

The Four Traits

By Dr. David Myers

What factors make a happy disposition? Who are the people who stay up despite life's downs?

What matters most are four inner traits that predispose positive mental attitudes: self-esteem, sense of personal control, optimism, and extroversion. Dozens of investigations have linked each with psychological well-being.

Self-esteem: Happy People Like Themselves

During the 1980s no topic in psychology was more researched than the area of self. By 1990, four thousand scholarly articles a year—more than triple the number twenty years ago—were exploring the roots and fruits of one's sense of self. Many showed that people with healthy self-esteem were less vulnerable to ulcers and insomnia, less likely to abuse drugs, more independent of pressures to conform, and more persistent at difficult tasks. When the going gets tough, those with strong feelings of self-worth keep going.

Most striking, however, is the connection between *low* self-esteem and psychological disorders, especially depression. Norman, a Canadian college professor, recalled his depression: "I despaired of ever being human again. I honestly felt subhuman, lower than the lowest vermin. Furthermore, I was

self-deprecatory and could not understand why anyone would want to associate with me, let alone love me . . . I was positive that I was a fraud and a phony and that I didn't deserve my Ph.D."

The flip side is a connection between high self-esteem and well-being. In University of Michigan studies of well-being in America, the best predictor of general life satisfaction is not satisfaction with family life, friendships, or income, but satisfaction with self. It's true in other parts of the world as well: people who like and accept themselves feel good about life in general. "I really wouldn't want to be anyone else," said middle-aged Dora. "I'm not perfect. But, like the song says, 'I Wanna Be Me!' and I look forward to each new day."

This finding will come as no surprise to anyone attuned to the pop psychology of our age. Self-help books exhort us to respect ourselves, to dwell on our good points, to be positive about ourselves. Cut the self-pity. Stop the negative talk. To discover love, first love yourself.

Actually, most of us do have a good reputation with ourselves. In studies of self-esteem, even low-scoring people respond in the mid-range of possible scores. (A "low" self-esteem person responds to statements such as "I have good ideas" with a qualifying adjective such as "somewhat" or "sometimes.")

However, all of us sometimes feel inferior—especially when comparing ourselves with those who are a step or two higher on the ladder of status, grades, looks, income, or agility. Looking at all the dates or the honors of a friend can make us feel miserable, even worthless. The deeper and more frequently we have such feelings, the more unhappy and depressed we become.

We can overcome these feelings and obtain healthy self-esteem through genuinely achieving realistic ideals and by accepting ourselves for what we are. Healthy self-esteem provides a sure foundation for enduring joy.

Personal Control: Happy People Believe They Choose Their Destinies

In *Don Juan in Hell*, George Bernard Shaw anticipated the conclusions of countless research studies: "Hell is to drift, heaven is to steer." Summarizing the University of Michigan's nationwide surveys, Angus Campbell commented that "having a strong sense of controlling one's life is a more dependable predictor of positive feelings of well-being than any of the objective conditions of life we have considered." The 15 percent of the populace who feel in control of their lives *and* feel satisfied with themselves have "extraordinarily positive feelings of happiness."

You can be happier

sult, 93 percent became more alert, active, and happy. Similar results have been observed after allowing prisoners to move chairs and control the room lights and TV and after enabling workers to participate in decision making.

The verdict of such studies is reassuring: people thrive best under conditions of democracy and personal freedom. Small wonder that stable democracies have happier citizens. In a late 1990 survey, Galina Balatsky of Moscow State University and Ed Diener of the University of Illinois discovered that Russian university students express a low level of satisfaction with life—noticeably lower than reported by students in other comparably poor countries. To paraphrase Seneca, “Happy are those who choose their own business.”

Happy, too, are those who gain the sense of control from effectively managing their time. Unoccupied time, especially for out-of-work people, is unsatisfying. Sleeping late, hanging out, or watching TV leave an empty feeling. For happy people, time “is filled and planned; they are punctual and efficient,” says Oxford University psychologist Michael Argyle. “For unhappy people time is unfilled, open, and uncommitted; they postpone things and are inefficient.”

One way to manage time is to set big goals, then break them down into daily objectives. Before beginning work on a textbook, I lay out a week-by-week schedule. My goal is not to have the whole book done by a certain date, that’s too remote to energize me day by day. Writing a six-hundred page book seems formidable. But writing three manuscript pages a day is relatively easy. Repeat the same process four hundred times and, presto, you have a twelve-hundred page



manuscript. It’s not hard to reach a goal by attacking it day by day. Moreover, as each mini-deadline is met, you get the delicious, confident feeling of personal control.

Optimism: Happy People Are Hope-Filled

It is fitting that I write these words in my office in the Norman Vincent Peale and Ruth Stafford Peale

Science Center at Hope College. Those who believe that “with enough faith, you can do almost anything” and who see the glass of life as half full, rather than half empty, are usually happier.

Optimists are healthier, too. Several studies reveal that a pessimistic view of life makes us more vulnerable to illness. Harvard graduates who were most pessimistic when interviewed in 1946 were least healthy when restudied in 1980. Virginia Tech students who reacted to bad events pessimistically suffered more colds, sore throats, and flu. In general, optimistic people are less bothered by various illnesses and recover better from coronary bypass surgery and cancer. Blood tests link optimism with stronger immune defenses.

Optimists also enjoy greater success. Rather than seeing setbacks as signs of their incompetence, they view them as flukes or as suggesting a new approach. Psychologist Martin Seligman found that new Metropolitan Life Insurance representa-

tives who put an optimistic spin on bad events sold more policies and were twice as likely to stay on after their first year.

“If you think in negative terms, you will get negative results. If you think in positive terms, you will get positive results. That is the simple fact . . . of an astonishing law of prosperity and success,” offers Norman Vincent Peale in *The Power of Positive Thinking*. “The good news is . . . the bad news can be turned into good news . . . when you change your attitude!” counsels Dr. Robert Schuller in *The 48 Laws of Power*. Two millennia earlier, Virgil put the same law in the *Aeneid*: “They can because they think they can.”

A wealth of new research by Seligman and others confirms Peale’s, Schuller’s, and Virgil’s optimism about optimism. A person who approaches life with an attitude that says “Yes!” to people and possibilities lives with far more joy and adventure than habitual naysayers.

The recipe for well-being requires neither positive nor negative thinking alone, but a mix of *ample optimism* to provide hope, *a dash of pessimism* to prevent complacency, and enough *realism* to discriminate those things we can control from those we cannot. It was for such wisdom that the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr offered his “Serenity Prayer”: “O God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that

cannot be changed, courage to change the things which should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.”

Extroversion: Happy People Are Outgoing

Happy people enjoy high self-esteem, a sense of personal control, an optimistic disposition—and outgoing personalities.

