

## THE BIG IDEAS

**Hedonic Adaptation**  
+ Your psych immune system.

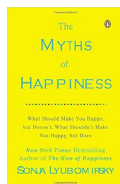
**Optimism**  
Most robust strategy to boost is...

**Ultradian Dip**  
Navigate it.

**Affluenza Virus**  
Got it?

**Frequency > Intensity**  
Enjoy more little things.

**Goals**  
Pursuit vs. Attainment.



# The Myths of Happiness

What Should Make You Happy, but Doesn't, What Shouldn't Make You Happy, but Does

BY SONJA LYUBOMIRSKY · PENGUIN BOOKS © 2014 · 320 PAGES

“Nearly all of us buy into what I call the myths of happiness—beliefs that certain adult achievements (marriage, kids, jobs, wealth) will make us forever happy and that certain adult failures or adversities (health problems, not having a life partner, having little money) will make us forever unhappy. This reductive understanding of happiness is culturally reinforced and continues to endure, despite overwhelming evidence that our well-being does not operate according to such black-and-white principles. ...

What I hope this book will make singularly clear is that although it may appear that some of these major challenges will definitively and permanently change our lives for better or for worse, it is really our responses to them that govern their repercussions. ...

The message of *The Myths of Happiness* is that, ultimately, we each can identify the steps to take to forge our way to a fulfilling life and help ourselves reach and exceed our happiness potentials.”

~ Sonja Lyubomirsky from *The Myths of Happiness*

This is the second Note on [Sonja Lyubomirsky](#)'s work we've created. Her first book remains one of my all-time favorites: [The How of Happiness](#). This one is another great one.

Sonja is one of the world's leading positive psychology researchers. Her award-winning and very well-funded research is on “the possibility of permanently increasing happiness.” <— How cool is that?

This book focuses on, you guessed it, the myths of happiness—those things we \*think\* will make us happy (or devastated) but don't. And, of course, Sonja walks us through what DOES lead to sustainable happiness and flourishing.

The book combines the best empirical wisdom from positive psychology, social psychology, personality psychology and clinical psychology—with over 700 (!) scholarly references. I always love connecting ancient wisdom and fun self-help with SOLID research so this book was a great treat. (Get a copy [here](#).)

Of course, it's packed with Big Ideas. I'm excited to share some of my favorites so let's jump straight in!

## HEDONIC ADAPTATION + YOUR PSYCHOLOGICAL IMMUNE SYSTEM

“One of my primary scientific interests is in the area of hedonic adaptation—namely, the fact that human beings have the remarkable capacity to grow habituated or inured to most life changes. A hot topic today in the fields of psychology and economics, hedonic adaptation explains why both the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat abate with time. What is particularly fascinating about this phenomenon, however, is that it is most pronounced with positive experiences.

“Life is so constructed,  
that the event does not,  
cannot, will not, match the  
expectation.”

~ Charlotte Brontë

*"He who is not contented with what he has, would not be contented with what he would like to have."*

~ Socrates

Indeed, it turns out that we are prone to take for granted pretty much everything positive that happens to us. When we move into a beautiful new loft with a grand view, when we partake of plastic surgery, when we purchase a fancy new automobile or *n*th-generation smartphone, when we earn the corner office and a raise at work, when we become immersed in a new hobby, and even when we wed, we obtain an immediate boost of happiness from the improved situation; but the thrill only lasts for a short time. Over the coming days, weeks, and months, we find our expectations ramping upward and we begin taking our new improved circumstances for granted. We are left with 'felicific stagnation.'

Hedonic adaptation. I'm sure you're familiar with it at this point.

Quick recap of the basic idea: We get used to all the good stuff in our lives \*really\* quickly. Therefore, thinking that "when we \_\_\_\_\_ (*get rich, get married, have kids, etc.*) we will finally be happy" is a really bad plan if sustainable happiness is your target.

Dan Gilbert is another leading researcher in this area. He tells us we're really bad at "affective forecasting" or predicting how we'll feel about something (good or bad) in the future.

His fortune-cookie maxim sums it up: "Nothing in life is as important as you think it is while you are thinking about it." As Sonja says, "In other words, we exaggerate the effect a life change will have upon our happiness because we cannot foresee that we won't always be thinking about it."

So, we adapt quickly. Got it. What can we do about it?

Well, the first section of the book is all about "Connections." (The second is about "Work and Money" while the third is on "Looking Back.") The first chapter is about your marriage. Short story here is the fact that pretty much ALL (!!!) relationships go through the inevitable decline from uber-passionate awesome to, shall we say, a more moderate level of awesome. (Hah.)

The MYTH of happiness is the idea that you should be able to burn at a 10-level passion forever and, if you're not, something's wrong with you and/or the relationship.

The wisest among us have what Sonja calls a "prepared mind" and \*know\* that this hedonic adaptation is inevitable. The trick is to navigate the transition from what researchers call passionate love to companionate love with grace and happiness.

Sonja offers a bunch of ways to go about doing that. Here are a few of my favorites:

**Appreciation.** This is her #1 tip and a favorite at the Johnson household. As we know and discuss all the time, there's a ton of research showing how this boosts happiness. The trick is to make it a regular practice.

Basic idea is simple: If you want to stop taking things/your spouse/kids/etc. for granted, APPRECIATE them. Alexandra recently brought appreciations back to our family. It's awesome. Each night (usually over dinner or during our evening walk) we take turns appreciating one another. What's amazing is how quickly Emerson joined the party. Although only four, he comes up with some awesome appreciations. (I'm smiling just typing that!)

**The Michelangelo Phenomenon.** You know how Michelangelo reportedly said, "I saw an angel in the block of marble and I just chiseled 'til I set him free"? Well, we need to see the best in our significant others (and kids + friends + colleagues + ...) and help our partners realize their ideal selves. How can you see the angel in your partner more today?

**Active-Constructive.** Another related practice here is to really celebrate their successes and dreams. When our partners share something they're excited about, it's important to respond in an "active-constructive" way—that is, "with interest and delight." Don't point out all the things that could go wrong (active-destructive). Celebrate and high five them with enthusiasm!

Other tips: Add some variety and surprises to your relationships. And touch. Lots of basic, simple, non-sexual touch. A fun game Sonja recommends is to touch your partner each time you're close in the kitchen. I'm in! You? #littlethings!

P.S. So, we hedonically adapt to the positive stuff—such that we take for granted what was once super-awesome. We also adapt to the negative stuff via what researchers call “psychological immunity.” In short, we're WAY stronger than we give ourselves credit for.

## “THE MOST ROBUST STRATEGY” TO BOOST OPTIMISM IS...

“Whether our optimism is big or little, many of us waver in our expectations of the future. Fortunately, numerous research-tested activities have been shown to boost positive thinking. The most robust strategy involves keeping a journal regularly for ten to twenty minutes per day, in which we write down our hopes and dreams for the future (e.g., ‘In ten years, I will be married and a home owner’), visualize them coming true, and describe how we might get there and what that would feel like. This exercise—even when engaged in as briefly as two minutes—makes people happier and even healthier.”

Whenever I read a line like, “*The most robust strategy...*” I sit up even taller than normal and start asterisking/underlining and folding pages over so we can make sure we soak in the goodness. (Lines like that are a lover of wisdom's dream and what I'm hunting for when I'm reading books and mining Big Ideas for us!)

So, let's take note: The most (not even “one of the” but THE MOST) robust strategy to boost your optimism is to take some time each day to write down your goals and get excited about your hopes and dreams for the future.

Sidenote: A ton of self-help teachers say the same thing. (In fact, just this week I read [Brian Tracy's Goals!](#) which emphasized this practice as well.) But... I gotta admit, although I get inspired to do it/experiment with it when I read a self-help author recommend a powerful tip, I get REALLY FIRED UP/ALL IN COMMITTED when that idea is backed up by robust empirical data and a non pom-pom waving conservative scientist starts dropping “The most robust strategy” lines on me. :)

My current practice takes about 5 minutes. Super simple. I start drawing a little “o” representing OPTIMIZE. Then I write down OPTIMIZE + Optimize Enterprises Public Benefit Corporation (our biz, of course), then Optimize.me (our shiny new URL) then our Purpose + Mission + Strategy then I draw a series of mountain peaks, representing my (/our) 3 + 5 + 10 + 25 + 50 year goals. (Actually, before goals I draw a little Maslow triangle thing and emphasize the base of the pyramid—celebrating the fact that we've created a really solid, profitable foundation that will fuel our growth in the years + decades ahead. (btw: We hit the \$1m+ revenue rate—yay! Thanks for your support!))

As I draw those mountain peaks and write out those goals, I smile and feel/visualize achieving them. Then I remind myself of my top 3 priorities: Energy + Family + Service. Then, most importantly, I flip the page over and write down “MASTERPIECE DAY” at the top followed by my #1 goal + #2 + #3 for the day along with that week's goal. Then I get to work.

More on what science says are the right kind of goals in a moment. For now, are you all in on taking at least a couple minutes to journal your goals + hopes + dreams?! Let's do this!

## NAVIGATING THE ULTRADIAN DIP

“Most of us have heard of circadian rhythms—daily cycles that regulate when we feel sleepy (close to bedtime and throughout the night) and when we feel alert and awake (upon waking and throughout the day). The word *circadian* means “about a day,” so a circadian rhythm occurs

*“ Learning to be more positive and optimistic means learning to see opportunities in difficulties, to construe the world as full of possibilities and wonder.”*

~ Sonja Lyubomirsky

*"Chance favors the prepared  
mind."*

~ Louis Pasteur

once in a twenty-four-hour period. The circadian rhythm is essentially our internal biological clock, which is sensitive to light and dark.

Few of us, however, have heard of another type of bodily cycle, called the ultradian rhythm. We cycle through ultradian stages every 90 minutes or so (but no longer than 120 minutes) during sleep. What's more, we continue to experience these 90- to 120-minute cycles while we are awake as well. Practically, this means that for about an hour and a half to two hours after rising in the morning, we feel particularly vigorous and focused—able to sustain concentration and energy throughout our activities. At the end of that interval, however, we experience a twenty-minute period of fatigue, lethargy, and difficulty concentrating. This is the "ultradian dip."

We've talked about ultradian rhythms a few times in these Notes. (See [Manage Your Day-to-Day](#) + [Toughness Training for Life](#) for more. My friend Pilar Gerasimo is ALL about this as well. Check out our interview + her podcast episode where she talks about it more.)

Know this: As Sonja says, our energy oscillates. We're focused and on. Then we need to relax and turn off (for 15-20 minutes). Getting attuned to this natural rhythm is a REALLY smart idea.

I've been working on this and deliberately +1% optimizing my Masterpiece Days to bake it in. Super fun to work everything around these rhythms so I can go REALLY deep in my focused work time, then step back and recharge with a hike/workout, time with the fam, etc.

How're you doing with this? You notice how your energy starts to dip after (60) to 90 to 120 minutes? Pay attention. Step back. Recharge. Repeat.

## GOT THE AFFLUENZA VIRUS?

"Why are materialistic tendencies important to identify? A mountain of research has shown that materialism depletes happiness, threatens satisfaction with our relationships, harms the environment, renders us less friendly, likable, and empathetic, and makes us less likely to help others and contribute to our communities. ...

*"Distracting ourselves  
from toxic comparisons,  
concentrating on our own  
internal standards, and  
focusing on the journey in  
pursuit of our dreams, rather  
than on the end result, will  
redirect our attention and  
energies from the 'I'll be  
happy when \_\_\_\_\_' mentality  
and toward more fruitful  
horizons."*

~ Sonja Lyubomirsky

Not everyone who is prosperous is focused on fame, power, and riches; not everyone catches the so-called affluenza virus. But it's a risk that threatens our happiness as we sit surrounded by conveniences and luxuries. As philosophers, religious figures, and humanistic psychologists have long contended, the pursuit of money and reputation redirects our energies and passions away from deeper and more meaningful social connections and growth experiences and prevent us from achieving our full potentials. As we spend more of our time making money, the opportunity 'costs' of reading poetry, playing catch with our child, or taking a walk with a friend become so high that it becomes 'irrational' to do such things. All the more reason to learn what research has to say about how to avoid the excesses of consumption and materialism and spend money in ways that make us happy."

That's from Part II on "Work and Money" in which Sonja walks us through the science of how money affects our well-being.

Short story: It's complicated.

First, money definitely helps increase happiness when we're talking about meeting basic needs. Then, "although having more money boosts our satisfaction with life, it has little if any impact on the daily positive and negative emotions and the uplifts and hassles we experience."

In other words, if you ask people how they're feeling in general about life, more money leads to higher reported levels of happiness. In general. But, if you get specific with how they feel today (or at 9 am, 2 pm or 6 pm) yesterday, money isn't going to predict much.

Sonja gives us four principles that psychological science suggests we live by if we want to optimally enjoy our money. Here's a super quick look:

*"The ideal goals are ones that nourish our basic drives to grow, feel competent and self-sufficient, connect with others, and contribute to our communities."*

~ Sonja Lyubomirsky

1. First, don't spend money on "stuff"—you'll hedonically adapt to that. Rather, spend money on experiences and "on developing ourselves as people, on growing, and on investing in interpersonal connections."
2. Spend money on others not yourself. (Fascinating research here. If you give people \$20 and have them spend it on themselves they'll be less happy than if they spend it on others.)
3. Spend money to give you time. TIME affluence is a much better predictor of happiness than pure affluence—so use your money to buy time for yourself to do meaningful stuff.
4. Spend money now but wait to enjoy it. There's a ton of happiness in the ANTICIPATION of something. So, for example, book a trip for 6 months from now then look forward to it the whole time. (And, book more mini-trips rather than one huge one. More in next Idea!)

P.S. Check out our Notes on [Happiness](#) by another couple leading positive psychologists. They give some more cool insights on money and what they call "psychological wealth."

## SCIENCE OF HAPPINESS: FREQUENCY > INTENSITY

"Are such positive experiences too run-of-the-mill to truly impact our happiness and help us cope with real hardships? Given what we know about the benefits of positive emotions, should we strive to experience big, intense highs rather than aiming for frequent ordinary bursts of pleasure? In chapter 6, I recommended that we spend our money on many small pleasures rather than a few big ones. This is because the results of research favor the ordinary over the intense. It turns out that the key to happiness and health (and to all of their auspicious by-products) is not how intensely happy we feel, but how *often* we feel positive or happy. For example, in a study that followed people aged eighteen to ninety-four over the course of thirteen years, those with more frequent positive moments (but not more intense positive moments) lived longer. Indeed, seemingly trivial behaviors can offer regular mood boosts that cumulate over time."

Quick quiz: Which would you prefer: A jumbo (!) intense feeling of uber-happiness OR a bunch of frequent little micro moments of happiness?

As you might have guessed from the above passage, the MYTH of happiness is that the intense highs are what lead to happiness. BUT... The science says that it's those little moments that provide the most sustainable, true happiness. Frequency > Intensity.

So, look for and enjoy those little moments. For me, today, that included a sunrise hike (always awe-inspiring), reading a story to Emerson before his nap after enjoying lunch together (appreciating I can actually do that) and a ton of other little things. You?

Let's repeat: "It turns out that the key to happiness and health (and to all of their auspicious by-products) is not how intensely happy we feel, but how often we feel positive or happy."

One more time: Frequency > Intensity.

## GOAL PURSUIT VS. ATTAINMENT (ONE IS MUCH WISER)

"One of the surest ways to focus on the future without dwelling on a seemingly idyllic past is by working toward significant life goals. 'There is no happiness without action'; there is no happiness without goal pursuit. However, as I mentioned earlier, it is important to choose our goals wisely, and to develop the ability to redirect our goals in ways that can bring us even greater happiness. The goals we select, if you recall, must be intrinsically rather than extrinsically motivated (prompted by our own sense of meaning and enjoyment as opposed to that of our parents or culture); they must be harmonious (rather than conflicting with one another); they must satisfy innate human needs (such as the need to be an expert at something, to connect with others, and to contribute to our communities, rather than simply desiring to be

*"My experience is what I agree to attend to."*

~ William James

*"There are many ways to find meaning and purpose. One is to establish a metric by which our life will be judged and, from today, to resolve to live each day in such a way that our life will be graded a success."*

~ Sonja Lyubomirsky

rich, powerful, beautiful, or famous); they must be aligned with our own authentic values; they must be reachable and flexible; and, ideally, they should focus on attaining something rather than evading or running away from something. The pursuit of all of these types of goals has been found to be associated with greater happiness, fulfillment, and perseverance. ...

Furthermore, although we can (and should) reach for our loftiest dreams, we need only to begin by breaking the goals down into subgoals and daily aims."

That is a magical list of the key ingredients to scientifically-sound goal setting. Please feel free to pause and re-read. :)

First, get rid of your goals to be rich, hot and famous. As discussed in *Why We Do What We Do*, manically chasing those extrinsic goals is a great way to make yourself psychologically unstable. Much wiser to focus on the intrinsic goals of becoming a better human, connecting with others, and making a contribution to your community.

And.. As you do that, make sure you focus on the PURSUIT of those goals, not the attainment.

Sonja talks about her quibbles with traditional self-help goal recommendations. In addition to being based on opinion + anecdote rather than on scientific research, she says *"the entire 'follow your dreams' oeuvre places a heavy emphasis on goals achievement rather than goal pursuit. In other words, the authors assume that what readers want above all is to reach a particular goal, and that the attainment of that pinnacle is primary."*

In other words, most goal-setting gurus lead us into the happiness myth of thinking we'll be happy when we get \_\_\_\_\_. But we now know that we're going to hedonically adapt to THAT. So... Let's focus on the PURSUIT of the goals rather than an obsessive focus on the attainment and enjoy a ton more happiness as we optimize and actualize! :)

B

**Brian Johnson,**  
Chief Philosopher

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## About the Author of "The Myths of Happiness"

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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](http://brianjohnson.me).