Gobi Desert.' He was right. People who strive for something personally significant, whether it's learning a new craft, changing careers, or raising moral children, are far happier than those who don't have

"... working toward a meaningful life goal is one of the most important strategies for becoming lastingly happier."

~ Sonja Lyubomirsky

"It turns out that the process of working toward a goal, participating in a valued and challenging activity, is as important to well-being as its attainment."

~ Sonja Lyubomirsky

strong dreams or aspirations. Find a happy person, and you will find a project."

So, uh, what's *your* project? :)

THE BEST POSSIBLE SELVES DIARY

"There are many ways to practice optimism, but the one that has been empirically shown to enhance well-being is the original Best Possible Selves diary method. To try it out, sit in a quiet place, and take twenty to thirty minutes to think about what you expect your life to be one, five, or ten years from now. Visualize a future for yourself in which everything has turned out the way you've wanted. You have tried your best, worked hard, and achieved all your goals. Now write down what you imagine. This writing exercise in a sense puts your optimistic 'muscles' into practice. Even if thinking about the brightest future for yourself doesn't come naturally at first, it may get there with time and training. Amazing things can come about as a result of writing."

We talk about imagining our ideal futures often as a *lot* of the self-help literature comes back to this theme again and again.

I love the fact that research is showing this to be a fantastic way to "work out our optimism muscles."

So bust out your journal and imagine your ideal self as we move to embody the hows of happiness, will ya?!? :)

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

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you'll probably like...

[Happier](#)

[The Pursuit of Perfect](#)

[Authentic Happiness](#)

[Learned Optimism](#)

[Flow](#)

[Mastery](#)

About the Author of "The How of Happiness"

SONJA LYUBOMIRSKY



Sonja Lyubomirsky is Professor of Psychology at the University of California, Riverside. Originally from Russia, she received her A.B., summa cum laude, from Harvard University and her Ph.D. in Social/Personality Psychology from Stanford University. Sonja's teaching and mentoring of students have been recognized with the Faculty of the Year and Faculty Mentor of the Year Awards and her research has been awarded a Templeton Positive Psychology Prize. Currently, she is an associate editor of the Journal of Positive Psychology and (with co-PI Ken Sheldon) holds a 5-year million-dollar grant from the National Institute of Mental Health to conduct research on the possibility of permanently increasing happiness. Her research has been written up in dozens of magazines and newspapers and she has appeared in multiple TV shows, radio shows, and feature documentaries around the world.

About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at brianjohnson.me.