

**HAPPINESS IS NOWHERE¹**

Medicine and psychology traditionally study disease not health. Business leaders study failure, and many religions focus on sin rather than blessings. Finding and talking about our strengths and the good in our lives is often harder than sharing our weaknesses. This is true of our newsletter topics too. So, this issue will focus on happiness. What did you see in the title of this issue? Happiness is now here or

happiness is no where?

Science of Happiness

Did you know that there is a science around happiness? Positive psychology was founded in 1998 by Martin E.P. Seligman, Ph.D., during his term as president of the American Psychological Association. Dr. Seligman sees three aspects to an individual's enduring level of happiness: 1) Your set range - the basic genetically determined range within which your happiness normally lies, 2) The circumstances of your life, and 3) Your voluntary control. He lists three kinds of happy lives in his book *Authentic Happiness*,² with the third type consisting of knowing what your strengths are and using them in service of something larger than yourself. Sonja Lyubomirsky, Ph.D., uses the term set point rather than set range and her research shows that 50% of our happiness level is genetically determined, while about 10% is based on our circumstances, leaving 40% over which we have control.³ Her research studied twins growing up in different homes to determine the genetic portion of the "pie."

How Happy are You?

Ed Diener, Ph.D. at the University of Illinois developed a five-question "Satisfaction with Life Scale" in 1985. Take a look at <http://tinyurl.com/4ltsmx> or try Seligman's authentic happiness questionnaire on his website at <http://tinyurl.com/4yku36>. However, the primary question is not "am I happy" but "how can I be happier" according to Tal Ben-Shahar, Ph.D.⁴ Once our basic needs are met, additional wealth does little to raise our happiness meter reading. Nor do education, IQ, and youth seem to matter. "In fact older people are more consistently satisfied with their lives than the young."⁵ Mark Holder, associate professor of Psychology at UBC Okanagan, has found a connection between spirituality and happiness in children. Spirituality is defined in his study as having an inner belief system. His study involved 315 children between the ages of nine and twelve. He found that spirituality accounted for 6.55 to 16.5% of their happiness – a much larger figure than expected.⁶

Change Your Happiness Level

Sheldon and Lyubomirsky⁷ believe that sustainable happiness is possible through intentional changes in specific activities. A change in our circumstances typically brings a brief blip in happiness levels – whether that is marriage, a new job, having a child, etc. "Circumstances and situations do color life, but you have been given the mind to choose what the color will be," according to John Homer Miller⁸ or to quote Ralph Waldo Emerson, "to different minds, the same world is a hell, and a heaven."

Tal Ben-Shahar, Ph.D., began teaching a positive psychology seminar at Harvard in 2002. The following year he opened the class to the public and 380 students registered. He suggests creating a

gratitude journal. Write down five things for which you are grateful each evening. You can do this alone or with your spouse and/or children. He also believes that time pressures directly affect our happiness level. Time affluence, the feeling that we have enough time to pursue meaningful activities is much more of a predictor of well-being, whereas material affluence is not. He provides seven exercises to increase your happiness level. Lyubomirsky gives specific happiness activities in her book such as practicing gratitude, investing in social connections, managing stress and trauma, and living in the present. Holden talks about being good enough and practicing acceptance among other topics.

Why Be Happy?

Is choosing to become happier selfish? There have been several recent studies that have tried to suggest that happiness is only an avoidance of real issues, a selfish coping strategy, or a superficial form of escape. This thinking doesn't take into account that your happiness is an inspiration, a gift to others, and a way out of suffering.⁹ Lyubomirsky notes psychological literature that shows that "happier people are more sociable and energetic, more charitable and cooperative, show more flexibility and ingenuity in their thinking, are more productive in their jobs, are more resilient in the face of hardship, have stronger immune systems, and are physically healthier. Happy people even live longer."¹⁰

The goal of having a happy life has been long sought after. Aristotle wrote that "happiness is the meaning and the purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence," as did the Dalai Lama, who said that "whether one believes in religion or not, whether one believes in this religion or that religion, the very purpose of our life is happiness, the very motion of our life is towards happiness."¹¹

Resources

1. Holden, Robert. (2007). *Happiness Now: Timeless wisdom for feeling good fast*. Hay House. Pg 5.
2. Seligman, Martin E.P. (2002). *Authentic happiness : using the new positive psychology to realize your potential for lasting fulfillment*. Random House.
3. Lyubomirsky, Sonja. (2007). *The How of happiness: A scientific approach to getting the life you want*. Penguin Press.
4. Ben-Shahar, Tal. (2007). *Happier: Learn the secrets to daily joy and lasting fulfillment*. McGraw-Hill.
5. Wallis, Claudia. (2005). "The New Science of Happiness." *Time*. Jan. 9. <http://tinyurl.com/3vjcy>
6. "The happy lab." (2008). *Trek: Magazine of the Univ. British Columbia*. Spring. Pg. 8.
7. Sheldon KM & S Lyubomirsky. (2006) "Achieving sustainable gains in happiness: Change your actions, not your circumstances." *Journal of Happiness Studies*, Mar. Pg.55-86. <http://tinyurl.com/64ytjd>
8. Holden, 2007. Pg. 52
9. Holden, 2007. Pg. 10.
10. Lyubomirsky, 2007. Pg. 25.
11. Ben-Shahar, 2007. Pg. 159