

Happiness

12-11 What are the causes and consequences of happiness?

Our state of happiness or unhappiness colors everything. Happy people perceive the world as safer and feel more confident. They make decisions, cooperate more easily, and are more tolerant. They rate job applicants more favorably, savor their positive past experiences without dwelling on the negative, and are more socially connected. They live healthier and more energized and satisfied lives (Briñol et al., 2007; Liberman et al., 2009; Mauss et al., 2011). When your mood is gloomy, life as a whole seems depressing and meaningless—and you think more skeptically and attend more critically to your surroundings. Let your mood brighten, and your thinking broadens and becomes more playful and creative (Baas et al., 2008; Forgas, 2008b; Fredrickson, 2006).

This helps explain why college students' happiness helps predict their life course. In one study, women with natural, happy smiles in 1950s college yearbook photos were more likely to be happily married in middle age (Harker & Keltner, 2001). In one 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). When we are happy, our relationships, self-image, and hopes for the future also seem more promising.

Moreover—and this is one of psychology's most consistent findings—happiness doesn't just feel good, it does good. 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). (The reverse is also true: Doing good also promotes good feeling, a phenomenon harnessed by some happiness coaches as they assign people to perform a daily "random act of kindness" and to record the results.)

William James was writing about the importance of happiness ("the secret motive for all [we] do") as early as 1902. With the twenty-first century rise of *positive psychology* (see Chapter 13), have come many studies of **subjective well-being**—our feelings of happiness (sometimes defined as a high ratio of positive to negative feelings) or sense of satisfaction with life.

The Short Life of Emotional Ups and Downs

Are some days of the week happier than others? In what is surely psychology's biggest-ever data sample, social psychologist Adam Kramer (at my request and in cooperation with Facebook) did a naturalistic observation of emotion words in "billions" of status updates. After eliminating exceptional days, such as holidays, he tracked the frequency of positive and negative emotion words by day of the week. The most positive moods days? Friday and Saturday (FIGURE 12.16). For you, too?

Over the long run, our emotional ups and downs tend to balance out. This is true even over the course of the day (FIGURE 12.17 on the next page). Positive emotion rises over the early to middle part of most days and then drops off (Kahneman et al., 2004; Watson, 2000). A stressful event—an argument, a sick child, a car problem—can trigger a bad mood. 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.

Even when negative events drag us down for longer periods, our bad mood usually ends. Romantic breakups feel devastating, but eventually the wound heals. Faculty members up for tenure expect their

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.

FIGURE 12.16

Using web science to track happy days Adam Kramer (personal correspondence, 2010) tracked positive and negative emotion words in many "billions" (the exact number is proprietary information) of status updates of U.S. Facebook users between September 7, 2007 and November 17, 2010.

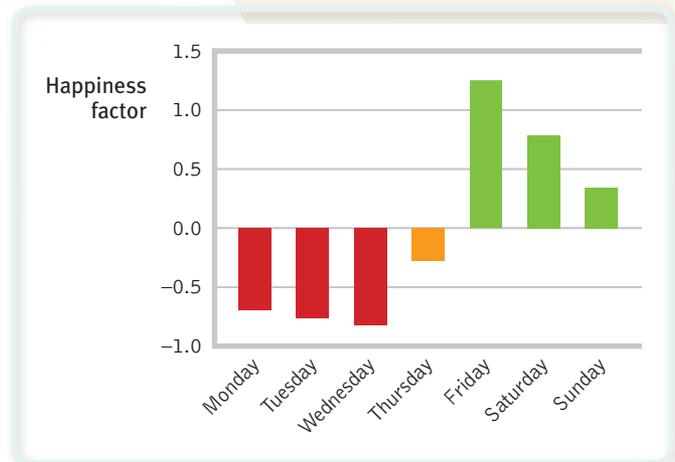
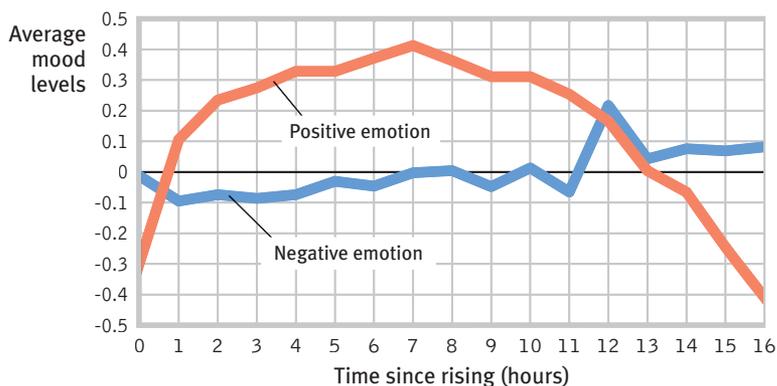


FIGURE 12.17**Moods across the day**

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.



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 recalled, “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 (with head movements that guide a cursor). Despite her paralysis, she has reported 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!”

lives would be deflated by a negative decision. Actually, 5 to 10 years later, their happiness level is about the same as for those who received tenure (Gilbert et al., 1998).

Grief over the loss of a loved one or anxiety after a severe trauma (such as child abuse, rape, or the terrors of war) can linger. But usually, even tragedy is not permanently depressing. People who become blind or paralyzed usually recover near-normal levels of day-to-day happiness. So do those who must go on kidney dialysis or have permanent colostomies (Gerhart et al., 1994; Riis et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2009). And in European studies, 8- to 12-year-olds with cerebral palsy experienced normal psychological well-being (Dickinson et al., 2007).

People mostly cope well with a permanent disability, although they may not rebound all the way back to their former emotions (Diener et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2009). A major disability leaves people less happy than average, yet much happier than able-bodied people with depression (Kübler et al., 2005; Lucas, 2007a,b; Oswald & Powdthavee, 2006; Schwartz & Estrin, 2004). “If you are a paraplegic,” explained 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.” Contrary to what many people believe, most patients “locked-in” a motionless body do not say they want to die (Bruno et al., 2008, 2011; Smith & Delargy, 2005).

The surprising reality: *We overestimate the duration of our emotions and underestimate our resiliency and capacity to adapt.* (As one who inherited hearing loss with a trajectory toward that of my mother, who spent the last 13 years of her life completely deaf, I take heart from these findings.)

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?” *Very important*, say many entering U.S. collegians (FIGURE 12.18). Some 3 in 4 students rate their top two objectives (among 21) as being “very well off” and “raising a family,” and they grade them “extremely important” or “essential.”

And to a point, wealth does correlate with well-being. Consider:

- In most countries, and 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; Lucas & Schimmack, 2009). And, as we will see later in this chapter, they often enjoy better health than those stressed by poverty and lack of control over their lives.

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

Psalms 30:5

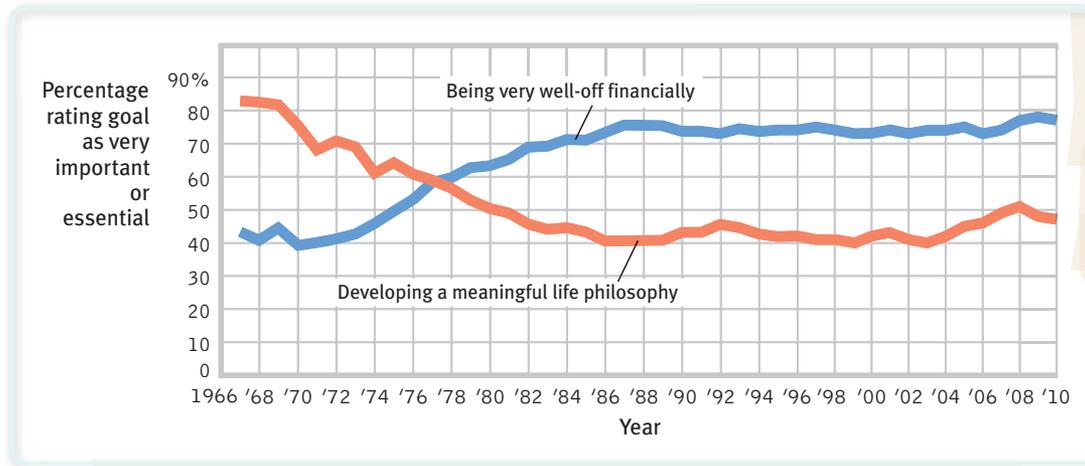


FIGURE 12.18

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 2010.)

- People in rich countries also experience greater well-being than those in poor countries (Diener et al., 2009; Inglehart, 2008; see FIGURE 12.19). The same is true for those in higher income American states (Oswald & Wu, 2010).

So, it seems that money enough to buy your way out of hunger and hopelessness also buys some happiness. But once one has enough money for comfort and security, piling up more and more matters less and less. Ever more money does allow us to enjoy more things and feel more control over our lives, but it does less to increase our *feelings* of happiness (Diener et al., 2009; Kahneman & Deaton, 2010). That's partly because of the *diminishing returns* phenomenon (familiar to economists as *diminishing marginal utility*). Experiencing luxury diminishes our savoring of life's simpler pleasures (Quoidbach et al., 2010). If you've skied the Alps, your neighborhood sledding hill pales.

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 happiness than raising high incomes.

And consider this: During the last half-century, the average U.S. citizen's buying power almost tripled. Did this greater wealth—enabling twice as many cars per person,



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

C. Harley Schwadron/www.cartoonbank.com



Michelle Krogmeier

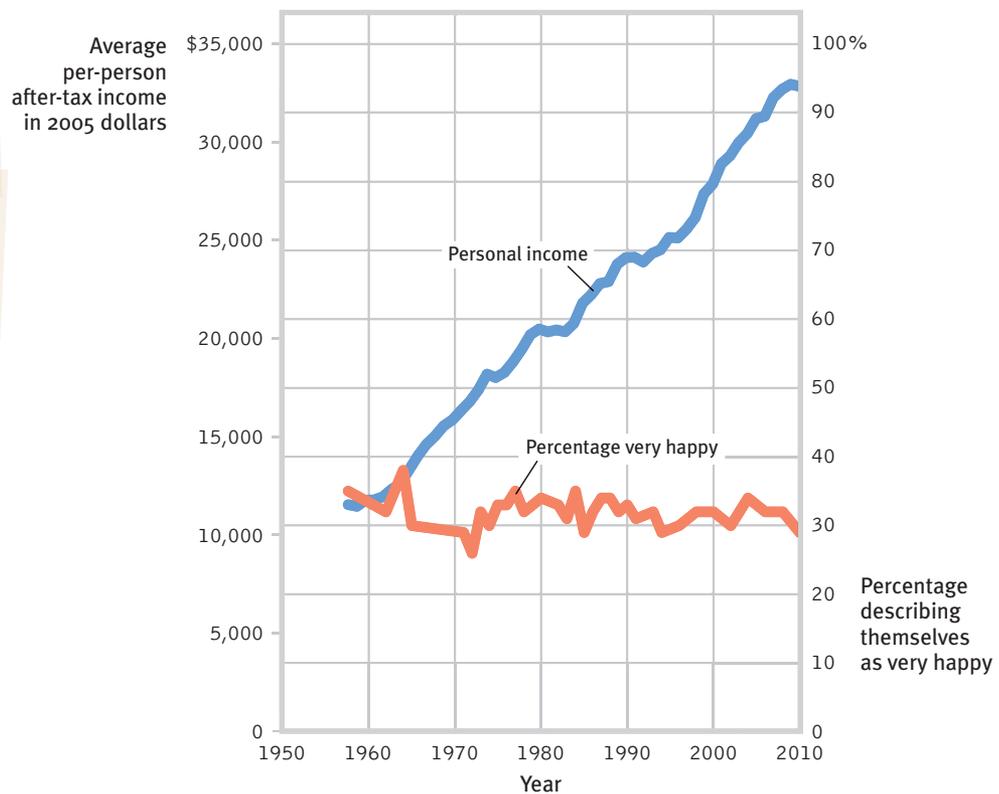
FIGURE 12.19

Well-being across the planet

The Gallup World Poll has surveyed nearly a half-million people across countries representing 99 percent of the human population. One question invited people to imagine a 10-step ladder, where 10 is "the best possible life for you" and 0 is "the worst possible life for you." "On which step of the ladder would you say you personally feel you stand?" As you can see, people in the wealthier countries of North America, Western Europe, and Australia and New Zealand have tended to rate their lives higher. (Courtesy The Gallup Organization, 2011.)

FIGURE 12.20

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*.)



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

“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

“No happiness lasts for long.”

Seneca, *Agamemnon*, c.E. 60

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

Dutch psychologist Nico Frijda (1988)

not to mention iPods, laptops, and smartphones—also buy more happiness? As **FIGURE 12.20** shows, the average American, though certainly richer, is not a bit happier. In 1957, some 35 percent said they were “very happy,” as did slightly fewer—32 percent—in 2008. Much the same has been true of Europe, Australia, and Japan, where increasing real incomes have *not* produced increasing happiness (Australian Unity, 2008; Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002, 2009; Di Tella & MacCulloch, 2010). Ditto China, where living standards have risen but satisfaction has not (Brockmann et al., 2009). These findings lob a bombshell at modern materialism: *Economic growth in affluent countries has provided no apparent boost to morale or social well-being.*

Ironically, in every culture, those who strive hardest for wealth have tended to live with lower well-being (Ryan, 1999), especially when those hard-driving people were seeking money to prove themselves, gain power, or show off rather than support their families (Niemiec et al., 2009; Srivastava et al., 2001). Those who instead strive for intimacy, personal growth, and contribution to the community experience a higher quality of life (Kasser, 2002, 2011).

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 Is Relative to Our Own Experience The **adaptation-level phenomenon** describes our tendency to judge various stimuli in comparison with our past experiences. 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—improves, we feel an initial surge of pleasure, come to consider this new level normal, and require something even better to give us another surge of happiness. I can recall the childhood thrill of watching my family’s first 12-inch, black-and-white TV. Years later, after watching movies on a family member’s 60-inch high-definition screen, I adapted upward, and became unimpressed by my once wonderful 27-inch TV. Yesterday’s marvelous becomes today’s mundane.

So, could we ever create a permanent social paradise? Probably not (Campbell, 1975; Di Tella & MacCulloch, 2010). People 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 would you, if you woke up tomorrow to your utopia—perhaps a world with no bills, no ills, perfect scores, someone who loves you unreservedly. But after a time, you would gradually recalibrate your adaptation level, and you would adjust your new neutral level to include these new experiences. Before long, you would again sometimes feel gratified (when events exceed your expectations) and sometimes feel deprived (when they fall below), and sometimes feel neutral. *The point to remember:* Feelings of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, success and failure are judgments we make based on our prior experience. Satisfaction, as Richard Ryan (1999) said, “has a short half life.” Ditto disappointment, which means that you may bounce back from a setback sooner than you expect.

Happiness Is Relative to Others’ Success We are always comparing ourselves with others. And whether we feel good or bad depends on who those others are (Lyubomirsky, 2001). We are slow-witted or clumsy only when others are smarter or more agile. This sense that we are worse off than others with whom we compare ourselves is the concept of **relative deprivation**.

During World War II, U.S. Air Corps soldiers experienced a relatively rapid promotion rate. Nevertheless, many individual soldiers were frustrated about their own comparatively slow promotion rates (Merton & Kitt, 1950). Seeing so many others being promoted apparently inflated the soldiers’ expectations. Likewise, the economic surge that has made some urban Chinese newly affluent appears to have fueled among other Chinese a sense of relative deprivation (Burkholder, 2005a,b).

When expectations soar above attainments, the result is disappointment. Relative deprivation showed up again when Alex Rodriguez achieved a 10-year, \$275 million baseball contract. His deal surely made him temporarily happy, but it likely also diminished other star players’ satisfaction with their lesser, multimillion-dollar contracts. Satisfaction stems less from our income than our income rank (Boyce et al., 2010). Better to make \$50,000 when others make \$25,000 than to make \$100,000 when one’s friends, neighbors, and co-workers make \$200,000 (Solnick & Hemenway, 1998, 2009).

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 more satisfied with life than are 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 local peers who are at or above their current level (Gruder, 1977; Suls & Tesch, 1978; Zell & Alicke, 2010). “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. In one study, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee women considered others’ deprivation and suffering (Dermer et al., 1979). They viewed vivid depictions of how grim life was in Milwaukee in 1900. They imagined and then wrote about various personal tragedies, such as



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“Every year it costs me more just to stay as amused as I was the year before.”

“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

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.

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

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

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

being burned and disfigured. Later, the women expressed greater satisfaction with their own lives. Similarly, when mildly depressed people have read about someone who was even more depressed, they felt 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

Happy people share many characteristics (TABLE 12.2). But why are some people normally so joyful and others so somber? Here, as in so many other areas, the answer is found in the interplay between nature and nurture.

Genes matter. In one study of 254 identical and fraternal twins, about 50 percent of the difference among people’s happiness ratings was heritable (Lykken & Tellegen, 1996). Other twin studies report similar or slightly less heritability (Bartels & Boomsma, 2009; Lucas, 2008; Nes et al., 2010). Identical twins raised apart are often similarly happy.

But our personal history and our culture matter, too. On the personal level, as we have seen, our emotions tend to balance around a level defined by our experience. On the cultural level, groups vary in the traits they value. Self-esteem and achievement matter more to Westerners, who value individualism. Social acceptance and harmony matter more to those in communal cultures such as Japan that stress family and community (Diener et al., 2003; Uchida & Kitayama, 2009).

Depending on our genes, our outlook, and our recent experiences, our happiness seems to fluctuate around our “happiness set point,” which disposes some people to be ever upbeat and others more negative. Even so, after following thousands of lives over two decades, researchers have determined that our satisfaction with life is not fixed (Lucas & Donnellan, 2007). Happiness rises and falls, and can be influenced by factors that are under our control. A striking example: In a long-term German study, 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. (For research-based hints on enhancing your own happiness, see Close-Up: Want to Be Happier?)

If we can enhance our happiness on an individual level, could we use happiness research to refocus our national priorities more on advancing psychological well-being? Many psychologists believe we could. Diener (2006, 2009), 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.” Happiness research offers new ways to assess the impacts of various public policies, argue Diener and his colleagues. Happy societies are not only prosperous, but also places where people trust one another, feel free, and enjoy close relationships (Oishi

TABLE 12.2

Happiness Is . . .

Researchers Have Found That Happy People Tend to	However, Happiness Seems Not Much Related to Other Factors, Such as
Have high self-esteem (in individualistic countries).	Age.
Be optimistic, outgoing, and agreeable.	Gender (women are more often depressed, but also more often joyful).
Have close friendships or a satisfying marriage.	Parenthood (having children or not).
Have work and leisure that engage their skills.	Physical attractiveness.
Have an active religious faith.	
Sleep well and exercise.	

Sources: Summarized from DeNeve & Cooper (1998), Diener et al. (2003), Headey et al. (2010), Lucas et al. (2004), Myers (1993, 2000), Myers & Diener (1995, 1996), and Steel et al. (2008). Veenhoven (2009) offers a data base of 11,000+ correlates of happiness at worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl.

CLOSE-UP

Want to Be Happier?

Your happiness, like your cholesterol level, is genetically influenced. Yet as cholesterol is also influenced by diet and exercise, so happiness is partly under your control (Nes, 2010; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Here are some research-based suggestions for improving your mood and increasing your satisfaction with life.

Realize that enduring happiness may not come from financial success. We adapt to change by adjusting our expectations. Neither wealth, nor any other circumstance we long for, will guarantee happiness.

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. This may be frustrating at first because we all tend to overestimate how much we will accomplish in any given day. The good news is that we generally *underestimate* how much we can accomplish in a year, given just a little progress every day.

Act happy. As you saw earlier in this chapter, people who were manipulated into a smiling expression felt better. So put on a happy face. Talk as *if* you feel positive self-esteem, are optimistic, and are outgoing. We can often act our way into a happier state of mind.

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 simpler forms, such as gardening, socializing, or craft work. Money also buys more happiness when spent on experiences that you can look forward to, enjoy, and remember than when spent on material stuff (Carter & Gilovich, 2010). As pundit Art Buchwald said, "The best things in life aren't things."

Join the "movement" movement. Aerobic exercise can relieve mild depression and anxiety as it promotes health and energy. Sound minds

reside in sound bodies. Off your duffs, couch potatoes!

Give your body the sleep it wants. Happy people live active lives yet reserve time for renewing sleep and solitude. Many people suffer from sleep debt, with resulting fatigue, diminished alertness, and gloomy moods.

Give priority to close relationships. Intimate friendships can help you weather difficult times. Confiding is good for soul and body. Compared with unhappy people, happy people engage in less superficial small talk and more meaningful conversations (Mehl et al., 2010). So resolve to nurture your closest relationships by *not* taking your loved ones for granted. This means displaying to them the sort of kindness you display to others, affirming them, playing together, and sharing together.

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.

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 savor good moments, and to record positive events and why they occurred. Express your gratitude to others.

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).

& Schimmack, 2010). Thus, when debating the minimum wage, economic inequality, tax rates, divorce laws, health care, and neighborhood planning, people's psychological well-being should be a prime consideration—a point now affirmed by the Canadian, French, German, and British governments, which have added well-being measures to their national agendas (Cohen, 2011; Gertner, 2010; Stiglitz, 2009). The predictive power of national well-being assessments was apparent in 2011, as the governments of Egypt and Tunisia succumbed to popular uprisings in the aftermath of declining life satisfaction (FIGURE 12.21).

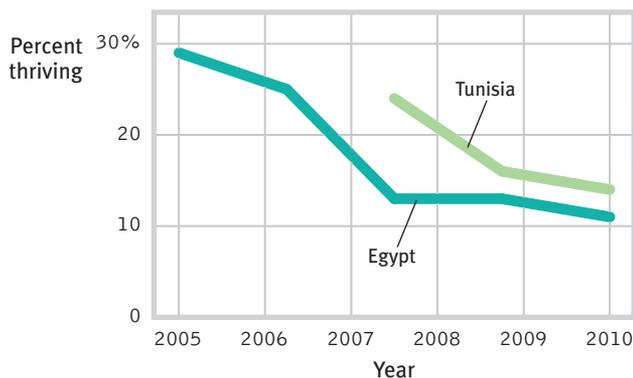


FIGURE 12.21

Declining well-being in Egypt and Tunisia prior to popular revolts In Gallup surveys, the percentage of people who were "thriving" (rating their life satisfaction 7 or higher and projecting their next five years at 8 or higher on a 10-step scale) declined in advance of 2011 demonstrations that led to a change of government (Clifton & Morales, 2011).