Happiness

12-12 What is the feel-good, do-good phenomenon, and what is the focus of positive psychology research?

People aspire to, and wish one another, health and happiness. And for good reason. Our state of happiness or unhappiness colors everything. Happy people perceive the world as safer and feel more confident. They are more decisive and cooperate more easily. 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 (DeNeve et al., 2013; 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, 2013).

This helps explain why college students’ happiness helps predict their life course. One study showed that the happiest 20-year-olds were more likely to marry and less likely to divorce (Stutzer & Frey, 2006). 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). 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. Feeling good, for example, increases people’s willingness to donate kidneys. And kidney donation leaves donors feeling good (Brethel-Haurwitz & Marsh, 2014). One survey of more than 200,000 people in 136 countries found that, nearly everywhere, people report feeling happier after spending money on others rather than on themselves (Aknin et al., 2013). Some happiness coaches harness the do-good, feel-good phenomenon as they assign people to perform a daily “random act of kindness” and to record the results.

Positive Psychology

William James was writing about the importance of happiness (“the secret motive for all [we] do”) as early as 1902. By the 1960s, the humanistic psychologists were interested in advancing human fulfillment. In the twenty-first century, under the leadership of American Psychological Association past-president Martin Seligman, positive psychology is using scientific methods to study human flourishing. This young subfield includes 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. For example, researchers are exploring:

* **positive emotions** by assessing exercises and interventions aimed at increasing happiness (Schueller, 2010; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009).

* **positive health** by studying how positive emotions enhance and sustain physical well-being (Seligman, 2008; Seligman et al., 2011).

* **positive neuroscience** by examining the biological foundations of positive emotions, resilience, and social behavior (www.posneuroscience.org).

* **positive education** by evaluating educational efforts to increase students’ engagement, resilience, character strengths, optimism, and sense of meaning (Seligman et al., 2009).

Martin E. P. Seligman “The main purpose of a positive psychology is to measure, understand, and then build the human strengths and the civic virtues.”

**feel-good, do-good phenomenon** people’s tendency to be helpful when already in a good mood.

**positive psychology** the scientific study of human flourishing, with the goals of discovering and promoting strengths and virtues that help individuals and communities to thrive.

**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.

Martin E. P. Seligman

Courtesy of Martin Seligman
Taken together, satisfaction with the past, happiness with the present, and optimism about the future define the positive psychology movement’s first pillar: positive well-being. Seligman views happiness as a by-product of a pleasant, engaged, and meaningful life.

Positive psychology is about building not just a pleasant life, says Seligman, but also a good life that engages one’s skills, and a meaningful life that points beyond oneself. Thus, the second pillar, positive character, focuses on exploring and enhancing creativity, courage, compassion, integrity, self-control, leadership, wisdom, and spirituality.

The third pillar, positive groups, communities, and cultures, seeks to foster a positive social ecology. This includes healthy families, communal neighborhoods, effective schools, socially responsible media, and civil dialogue.

“Positive psychology,” Seligman and colleagues have said (2005), “is an umbrella term for the study of positive emotions, positive character traits, and enabling institutions.” Its focus differs from psychology’s traditional interests during its first century, when attention was directed toward understanding and alleviating negative states—abuse and anxiety, depression and disease, prejudice and poverty. Indeed, articles on selected negative emotions since 1887 have outnumbered those on positive emotions by 17 to 1.

In ages past, times of relative peace and prosperity have enabled cultures to turn their attention from repairing weakness and damage to promoting what Seligman (2002) has called “the highest qualities of life.” Prosperous fifth-century Athens nurtured philosophy and democracy. Flourishing fifteenth-century Florence nurtured great art. Victorian England, flush with the bounty of the British Empire, nurtured honor, discipline, and duty. In this millennium, Seligman believes, thriving Western cultures have a parallel opportunity to create, as a “humane, scientific monument,” a more positive psychology, concerned not only with weakness and damage but also with strength and virtue. Thanks to his leadership, the movement has gained strength, with supporters in 77 countries from Croatia to China (IPPA, 2009, 2010; Seligman, 2004, 2011). Their research on human flourishing has given us insights into many aspects of our well-being, including studies of the predictors of happiness.

Will psychology have a more positive mission in this century? Without slighting the need to repair damage and cure disease, positive psychology’s proponents hope so. With American Psychologist and British Psychologist special issues devoted to positive psychology; with many new books; with networked scientists working in worldwide research groups; and with prizes, research awards, summer institutes, and a graduate program promoting positive psychology scholarship, these psychologists have reason to be positive. Cultivating a more positive psychology mission may help Seligman achieve his most ambitious goal: By the year 2051, 51 percent of the world will be “flourishing.” “It’s in our hands not only to witness this,” he says, “but to take part in making this happen” (Seligman, 2011).

The Short Life of Emotional Ups and Downs

How do time, wealth, adaptation, and comparison affect our happiness levels?

Are some days of the week happier than others? In what is likely psychology’s biggest-ever data sample, social psychologist Adam Kramer (at my [DM’s] 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 12.15). A similar analysis of emotion-related words in 59 million Twitter messages found Friday to Sunday the week’s happiest days (Golder & Macy, 2011). 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 12.16). 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). Our overall judgments of our lives often show lingering effects of good or bad events, but our moods typically rebound (Luhmann et al., 2012). If anything, people tend to bounce back from a bad day 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. A romantic breakup feels devastating, but eventually the wound heals. In one study, faculty members up for tenure expected their lives would be deflated by a negative decision. Actually, 5 to 10 years later, their happiness level was 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 may not completely recover their previous well-being, but those with an agreeable personality usually recover near-normal levels of day-to-day happiness (Boyce & Wood, 2011). So do those who must go on kidney dialysis or have permanent colostomies (Riis et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2009). Even if you lose the use of all four limbs, explained psychologist 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 indicate they want to die (Bruno et al., 2008, 2011; Nizzi et al., 2012; 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 [DM] 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 82 percent of entering U.S. collegians (FIGURE 12.17).

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, they often enjoy better health than those stressed by poverty and lack of control over their lives.

- People in rich countries also experience greater well-being than those in poor countries (Diener et al., 2009; Inglehart, 2008; Tay & Diener, 2011). The same is true for those in higher-income American states (Oswald & Wu, 2010).

So, it seems that having enough money to buy your way out of hunger and to have a sense of control over your life does buy some happiness (Fischer & Boer, 2011). As Australian data confirm, the power of more money to increase happiness is significant at low incomes and diminishes as income rises (Cummins, 2006). A $1000 annual wage increase does a lot more for the average person in Malawi than for the average person in Switzerland. This implies that raising low incomes will do more to increase happiness than raising high incomes.

Once one has enough money for comfort and security, piling up more and more matters less and less. 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.

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, not to mention iPads, smartphones, and HDTVs—also buy more happiness? As FIGURE 12.18 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—33 percent—in 2012. 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 life satisfaction has not (Davey & Rato, 2012; Easterlin et al., 2012). 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, especially when they seek money to prove themselves, gain power, or show off rather than support their families (Niemiec et al., 2009; Ryan, 1999; Srivastava et al., 2001). Those who instead strive for intimacy, personal growth, and community contribution experience a higher quality of life (Kasser, 2002, 2011).

▼ FIGURE 12.17
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. (Data from The American Freshman surveys, UCLA, 1966 to 2013.)
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 form judgments (of sounds, of lights, of income) relative to a neutral level defined by our prior experience. 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, after an initial surge of pleasure, improvements become our “new normal,” and we then require something even better to give us another surge of happiness. Yesterday’s marvelous becomes today’s mundane.

So, could we ever create a permanent social paradise? Probably not (Campbell, 1975; Di Tella et al., 2010). People who have experienced a recent windfall—from a lottery, an inheritance, or a surging economy—typically feel elated (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, and 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 partly 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.

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

Dutch psychologist Nico Frijda (1988)

“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
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. When we sense that we are worse off than others with whom we compare ourselves, we are experiencing relative deprivation. Thus, when Miguel Cabrera achieved an 8-year, $248 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. Likewise, the economic surge that has made some urban Chinese newly affluent appears to have fueled among other Chinese a sense of relative deprivation (Davey & Rato, 2012; Easterlin et al., 2012). Seeing others succeed may inflate our own expectations, and when expectations soar above attainments, the result is disappointment.

Satisfaction stems less from our income than from our income rank (Boyce et al., 2010). Better to make $50,000 when others make $25,000 than to make $100,000 when friends, neighbors, and co-workers make $200,000 (Solnick & Hemenway, 1998, 2009). Likewise, a raise will make you happier if it’s greater than the raise received by others around you (Graham, 2011).

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 have greater life satisfaction 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 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 British philosopher 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).

Over the last half century, inequality in Western countries has increased. The rising economic tide shown in Figure 12.18 has lifted the yachts faster than the rowboats. Does it matter? Places with great inequality have higher crime rates, obesity, anxiety, and drug use, and lower life expectancy (Kawachi et al., 1999; Ratcliff, 2013; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Times and places with greater income inequality also tend to be less happy—a result that people’s social comparisons help explain (Hagerty, 2000; Helliwell et al., 2013; Oishi et al., 2011).

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 (Derrmer 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 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.”

What Predicts Our Happiness Levels?

What are some 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 hundreds of identical and fraternal twins, about 50 percent of the difference among people's happiness ratings was heritable (Gigantesco et al., 2011; 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. Moreover, researchers are now drilling down to identify how specific genes influence our happiness (De Neve et al., 2012; Fredrickson et al., 2013).

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, which stress family and community (Diener et al., 2003; Fulmer et al., 2010; 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). Relationship quality matters.

If we can enhance our happiness on an individual level, could we use happiness research to refocus our national priorities more on the pursuit of happiness? Many psychologists believe we could. Ed Diener (2006, 2009, 2013), 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 (Helliwell et al., 2013; Oishi & Schimmack, 2010). Thus, in debates about the minimum wage, economic inequality, tax rates, divorce laws, health care, and city planning, people’s psychological well-being should be a prime consideration—a point affirmed by 41 nations that have added well-being measures to their national...
Evidence-Based Suggestions For a Happier Life

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 (Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014; Nes, 2010). Here are 11 research-based suggestions for improving your mood and increasing your satisfaction with life.

1. **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.

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. 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.

3. **Act happy.** Research shows that people who are manipulated into a smiling expression feel 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.

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 simpler forms, such as gardening, socializing, or craft work.

5. **Buy shared experiences rather than things.** Compared with money spent on stuff, money buys more happiness when spent on experiences that you look forward to, enjoy, remember, and talk about (Carter & Gilovich, 2010; Kumar & Gilovich, 2013). This is especially so for socially shared experiences (Caprariello & Reis, 2012). The shared experience of a college education may cost a lot, but, as pundit Art Buchwald said, “The best things in life aren’t things.”

6. **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!

---

7. **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.

8. **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.

9. **Focus beyond self.** Reach out to those in need. Perform acts of kindness. Happiness increases helpfulness (those who feel good do good). But doing good also makes us feel good.

10. **Count your blessings and record your gratitude.** Keeping a gratitude journal heightens well-being (Emmons, 2007; Seligman et al., 2005). When something good happens, such as an achievement, take time to appreciate and savor the experience (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2012). Record positive events and why they occurred. Express your gratitude to others.

11. **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 crises.

---

**RETRIEVAL PRACTICE**

- Which of the following factors do NOT predict self-reported happiness? Which factors are better predictors?
  - a. Age
  - b. Personality traits
  - c. Close relationships
  - d. Gender
  - e. Sleep and exercise
  - f. Religious faith

**ANSWERS:** Age and gender (a. and d.) do NOT effectively predict happiness levels. Better predictors are: Personality traits, close relationships, sleep and exercise, and religious faith (b. c. e. f.).

---

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

**RETRIEVAL PRACTICE** Take a moment to answer each of these Learning Objective Questions (repeated here from within this section). Then turn to Appendix C, Complete Chapter Reviews, to check your answers. Research suggests that trying to answer these questions on your own will improve your long-term retention (McDaniel et al., 2009).

- 12-10 What are some basic emotions, and what two dimensions help differentiate them?
- 12-11 What are the causes and consequences of anger?
- 12-12 What is the feel-good, do-good phenomenon, and what is the focus of positive psychology research?
- 12-13 How do time, wealth, adaptation, and comparison affect our happiness levels?
- 12-14 What are some predictors of happiness?

**TERMS AND CONCEPTS TO REMEMBER**

**RETRIEVAL PRACTICE** Test yourself on these terms by trying to write down the definition before flipping back to the page number referenced to check your answer.

- catharsis, p. 477
- feel-good, do-good phenomenon, p. 479
- positive psychology, p. 479
- subjective well-being, p. 479
- adaptation-level phenomenon, p. 483
- relative deprivation, p. 484