Prologue
Stop Trying to Be So Happy

What do you want in life? If you made a list, what would be on it? Would you want a bigger car? A bigger family? More free time? Would you want to be happier?

If one of the items on your list says "be happier" (or something like that), get rid of it. Don't get me wrong; there's nothing wrong with being happy. Happy feels good, for one thing. It feels so good that a lot of what people wish for—things that may have shown up on your list such as friends, power, beauty, money—they wish for because they believe that having those things will make them happy. Not only that, but being happy may also help you get what you wish for. Happy people are more popular (cheerful, lively, and enthusiastic people have more social relationships), are more successful (happy college students have higher incomes after graduation), and may even live longer (happy novitiates were the longest-living nuns). So why not try to be happier?

Imagine that you have had a terrible day at work, and you're feeling very unhappy. On the radio on the way home, you hear about a concert featuring works by your favorite composer, who happens to be Igor Stravinsky. "Egad!" you think, "I'll go to the concert, and Igor will cheer me right up, and then I will be happy." So you buy your ticket, and you sit down, and the music starts, and you wait to get happy.

You might have a long wait.

Surprisingly, if you hadn't gone to the concert expecting to be cheered up, you very well might have been. But your goal to get happier has sabotaged you. An experiment about the effects of trying to be happy showed that both trying to be happy and just monitoring happiness actually prevented happiness. In this experiment, participants listened to Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. Some of them just listened to the music, others were told to use the music to cheer themselves up, and others just to keep track of how happy they were as they listened to the music. Surprisingly, the only way that listening to the *Rite of Spring* actually increased happiness was if the listener (1) wasn't trying to cheer up and (2) wasn't even keeping track of how happy she was. As you sit in the concert hall waiting for Igor Stravinsky to cheer you up, you actually guarantee that he won't. By constantly trying to get happy and monitoring whether you're happy, you're keeping yourself from getting happy.

Fun works the same way. Remember the millennium celebrations of 1999? How much fun did you have that New Year's Eve? It was the biggest New Year's Eve of our lifetimes, so shouldn't it have been the most fun? If you're like most people, you'll look back and recall that, even though your preparations and plans may have been more elaborate, you didn't have much more fun than you usually do on New Year's, and you may have had less.[1] Research shows that people who spent more time and money to ensure a fabulous millennial New Year's Eve actually had less fun than people who didn't put much effort into the evening at all. It seems that trying too hard to have fun is a sure way to kill your buzz.

Another reason to cross the happiness goal off your list: happy people often don't list "be more happy" among their goals. A list of goals that includes "be positive," "be happy," "have a good attitude," or the like might indicate that that person is not already very happy or positive. Maybe this is obvious: happy people are already happy, so they don't set a goal to be happy. On the other hand, maybe it's not that obvious. Consider what would happen if you substituted fitness for happiness. Fit people are already fit, but they very often have goals to *remain* fit by doing things like running or working out a certain

[1]Depending on how much champagne you had, you may or may not recall that evening. Just work with me here.

number of times a week. Happiness is unlike fitness in that most happy people do not have goals specifically related to remaining happy. They don't wake up in the morning thinking about how they are going to maintain their happiness that day, the way fit people might wake up thinking about how they are going to manage to get in their daily run. The Stravinsky and New Year's Eve research shows that it's a good thing that happy people don't plan their happiness, because if they did, they might actually become less happy. To truly be more happy, you have to stop trying.

KILL YOUR TELEVISION

Right after you stop your pursuit of happiness, you should stop trying to free up your time. People think they'll be happier if they have more free time, but free time is overrated. Look at how American lives have changed over the past century. We have wealth and leisure beyond previous generations' wildest imaginings. The washing machine! The automobile! Air travel! Computers! Television! And we have more years and better health to enjoy our leisure. Expected longevity for children born in the United States increases every year. New drugs control infections, improve our love lives, and even, like the statins that lower cholesterol, compensate for the health effects of our wealthy diet and increased leisure. Still, despite all these improvements, Americans are no happier today on average than they were 50 years ago, when they always had to do the dishes by hand and there was no such thing as permanent press.

Actually, free time is not in and of itself a problem. It's what people do with it, which is in large part watching TV. The average American watches several hours of television every day, and TV is a bigger part of many people's lives than things going on outside the box. For example, about 50 million Americans between the ages of 18 and 44 voted in the 2000 presidential election. About 24 million Americans in roughly the same age group voted for a recent American Idol. When citizens' involvement in a TV show starts gaining on citizens' involvement in their own national government, you have to wonder if TV isn't taking over just a little bit too much of American life.

If I actually killed the television, my husband would probably divorce me.[2] Still, I can't ignore the fact that TV is the refined sugar of daily activities, and Americans consume way too much of both. Here's a problem with sugar: When you eat a candy bar, a large amount of sugar rushes into your bloodstream. A little while later, a large amount of insulin rushes into your bloodstream to process the sugar. Unfortunately, the insulin comes too late, most of the sugar having moved on by then. Insulin ends up having to scavenge whatever leftover sugar remains, and the result is that you get low blood sugar and feel nasty and hungry, which makes you want to eat more candy to get your blood sugar up, and the whole cycle starts over again.

Sugar's effects are ironic; that is, they have the opposite effect from the one you intended. You wanted to feel less hungry and nasty, and you ended up feeling more hungry and nasty. TV has a similar effect, but on happiness instead of hungriness. You watch TV because you want to be entertained, relaxed, involved—you want to feel happy. Unfortunately, although TV can be relaxing, it is only intermittently entertaining and very rarely involving. So, you end up bored, which makes you think you should watch more TV . . . and you can guess the consequences. Everyone needs a little time to watch TV or just do nothing, just like everyone needs a little sugar now and then. A problem arises when you assume that if a little is good, then more must be better. It's not. I guarantee that prolonged periods of sitting in front of the TV and eating sugary snacks will not make you happy in the long run.

THE UNHAPPY MILLIONAIRE

Although many people believe the rich must be happy, we have to add money to the list of things that actually won't make you happy. Although wealth in the United States has tripled over the past 50

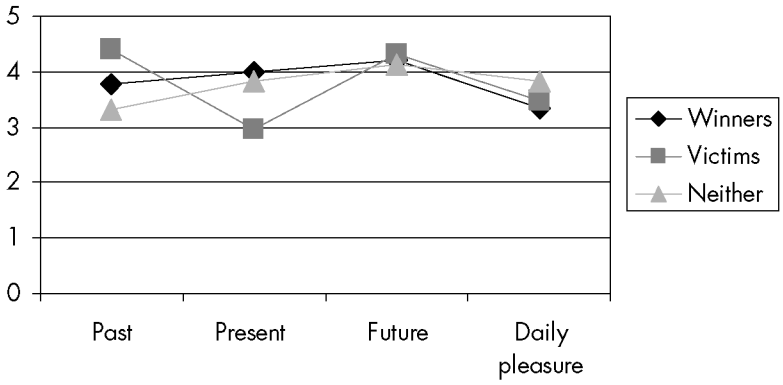
[2]Lest I seem preachy about TV, I freely admit that there are at least three televisions in my house (I think my husband may have a fourth plugged in down in the basement, but the state of the basement is such that he also might have a pony stabled down there and I wouldn't notice—at least for a while.) We also have a satel-

years, American satisfaction with life has remained level, and the prevalence of depression has increased alarmingly, especially among younger generations. In countries in which per capita gross domestic product is greater than $10,000, wealth has hardly any effect on satisfaction with life. Above subsistence level, then, money truly does not buy happiness. People on *Forbes* magazine's list of richest Americans are, on average, no happier than a group of Pennsylvania Amish, who live without jet planes, designer shoes, plastic surgery, or (for that matter) even television: both average 5.8 on a scale of 1–7, where 7 is the most satisfied with life. An international college student sample (averaging 4.9) is almost exactly as happy as Calcutta slum dwellers (averaging 4.6), despite vast differences in their fortunes.

How can people in such widely different circumstances be equally happy? People have a tremendous ability to adapt to their circumstances, a phenomenon called the "psychological immune system" or the "hedonic treadmill." Two days ago I was ecstatic because I found the last of a particular dress in my size in the country (as far as I can tell). Today, I am not as ecstatic. Although I'm looking forward to wearing the dress and I'm still pleased that I have it, my mood is not particularly elevated.

A much more dramatic demonstration of the "psychological immune system" compared people who had experienced something that should make anyone very happy—winning the lottery—with other people who had experienced something that should make anyone very unhappy, becoming paralyzed in an accident. Their reports of their general happiness are telling. The graph on page 6 shows how they rated their happiness in the past, present, and future and how much pleasure they were getting from everyday activities such as talking with friends, getting a compliment, or buying clothes. The bottom of the scale is "not at all" happy, and the top of the scale is "very much" happy. Not surprisingly, the accident victims saw their present as somewhat less happy than their past (although it looks as though they have a nostalgic view of their past as happier than it probably

lite dish, the original purpose of which was to access all 9,412 channels of college football and motorized vehicle races (mostly cars, but also school buses and riding lawn mowers). The purpose has been thwarted somewhat since I discovered the university research channels. It takes all kinds of geeks to make the world go 'round.



Happiness for lottery winners, paraplegic accident victims, and a group experiencing neither event.

was), and winners saw their present as somewhat happier than their past. However, neither group diverges much from people who didn't win the lottery *or* get paralyzed in an accident. Even the accident victims at their lowest are more happy than not. And although the three groups are very similar, it's revealing that winners get the least pleasure out of everyday activities. The ecstasy of winning the lottery appears to have deadened them to the joys of daily life.

It's no wonder, then, that ability to buy things hasn't increased our happiness. A new sweater will make you feel happier for a while, but not for very long. Two new sweaters won't make you much happier than one new sweater. And a million dollars' worth of new sweaters, in the long run, won't do much at all.

DON'T HATE ME BECAUSE I'M HAPPY

If being happy is good, but trying to get happy either directly through effort or indirectly though free time or income isn't the answer, what should you do? Here is an example of someone who—I think—has found the answer to feeling good. Even though I talked to him for only a few minutes, I remember him and the lesson he taught me very distinctly. A few years ago, I was at a conference in New Orleans, wait-

ing in the bar of the hotel to meet some friends for dinner. Seated next to me was an older gentleman, and he asked me what I was doing in New Orleans (a health conference) and what my work was about (optimism and health). He then shared with me his prescription for happiness. Now, optimism and happiness are not the same thing, but this gentleman hit on exactly what I have come to believe is the key to understanding optimism. The key for him was to *do something*. I forget what it was, but I remember he had hobbies he would pursue when he got home from work, and frankly the details don't matter that much. What does matter is that he specifically said it was important for him to avoid the TV, because watching TV all evening would just make him bored and irritable. This gentleman was *engaged*. He didn't just want to be watching. He wanted to be *doing*, and the doing made him happy.

Now, another possibility is that this guy was a naturally happy person, so it didn't really matter what he was doing. We all know people who are cheerful and happy most of the time and other people for whom a parking ticket can create a black cloud that follows them around all day (or maybe they don't even need the parking ticket). Their happiness or unhappiness seems to come from somewhere inside them, and even though the happy person might be temporarily saddened or upset, he also recovers quickly, and vice versa for the unhappy person. This phenomenon led happiness scientists to propose that everyone has a happiness "set point." A set point implies that most people are pretty stable in their happiness levels. Think of the set point as being like a car's cruise control. Cruise control is a negative feedback loop, in which deviations from the set point are brought back toward the set point. If the car is going too slowly, the cruise control will give it more gas, and if the car is going too fast, the cruise control will ease up on the gas. The system always tries to bring the car's speed back to the set point. Likewise, if your mood strays too far from your "set point," some mechanism will bring it back to its usual level.

One potential mechanism for the set point is genes. It's very clear that a nontrivial part of how happy you are is genetic. If you're generally a happy person, you have genes to thank for some of that happiness, and the same is true if you're generally an unhappy person. Your genes set your happiness "reaction range"—that is, the amount of happiness you are biologically able to produce—in the same way

that they set the reaction range for your height. Then, once "nature" has set the boundaries, "nurture" determines where you end up. Experiences make you as happy or as sad as your genes will let you be, in the same way that whether you drink milk or soda as a child will make you as tall or short as your genes will let you be (at least according to Mom).

It is premature, though, to start hating the happy because they happen to be privileged to have this state—happiness—that others can only wish for. There may be an escape from the set point. To escape a set point, there has to be some kind of *positive* feedback loop, that is, some mechanism by which a fast car gets faster.

Optimism is one such mechanism. Many people equate optimism with happiness, but optimism is actually not a feeling. Optimism is a *belief* about the future. Very optimistic people believe that more good things will happen to them than bad, that things will go their way, that the future is positive, and that uncertainty is an opportunity for the best to occur, rather than the worst. Optimistic beliefs set up a positive feedback loop because, as the rest of this book will show, the more optimistic people are, the more they can be expected to experience the positive future they envision. Optimistic people get more joy out of everyday life, they are more resilient to the stressful twists and turns of life, they have better relationships, and they may even be physically healthier. In turn, these positive outcomes naturally feed expectations for an equally if not more positive future—that is, optimism. An optimistic athlete will tend to realize her goals (by processes explained in Chapter 2), leading her to believe even more strongly that she can be successful. An optimistic teacher will tend to have students who (by processes explained in Chapter 4) confirm his belief in his power to educate. Insofar as happiness is a consequence of realizing goals and exercising strengths (a hypothesis addressed in Chapters 2 and 3), optimistic people's happiness may actually grow over time.

It's not entirely wrong to think of optimistic people as happy people, because most optimistic people are happier than most pessimistic people. It may be entirely wrong, however, to think of optimistic people as happy simply because they are positive. For a long time, I thought the most important thing about optimistic people was their positive outlook and specifically that their positive outlook about the future would protect them against present stress, because the present

wouldn't seem so bad in light of a positive future to come. Ironically, this viewpoint made me skeptical about whether I was optimistic. When I have published research on the relationship between optimism and the immune system (my primary research area), TV stations, radio programs, and newspapers ranging from the *New York Times* to small local papers and my college alumni newsletter[3] have interviewed me about the results for their stories on psychological well-being and health. I even turned down the opportunity to write the Cosmo Quiz. (I was pretty sure that they wanted a more sensational version than I could provide.) In many of the media interviews I've done, I'm asked about different aspects of the relationship between optimism and health or the immune system, but one question seems to always come up: Are you an optimist?

I had a hard time answering this question. I felt I was too familiar with the scales used to measure optimism to be able to answer honestly. I could see myself confronted with one of these items and thinking to myself, "I think I'm a 4. Should I circle 4? Most people would circle 4 . . . 3 would be acceptable—would that make my score too pessimistic? How many other 4's have I already circled? Any 5's? What's my score so far?"[4] So I couldn't really take the questionnaire because I was too self-conscious about my answers. Imagine that you could decide what number your bathroom scale would show. How accurate would *you* be?

I also had trouble saying that I was a very optimistic person because I am not necessarily a happy-go-lucky, carefree person.[5] I also couldn't in good conscience present myself as consistently cheery and smiley. Though I am often cheery and smiley, I have pronounced grumpy, irritable, and worried aspects. So, when I was asked whether I am an optimist, I would hem and haw, citing my inability to respond honestly to the questionnaires and generally avoiding the question.

That started to change a few years ago. I started to think of other meanings of optimism—meanings that did not imply cheery, smiley, carefree happy-go-luckiness. This was prompted by an unexpected finding: some of the optimists in one of my studies had *lower* immune

[3]Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon.

[4]One of my other research interests is rumination. Go figure.

[5]See previous note re rumination.

parameters than their more pessimistic counterparts (a finding described further in Chapter 5). I looked to see whether they were also unhappier, but they usually weren't. I had to find some other explanation for the difference. That led to a line of research that emphasizes something different about optimists: their approach to their goals. Optimists believe their goals are achievable. They are more committed to their goals. They don't give up easily. They will even stress their bodies in the pursuit of their goals. Once I started thinking about optimism this way, I could easily identify with optimists.

Optimism is certainly something that you have. Some people have optimistic beliefs, and others do not. Optimism or pessimism is part of personality, that part of the psychological makeup that is consistent over time and, not incidentally, slow to change if changeable at all. Furthermore, optimism is only one of many personality dimensions associated with being more or less happy and healthy (not to mention successful, tidy, and many other desirable states). Extraverted people are more happy; hostile people are less happy. Secure people are more happy; neurotic people are less happy. This is interesting to know, but if you want to escape the set point, somewhat harder to put into practice. Many personality factors are substantially genetic, and others (such as secure relationship styles) have their sources in early experiences that are unlikely to be repeated in adulthood (such as an infant–caregiver relationship). By adulthood, many aspects of your personality either benefit or harm you just by virtue of being there.

Optimism is no exception to the genes–personality rule, being about 25% heritable. However, the longer I have studied optimism, the more I have come to believe that the benefits of optimism are only partially from *being* optimistic. That is, having optimistic beliefs gets you only so far. You have to get the rest of the way through *doing*. Those optimistic beliefs work to make optimists' lives better because they cause optimistic people to behave in particular ways.

Entry into the positive feedback loop provided by optimism happens through behaving optimistically. If you are looking for a way to escape your set point and move toward the top of where your genes will let you be in psychological and physical well-being, you would do well to attend to what it is to *do* optimism.

Before I delve into the details of how very optimistic people teach the rest of us how to overcome our set points, defeat our psy-

chological immune systems, and get off the hedonic treadmill, a few words about this book. There have been many claims about optimistic thinking over the years. If you took the most extreme of these claims, you might believe that being optimistic means you can never have another unhappy day, and you might just live forever. Cynics, take heart. It's not true.[6] Chapter 6, which separates the potential from the real vulnerabilities that arise from optimism, is just for you.

How does one know what to believe about optimism? This is not the place to go into the theory and philosophy of science or to give a discourse on research design. Those topics require books unto themselves. Suffice it to say that the evidence that I present here is based on scientific studies published in peer-reviewed journals. I think you'll find the science is even more interesting than the extreme claims—it is certainly more complex. Research is like the test kitchen for good ideas. Sure, zucchini bread with dried apricots sounds good, but what happens when you actually make it? And with how many eggs? The *Betty Crocker Cookbook* wouldn't include a cake recipe unless it worked in a variety of home kitchens and was forgiving of a number of cook errors. You can trust in Betty's cake recipe, and you can feel confident that the ideas about optimism presented here reflect its workings in the real world. Maybe even in you.

[6]Otherwise, we might expect that a third or so of the population would be perpetually happy and enjoy eternal life, and that's *clearly* not true.

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