

Happiness

10: What are the causes and consequences of happiness?

“How to gain, how to keep, how to recover happiness is in fact for most men at all times the secret motive for all they do,” observed William James (1902, p. 76). Understandably so, for one’s state of happiness or unhappiness colors everything. People who are happy perceive the world as safer, feel more confident, make decisions more easily, rate job applicants more favorably, are more cooperative and tolerant, and live healthier and more energized and satisfied lives (Briñol et al., 2007; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Pressman & Cohen, 2005). When your mood is gloomy and your thinking preoccupied, life as a whole seems depressing and meaningless. Let your mood

::feel-good, do-good phenomenon

people's tendency to be helpful when already in a good mood.

::subjective well-being self-perceived happiness or satisfaction with life. Used along with measures of objective well-being (for example, physical and economic indicators) to evaluate people's quality of life.

brighten, and your thinking broadens and becomes more playful and creative (Amabile et al., 2005; Fredrickson, 2006; King et al., 2006). Your relationships, your self-image, and your hopes for the future also seem more promising. Positive emotions fuel upward spirals.

This helps explain why college students' happiness helps predict their life course. In one study, women who smiled happily (rather than smiling artificially or not at all) in 1950s college yearbook photos were more likely to be married, and happily so, in middle age (Harker & Keltner, 2001). In another study, which surveyed thousands of U.S. college students in 1976 and restudied them at age 37, happy students had gone on to earn significantly more money than their less-happy-than-average peers (Diener et al., 2002). Nonetheless, it's also true that social reforms are often launched, as well as great literature written, by those not extremely happy with how things are (Oishi et al., 2007).

Moreover—and this is one of psychology's most consistent findings—when we feel happy we more often help others. In study after study, a mood-boosting experience (finding money, succeeding on a challenging task, recalling a happy event) has made people more likely to give money, pick up someone's dropped papers, volunteer time, and do other good deeds. Psychologists call it the **feel-good, do-good phenomenon** (Salovey, 1990). Happiness doesn't just feel good, it does good. (Doing good also promotes good feeling, a phenomenon harnessed by some happiness coaches and instructors as they assign people to perform a daily "random act of kindness" and to record the results.)

Despite the significance of happiness, psychology throughout its history has more often focused on negative emotions. Since 1887, *Psychological Abstracts* (a guide to psychology's literature) has included, as of this writing, 14,889 articles mentioning anger, 93,371 mentioning anxiety, and 120,897 mentioning depression. For every 17 articles on these topics, only 1 dealt with the positive emotions of joy (1789), life satisfaction (6255), or happiness (5764). There is, of course, good reason to focus on negative emotions; they can make our lives miserable and drive us to seek help. But researchers are becoming increasingly interested in **subjective well-being**, assessed either as feelings of happiness (sometimes defined as a high ratio of positive to negative feelings) or as a sense of satisfaction with life. A new *positive psychology* is on the rise (see Chapter 13).

The Short Life of Emotional Ups and Downs

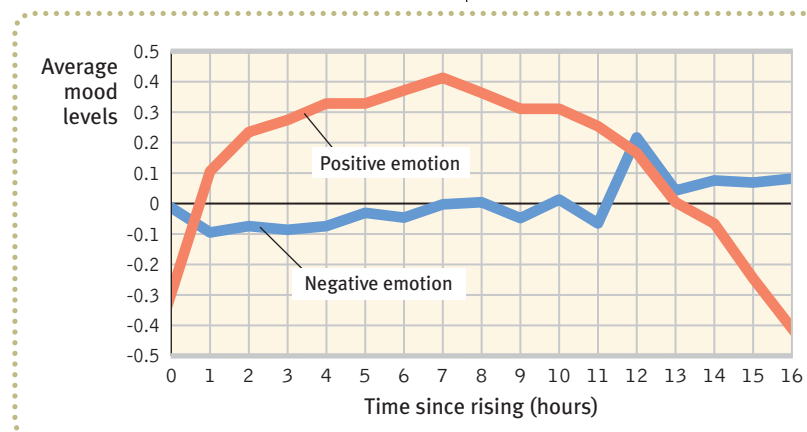
In their happiness research, psychologists have studied influences on both our temporary moods and our long-term life satisfaction. When studying people's hour-by-hour moods, David Watson (2000) and Daniel Kahneman and his colleagues (2004) discovered that positive emotion rises over the early to middle part of most days (FIGURE 12.18). Stressful events—an argument, a sick child, a car problem—trigger bad moods. No surprise there. But by the next day, the gloom nearly always lifts (Affleck et al., 1994; Bolger et al., 1989; Stone & Neale, 1984). If anything, people tend to rebound from bad days to a *better-than-usual* good mood the following day. When in a bad mood, can you usually depend on rebounding within a day or two? Are your times of elation similarly hard to sustain? Over the long run, our emotional ups and downs tend to balance.

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Apart from prolonged grief over the loss of a loved one or lingering anxiety after a trauma (such as child abuse, rape, or the terrors of war), even tragedy is not permanently depressing:

► FIGURE 12.18

Moods across the day When psychologist David Watson (2000) sampled nearly 4500 mood reports from 150 people, he found this pattern of variation from the average levels of positive and negative emotions.

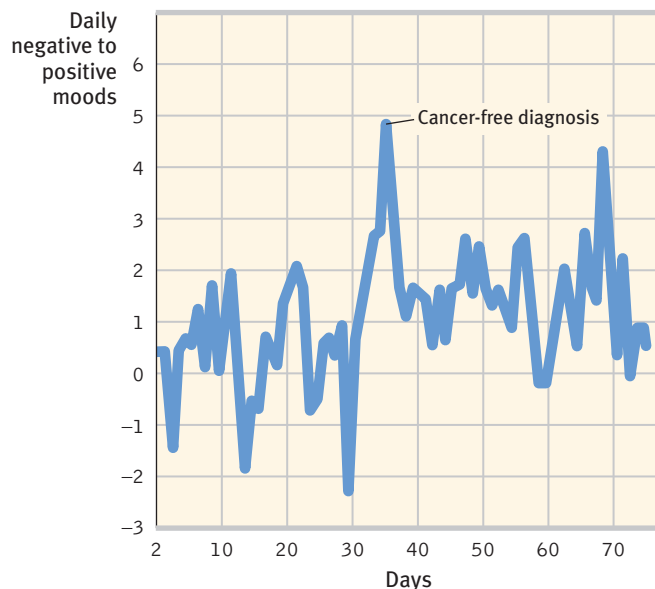


- Learning that one is HIV-positive is devastating. But after five weeks of adapting to the grim news, those who have tested positive report feeling less emotionally distraught than they had expected (Sieff et al., 1999).
- Kidney dialysis patients recognize that their health is relatively poor, yet in their moment-to-moment experiences they report being just as happy as healthy nonpatients (Riis et al., 2005).
- European 8- to 12-year-olds with cerebral palsy experience normal psychological well-being (Dickinson et al., 2007).

“If you are a paraplegic,” explains Daniel Kahneman (2005), “you will gradually start thinking of other things, and the more time you spend thinking of other things the less miserable you are going to be.” A major disability often leaves people less happy than average, yet happier than able-bodied people with depression (Kübler et al., 2005; Lucas, 2007a,b; Oswald & Powdthavee, 2006; Schwartz & Estrin, 2004). Even patients “locked-in” a motionless body “rarely want to die,” report Eimar Smith and Mark Delargy (2005), which “counters a popular misconception that such patients would have been better off dead.”

In less life-threatening contexts, the pattern continues. Faculty members up for tenure expect their lives would be deflated by a negative decision. Actually, 5 to 10 years later, those denied are not noticeably less happy than those who were awarded tenure, reported Daniel Gilbert and colleagues (1998). The same is true of romantic breakups, which feel devastating. The surprising reality: *We overestimate the duration of our emotions and underestimate our capacity to adapt.*

Positive emotions are similarly hard to sustain. In *Rethinking Happiness: The Science of Psychological Wealth*, Ed Diener and Robert Biswas-Diener (2009) illustrate the short life of most emotions with daily happiness reports of a 21-year-old student undergoing treatment for Hodgkins disease, a cancer of the immune system. Midway through his 80 daily reports, the young man learned the treatment had effectively wiped out his cancer. As FIGURE 12.19 shows, on the day he received this wonderful news, he was elated. But although the ensuing month was relatively free of down-in-the-dumps days, his emotions soon returned to near their previous level, with fluctuations in response to daily events.



► **FIGURE 12.19**
The short life of strong emotions A university student's daily reports of negative and positive moods revealed day-to-day fluctuations, punctuated by temporary elation on the day he learned that he was now cancer free. (From Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2009.)



Courtesy of Anna Putt

Human resilience Seven weeks after her 1994 wedding, Anna Putt of South Midlands, England, shown here with her husband, Des, suffered a brainstem stroke that left her “locked-in.” For months after, she recalls, “I was paralyzed from the neck down and was unable to communicate. These were VERY frightening times. But with encouragement from family, friends, faith, and medical staff, I tried to keep positive.” In the ensuing three years, she became able to “talk” (by nodding at letters), to steer an electric wheelchair with her head, and to use a computer (by nodding while wearing spectacles that guide a cursor). Despite her paralysis, she reports that “I enjoy going out in the fresh air. My motto is ‘Don’t look back, move forward.’ God would not want me to stop trying and I have no intention of doing so. Life is what you make of it!”

“Weeping may tarry for the night,
 but joy comes with the morning.”

Psalm 30:5

- In both World Values Surveys in 97 countries (Inglehart, 2008) and Gallup (2008) surveys in 130 countries, the highest self-reported happiness was found in Denmark. •



"Money won't make you happy, Waldron. So instead of a raise, I'm giving a Prozac."

➤ **FIGURE 12.20**
The changing materialism of entering collegians Surveys of more than 200,000 entering U.S. collegians per year have revealed an increasing desire for wealth after 1970. (From *The American Freshman* surveys, UCLA, 1966 to 2007.)

Wealth and Well-Being

"Do you think you would be happier if you made more money?" Yes, replied 73 percent of Americans in a 2006 Gallup poll. How important is "Being very well off financially?" In recent years, this has, for entering U.S. collegians, been ranked first or second among 21 possible objectives. Some 3 in 4 students rate their top two objectives—being "very well off" and "raising a family"—as "extremely important" or "essential" (FIGURE 12.20).

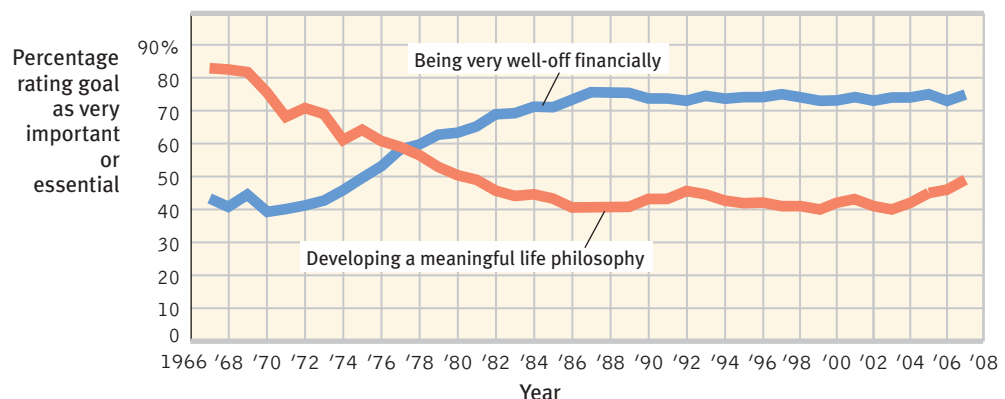
There is evidence that wealth, to a point, correlates with well-being. Consider:

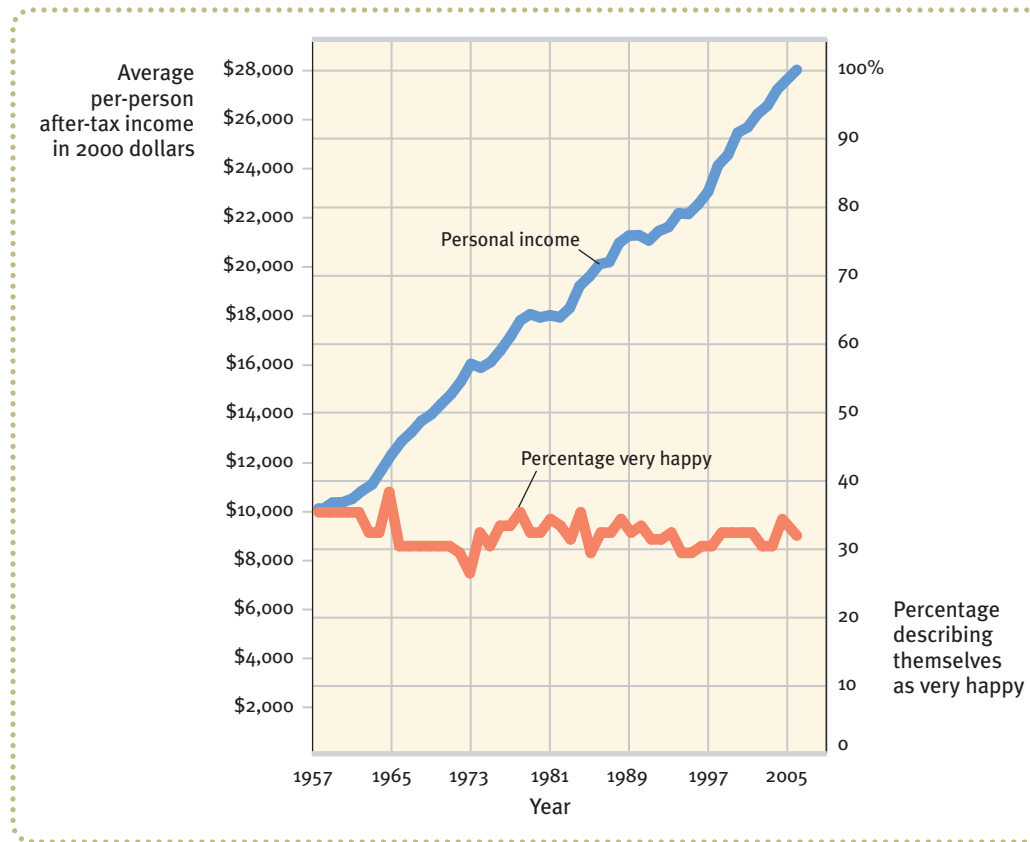
- Within most countries, though especially in poor countries, individuals with lots of money are typically happier than those who struggle to afford life's basic needs (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2009; Howell & Howell, 2008). They also, as we will see later in this chapter, often enjoy better health than those stressed by poverty and lack of control over their lives.
- People in rich countries are also somewhat happier than those in poor countries (Inglehart, 2009).
- Those who have experienced a recent windfall from a lottery, an inheritance, or a surging economy typically feel some elation (Diener & Oishi, 2000; Gardner & Oswald, 2007).

So, it seems that money enough to buy your way out of hunger and hopelessness also buys some happiness. Wealth is like health: Its utter absence breeds misery. But once one has enough money for comfort and security, piling up more and more matters less and less. This *diminishing returns* phenomenon is familiar to economists as *diminishing marginal utility* and to you as the second piece of dessert satisfying you less than the first. As Robert Cummins (2006) confirms with Australian data, the power of more money to increase happiness is significant at low incomes and diminishes as income rises. A \$1000 annual wage increase does a lot more for the average person in Malawi than for the average person in Switzerland. This implies, he adds, that raising low incomes will do more to increase human well-being than raising high incomes.

The income-happiness correlation seemingly occurs because more income produces greater happiness. But perhaps, note John Cacioppo and his collaborators (2008), more happiness produces greater income. So it was among the middle-aged adults whom they studied over time: Today's happiness predicted tomorrow's income better than today's income predicted tomorrow's happiness. (Recall that after graduation, happy collegians likewise outearn their less happy fellow students.)

And consider this: During the last four decades, the average U.S. citizen's buying power almost tripled. Did this greater wealth—enabling twice as many cars per person, not to mention iPods, laptops, and camera cell phones—also buy more happiness? As FIGURE 12.21 shows, the average American, though certainly richer, is not a





► FIGURE 12.21

Does money buy happiness? It surely helps us to avoid certain types of pain. Yet, though buying power has almost tripled since the 1950s, the average American's reported happiness has remained almost unchanged. (Happiness data from National Opinion Research Center surveys; income data from *Historical Statistics of the United States and Economic Indicators*.)

bit happier. In 1957, some 35 percent said they were “very happy,” as did slightly fewer—32 percent—in 2006. Much the same has been true of Europe, Australia, and Japan, where people enjoy better nutrition, health care, education, and science, and they are somewhat happier than those in very poor countries (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002, 2009; Speth, 2008). Yet their increasing real incomes have *not* produced increasing happiness. This finding lobs a bombshell at modern materialism: *Economic growth in affluent countries has provided no apparent boost to morale or social well-being.*

Ironically, those who strive hardest for wealth tend to live with lower well-being, a finding that “comes through very strongly in every culture I’ve looked at,” reported Richard Ryan (1999). This is especially so for those seeking money to prove themselves, gain power, or show off rather than support their families (Srivastava et al., 2001). Ryan’s collaborator, Tim Kasser (2000, 2002), concluded from their studies that those who instead strive for “intimacy, personal growth, and contribution to the community” experience a higher quality of life.

If we are richer and healthier than were our grandparents at our age, but no happier, should our national priorities focus more on advancing psychological well-being? In Bhutan, King Jigme Singye Wangchuk says that “gross national happiness is more important than gross national product.” Bhutan’s prime minister frames his annual report in terms of Bhutan’s four pillars of progress toward national happiness: “The promotion of equitable and sustainable socio-economic development, preservation and promotion of cultural values, conservation of the natural environment, and establishment of good governance” (Esty, 2004). Diener (2006), supported by 52 colleagues, has proposed ways in which nations might measure national well-being. “Policymakers should be interested in subjective well-being not only because of its inherent value to citizens, but also because individuals’ subjective well-being can have positive spillover benefits for the society as a whole.”

“Americans say that money doesn’t bring happiness. But it helps you to live with misery in comfort.”

Farah Pahlavi, exiled widow of the wealthy Shah of Iran, 2004

“Australians are three times richer than their parents and grandparents were in the 1950s, but they are not happier.”

A *Manifesto for Well-Being*, 2005



“But on the positive side, money can’t buy happiness—so who cares?”

"No happiness lasts for long."

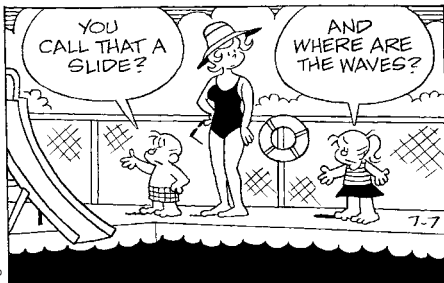
Seneca, *Agamemnon*, A.D. 60

"Continued pleasures wear off. . . . Pleasure is always contingent upon change and disappears with continuous satisfaction."

Dutch psychologist Nico Frijda (1988)

HI & LOIS

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"I have a 'fortune cookie maxim' that I'm very proud of: Nothing in life is quite as important as you think it is while you are thinking about it. So, nothing will ever make you as happy as you think it will."

Nobel Laureate psychologist Daniel Kahneman, Gallup interview, "What Were They Thinking?" 2005

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"Shortly after I realized I had plenty, I realized there was plenty more."

Two Psychological Phenomena: Adaptation and Comparison

Two psychological principles explain why, for those who are not poor, more money buys little more than a temporary surge of happiness and why our emotions seem attached to elastic bands that pull us back from highs or lows. In its own way, each principle suggests that happiness is relative.

Happiness and Prior Experience The **adaptation-level phenomenon** describes our tendency to judge various stimuli relative to those we have previously experienced. As psychologist Harry Helson (1898–1977) explained, we adjust our *neutral* levels—the points at which sounds seem neither loud nor soft, temperatures neither hot nor cold, events neither pleasant nor unpleasant—based on our experience. We then notice and react to variations up or down from these levels.

Thus, if our current condition—our income, academic average, or social prestige—increases, we feel an initial surge of pleasure. We then adapt to this new level of achievement, come to consider it normal, and require something even better to give us another surge of happiness. From my childhood, I can recall the thrill of watching

my family's first 12-inch, black-and-white TV. Now, after viewing a movie on a family member's 60-inch high-definition screen, I am unimpressed by my once wonderful 27-inch TV. Having adapted upward, I perceive as neutral what I once experienced as positive.

So, could we ever create a permanent social paradise? Social psychologist Donald Campbell (1975) answered *no*:

If you woke up tomorrow to your utopia—perhaps a world with no bills, no ills, perfect scores, someone who loves you unreservedly—you would feel euphoric, for a time. But then you would gradually recalibrate your adaptation level. Before long, you would again sometimes feel gratified (when achievements surpass expectations), sometimes feel deprived (when they fall below), and sometimes feel neutral. *The point to remember*: Satisfaction and dissatisfaction, success and failure—all are relative to our recent experience. Satisfaction, as Ryan (1999) said, "has a short half-life."

The point is not that, so far as long-term happiness goes, nothing really matters. Despite our remarkable adaptiveness and resilience, after being struck by a severe disability, we may not rebound all the way back to our former emotions (Diener et al., 2006). Moreover, there are some things we can do to enhance our happiness (see Close-Up: How to Be Happier).

Happiness and Others' Attainments Happiness is relative not only to our past experience but also to our comparisons with others (Lyubomirsky, 2001). We are always comparing ourselves with others. And whether we feel good or bad depends on who those others are. We are slow-witted or clumsy only when others are smarter or more agile.

Two examples: To explain the frustration expressed by U.S. Air Corps soldiers during World War II, researchers formulated the concept of **relative deprivation**—the sense that we are worse off than others with whom we compare ourselves. Despite a relatively rapid promotion rate for the group, many soldiers were frustrated about their own promotion rates (Merton & Kitt, 1950). Apparently, seeing so many others being promoted inflated the soldiers' expectations. And when expectations soar above attainments, the result is disappointment. Alex Rodriguez's 10-year, \$275 million baseball contract surely made him temporarily happy, but it likely also diminished other star players' satisfaction with their lesser, multimillion-dollar contracts.

CLOSE-UP

How to Be Happier

Happiness, like cholesterol level, is a genetically influenced trait. Yet as cholesterol is also influenced by diet and exercise, so our happiness is to some extent under our personal control. Here are some research-based suggestions for improving your mood and increasing your satisfaction with life.

1. **Realize that enduring happiness may not come from financial success.** People adapt to changing circumstances. Thus wealth is like health: Its utter absence breeds misery, but having it (or any circumstance we long for) doesn't guarantee happiness.
2. **Take control of your time.** Happy people feel in control of their lives. To master your use of time, set goals and break them into daily aims. Although we often overestimate how much we will accomplish in any given day (leaving us frustrated), we generally underestimate how much we can accomplish in a year, given just a little progress every day.
3. **Act happy.** We can sometimes act ourselves into a happier frame of mind. Manipulated into a smiling expression, people feel better; when they scowl, the whole world seems to scowl back. So put on a happy face. Talk as if you feel positive self-esteem, are optimistic, and are outgoing. Going through the motions can trigger the emotions.
4. **Seek work and leisure that engage your skills.** Happy people often are in a zone called *flow*—absorbed in tasks that challenge but don't overwhelm them. The most expensive forms of leisure (sitting on a yacht) often provide less flow experience than gardening, socializing, or craft work. Take time to savor such pleasant experiences.
5. **Join the "movement" movement.** Aerobic exercise can relieve mild depression and anxiety and promote health and

energy. Sound minds reside in sound bodies. Off your duffs, couch potatoes.

6. **Give your body the sleep it wants.** Happy people live active vigorous lives yet reserve time for renewing sleep and solitude. Many people suffer from sleep debt, with resulting fatigue, diminished alertness, and gloomy moods.
7. **Give priority to close relationships.** Intimate friendships with those who care deeply about you can help you weather difficult times. Confiding is good for soul and body. Resolve to nurture your closest relationships by *not* taking your loved ones for granted, by displaying to them the sort of kindness you display to others, by affirming them, by playing together and sharing together.
8. **Focus beyond self.** Reach out to those in need. Happiness increases helpfulness (those who feel good do good). But doing good also makes one feel good.
9. **Count your blessings and record your gratitude.** Keeping a gratitude journal heightens well-being (Emmons, 2007; Seligman et al., 2005). Try pausing each day to record positive events and why they occurred. Express your gratitude to others.
10. **Nurture your spiritual self.** For many people, faith provides a support community, a reason to focus beyond self, and a sense of purpose and hope. That helps explain why people active in faith communities report greater-than-average happiness and often cope well with crisis.

Digested from David G. Myers, *The Pursuit of Happiness* (Harper).

Likewise, the economic surge that has made some urban Chinese newly affluent appears to have fueled among others a sense of relative deprivation (Burkholder, 2005a,b).

Such comparisons help us understand why the middle- and upper-income people in a given country, who can compare themselves with the relatively poor, tend to be slightly more satisfied with life than their less fortunate compatriots. Nevertheless, once people reach a moderate income level, further increases buy little more happiness. Why? Because as people climb the ladder of success they mostly compare themselves with peers who are at or above their current level (Gruder, 1977; Suls & Tesch, 1978). "Beggars do not envy millionaires, though of course they will envy other beggars who are more successful," noted Bertrand Russell (1930, p. 90). Thus, "Napoleon envied Caesar, Caesar envied Alexander, and Alexander, I daresay, envied Hercules, who never existed. You cannot, therefore, get away from envy by means of success alone, for there will always be in history or legend some person even more successful than you are" (pp. 68–69).

Just as comparing ourselves with those who are better off creates envy, so counting our blessings as we compare ourselves with those worse off boosts our contentment. Marshall Dermer and his colleagues (1979) demonstrated this by asking University

- The effect of comparison with others helps explain why students of a given level of academic ability tend to have a higher academic self-concept if they attend a school where most other students are not exceptionally able (Marsh & Parker, 1984). If you were near the top of your graduating class, you might feel inferior upon entering a college or university where all students were near the top of their class. ●

:: **adaptation-level phenomenon** our tendency to form judgments (of sounds, of lights, of income) relative to a neutral level defined by our prior experience.

:: **relative deprivation** the perception that one is worse off relative to those with whom one compares oneself.



“Researchers say I’m not happier for being richer, but do you know how much researchers make?”

TABLE 12.1

HAPPINESS IS . . .

Researchers Have Found That Happy People Tend to

- Have high self-esteem (in individualistic countries).
- Be optimistic, outgoing, and agreeable.
- Have close friendships or a satisfying marriage.
- Have work and leisure that engage their skills.
- Have a meaningful religious faith.
- Sleep well and exercise.

However, Happiness Seems Not Much Related to Other Factors, Such as

- Age.
- Gender (women are more often depressed, but also more often joyful).
- Parenthood (having children or not).
- Physical attractiveness.

Sources: Summarized from DeNeve & Cooper (1998), Diener et al. (2003), Lucas et al. (2004), Myers (1993, 2000), Myers & Diener (1995, 1996), and Steel et al. (2008).

- **Studies of chimpanzees in zoos reveal that happiness in chimpanzees, as rated by 200 employees, is also genetically influenced (Weiss et al., 2000, 2002).** •



“I could cry when I think of the years I wasted accumulating money, only to learn that my cheerful disposition is genetic.”

of Wisconsin-Milwaukee women to study others’ deprivation and suffering. After viewing vivid depictions of how grim life was in Milwaukee in 1900, or after imagining and then writing about various personal tragedies, such as being burned and disfigured, the women expressed greater satisfaction with their own lives. Similarly, when mildly depressed people read about someone who is even more depressed, they feel somewhat better (Gibbons, 1986). “I cried because I had no shoes,” states a Persian saying, “until I met a man who had no feet.”

Predictors of Happiness

If, as the adaptation-level phenomenon implies, our emotions tend to rebound toward our normal, why are some people normally so joyful and others so gloomy? The answers vary somewhat by culture. Self-esteem matters more to individualistic Westerners, social acceptance matters more to those in communal cultures (Diener et al., 2003). But across many countries, research does reveal several predictors of happiness (TABLE 12.1).

Although tasks and relationships affect our happiness, genes matter, too. From their study of 254 identical and fraternal twins, David Lykken and Auke Tellegen (1996) estimated that 50 percent of the difference among people’s happiness ratings is heritable. Other twin studies report similar or slightly less heritability (Lucas, 2008). Genes influence the personality traits that mark happy lives (Weiss et al., 2008). Thus even identical twins raised apart are often similarly happy.

But when researchers have followed thousands of lives over two decades, they observe that people’s “happiness set point” is not fixed (Lucas & Donnellan, 2007). Satisfaction may rise or fall, and happiness can be influenced by factors that are under our control. A striking example: In a long-term study of people in Germany, married partners were as similarly satisfied with their lives as were identical twins (Schimmack & Lucas, 2007). Genes matter. But as this study hints, relationship quality matters, too.

Our studies of happiness remind us that emotions combine physiological activation (left hemisphere especially), expressive behaviors (smiles), and conscious thoughts (“I was so ready for that test!”) and feelings (pride, satisfaction). Fear, anger, happiness, and so much else have this in common: They are biopsychosocial phenomena. Our genetic predispositions, brain activity, outlooks, experiences, relationships, and cultures jointly form us.