“This is a happiness book by the world authority, the pre-eminent scholar in the field along with an in-the-trenches coach who teaches and adapts this material every day for practical use with coaching clients. Robert is also an international researcher and coaching scholar in his own right. This is to say that these are scholars who do the research and not just journalists or pop psychologists reporting it second hand. These folks know happiness from the inside out.”

Michael B. Frisch, Psychologist and Neuroscientist, Baylor University;
Positive Psychologist/Coach and Clinical Psychologist

“In the huge happiness industry that has grown up over the past few years, this book is the very best overview of research and self-help manual available. It is written by the most productive, respected psychologist in the field of happiness studies and his son. It is the most readable, comprehensive overview and self-help manual available on happiness. If an ordinary citizen wanted to know about the contemporary science of happiness, it would be the place to begin.

Alex C. Michalos, Ph.D., F.R.S.C., Chancellor Director,
Institute for Social Research and Evaluation
To our wives, Carol and Keya, who have been so helpful to us in our writing of the book, and to the Gallup Organization, for their encouragement and support.
A crowd of people out there wants you to be happier. Self-help authors and inspirational speakers seek to make you joyous; possibly because they want you to buy their products, perhaps because they have faith in their mission. Authors want to sell you their “secret” or list of happiness-producing habits. Positive psychologists and psychotherapists, often motivated by empathy, want you to be happier. Your elected officials want you to be happy because if you are, you most likely will elect them again. Your mother wants you to be happy, because she loves you, and she might feel that she is a failure if you are unhappy. Somewhere, at this very moment, a technician in the lab of a major pharmaceutical company is working on a new drug to make you happier. There are even people that would like to give you special ozone enemas to make you happier. A large happiness industry has blossomed, and it has developed so many ways to help you – including self-improvement, meditation, positive thinking, natural herbs, the enemas we mentioned, medications, and many other personal and spiritual techniques. As surprising as it may seem, the authors of this book touting the benefits of happiness might not want you to be happier, because we think many of you may be happy enough already!

The attempts to make you happier are usually meant sincerely, and may be a good thing if you are chronically unhappy. As we have seen, happiness conveys benefits to those who experience it, and for those unfortunate individuals who are perpetually sad or angry, a dose of increased well-being may be just what Doctor Happiness ordered. But what about the rest of us, the majority who are already happy? Do we need to be happier? Do you really want to be happier? You might feel that even if you are happy, you are not happy enough.
Putting It All Together

Might all the well-intentioned meddlers be making you unhappier by insisting that you need more happiness? And might they be selling you something that you don’t really need?

Too Nice in the Big Apple

For those people who think that limitless happiness is a desirable emotional trophy, consider an interesting and ill-fated experiment conducted by a group of well-meaning New Yorkers. This group decided that they could improve their lives and generate more positivity to the world by saying “yes” to everything – absolutely everything – that was asked of them. At first glance, this sounds like a fun social experiment, and a refreshing remedy to all the turnoffs, rejection, and negativity we encounter in our daily lives. Just imagine: a world in which people feel safe to pick up hitchhikers, give money to beggars, allow you to pass them in line, consent to overtures in the bedroom, and allow you to try out new, creative ideas at work. Sounds pretty good, doesn’t it? Unless, of course, you are the one who must say yes to everything.

The sweet New Yorkers began the month of their experiment feeling very positive. They were extraordinarily generous to people, and put their friends and co-workers in a good mood with their unexpected acquiescence and happiness. They were taking on extra tasks at work, fetching cups of coffee, volunteering to pick up kids from school, and allowing strangers to steal the taxis right out from under them. But, as the month wore on, they began to feel spent. Their time, energy, and other resources were stretched thin, and they were having a difficult time functioning effectively. Toward the end of the month, they were absolutely depleted, had put themselves in compromising situations, and were, ironically, feeling negative toward others and harboring feelings of being taken advantage of. Clearly, happiness and positivity with no checks whatsoever can be downright problematic. Especially in New York City.

Problems of Being a “Happiness Ten”

Many of us harbor doubts about whether it is good to score a ten on the happiness scale. Might a little unhappiness or complaining be okay? Keep in mind that on a one to ten scale, the majority of people in economically developed nations fall in the six to nine range; few score in the unhappy zone and very few score a ten, the top of the scale – extreme happiness. It seems that some people enjoy complaining a little, and the moral imperative to be constantly cheerful can feel oppressive. At times, extremely happy people seem a bit naïve and we wonder whether the superhappy will worry when it is needed. These concerns make sense: in great novels and engaging movies, we want to see conflict, not simply people having a very pleasant and very boring life. Imagine Crime and Punishment without the murder and guilt, or Jews without the shark attacks. The story of Cinderella would lose its narrative power if the beloved protagonist had been a young girl living with her wealthy, loving, intact family. We are often drawn to stories in which people overcome adversity, rather than those where everything seems to be fine.

Critics wonder whether our energies might be better placed in focusing on the welfare of others rather than our own personal enjoyment. For that matter, might trying to achieve a complete sense of satisfaction hobble our motivation to improve the quality of our own lives? Despite the clear benefits of happiness, nagging questions remain. Even if we accept happiness as a worthwhile pursuit, might we already be happy enough? Is there, in fact, an optimal level of happiness?

Many people across the globe find the American idea of being ever-cheerful to be silly. Always smiling, always saying “Great!” and “Super!” and always looking on the bright side seem distasteful to many. To many, constant cheerfulness seems phony and shallow, if not downright stupid. What about duty, hard work, critical thinking, and responsibility? What about facing the difficult problems that plague the world? When one of the authors of this book, Ed, spoke at a roundtable meeting with VIPs in Scotland, many expressed skepticism at the idea that happiness is a good thing. They said that many Scots are dour, and like it that way, and they did not want an American telling them that they should be happy.

The idea that there may be an optimal level of happiness, a point at which we say “enough,” is provided by examples of extreme individuals – those who, for one reason or another, appear too happy. Take, for instance, the case of bipolar (manic depressive) individuals, who are flooded with expansive, joyful feelings when they are in their “up phase.” Rather than conferring the usual benefits of health,
productivity, and sociability, mania is often detrimental to an individual’s life. Consider the case of Peter.

Peter was a student at a university where one of the authors taught. He attended classes on a disability scholarship – his disability was a mental problem rather than a physical one. Peter was a bright mathematics major, and as long as he stayed on his lithium, which controlled his moods, he could function appropriately as a college student. But he felt that the medications “knew him down”; that is, interfered with his creativity and high moods, and so he quit taking the pills. Very quickly, his energy levels skyrocketed. He met with his professor and confided that he had started writing three new books that very morning, and was very excited about each of them. He had so many good ideas, it was impossible to keep track of them.

Because Peter was so enthusiastic about the topics of his classes, he attended them regularly, but was too excited to take notes. One day, from the front row of a classroom of two hundred students, he stood up in the middle of the lecture, turned to the class, and shouted out, “I love you all.” He attended advanced seminars and sat on the floor, appearing enraptured by complex statistical tables that were far beyond his level of understanding. His grades plummeted from B’s to F’s, and soon he was expelled from the university.

But Peter’s story does not end there. Even after being ejected from the university, he continued to attend classes and hang around the campus. A professor picked up Peter hitchhiking in the snow barefoot. Although his parents lived over a thousand miles away, Peter would hitchhike to see them. Peter claimed the cold didn’t bother him and, besides, he was interested in the experience of traveling through the snow barefoot. Peter told the professor that he was working on a book of poetry and had secured a job doing menial labor. Unfortunately, his employers demanded that he wear shoes, and so he was not sure the job would work out. His employers also demanded that he come to work on a regular basis, and frequently Peter would get so excited by something else that he just could not pull himself away to attend work. Nonetheless, he told his former professor that his life was wonderful because it was filled with exciting activities every second of the day.

Although the things Peter did might seem amusing because they fly in the face of social norms, his story is a tragic one. Peter experienced a constant flood of energy and enthusiasm, but was unable to function effectively. He was more intelligent and far more creative than many of his peers at the university, but when he quit taking his medication, Peter lacked the ability to maintain his focus on projects, and tended to behave in strange ways that alienated him from others. Of course, mania is not the same thing as happiness, but Peter’s story illustrates the potential downsides of having too much exuberance.

Sociopaths or psychopaths provide another example of the dangers associated with an inability to experience negative feelings. We are not talking about the Hannibal Lecter evil geniuses of the world, but those more common individuals who, for some reason, tend not to experience the negative emotions of worry, anxiety, guilt, and shame. Sociopaths can be both fearless and guiltless and, as a result, often lie effectively. The experience of negative emotions, such as guilt and anxiety, make the rest of us reluctant to lie, and if we do so, these emotions often make it hard for us to be convincing. Sociopaths single-mindedly pursue pleasure and can therefore easily rationalize hurtful, immoral behaviors. At their worst, they are capable of committing heinous crimes without guilt or shame. In the case of sociopaths, we see that negative emotions such as guilt are tied to our moral sensibilities, and that a lack of negative feelings is just as problematic as experiencing mania. Thus, extreme mania as well as the complete absence of negative emotions can both be extremely detrimental to effective functioning.

Scientific studies on emotion have pointed to similar conclusions. Take, for example, the case of the “Termites.” In the 1920s, Lewis Terman assessed a large group of exceptionally gifted children, little geniuses who were later dubbed “Termites” because of the man who devoted his life to studying them. Many years later, researchers located the Termites, curious to see how they were faring, at a time when many were dead. What they found was surprising – the happiest Termites died at a younger age than the less happy savants.

When we examined the Termites data, it was clear that all of the gifted individuals were quite happy, and therefore the researchers were not comparing unhappy individuals to happy ones, as is often the case in such research. Instead, the comparison was between the very happy and the extremely happy, with the very happy living longer than their extremely happy peers. Perhaps the happiest Termites did not pay close attention to their physical symptoms, leading to poorer health strategies, or were more likely to take more risks, such as driving fast or drinking too much. Regardless of the reason, the Termites provide a test case from research that suggests
happiness because, although happiness is beneficial, not all forms of happiness are, and not in all cases.

How much happiness is enough? Research shows that the optimal level of happiness depends on the aspect of happiness we are talking about, our resources, and the type of outcome and activity in which we are interested. It makes a difference, for example, whether we consider how frequently a person experiences happiness versus how intensely they experience it. In determining the optimal level of happiness, it also matters which measures we look at: for example, whether we pay attention to a person’s work achievements or their social life. Finally, the optimal level of happiness depends on the other resources a person has available for achieving goals.

Life Outcomes of Extremely Happy People

Earlier, we reviewed outcomes where happiness is clearly beneficial. In study after study, for example, the happiest people reap the most benefits where friendship is concerned. In research from many countries employing longitudinal designs (in which people are measured over time), those who are “extremely happy” are more likely to be in long-term relationships and involved in volunteer activities. Happy people like and trust others more, and are liked more in return.

To determine the optimal happiness for social relationships, we intensively studied over two hundred college students. It was clear that the extremely happy were doing better, socially speaking, than were any of the other groups. Self-confidence, energy, confidence, and sociability were highest among the extremely happy. The extremely happy group dated more and had more friends than even the very happy group, and their margin over the unhappy group was very large in the case of social relationships and feelings of energy. Thus, in the realm of sociability, more happiness is better. Unhappy people had the least energy and self-confidence, and the fewest close friends.

The case of health provides another interesting example of the tangible benefits of happiness. Happiness, as we learned earlier, often translates to healthier behaviors and a more robust physiology. But remember also the possible dark side to the health-happiness connection. In a review of dozens of studies relating health and happiness, researchers found that the happiest people who had late-stage or terminal illnesses were more likely to die than those who were less
happy, possibly because they did not take the threat seriously. Another finding was that highly aroused positive emotions, such as elation, might raise blood pressure and heart rate. The research findings on health indicate that there might be an optimal level of happiness, wherein too little subjective well-being fails to convey the potential health benefits of happiness, and too much might also be detrimental. With this cautionary note in mind, it makes sense to ask: Might there be other domains of life where extreme happiness is not desirable, and where emotional balance is needed?

Magic Eights

Take achievement, for instance. Achievement means working toward important long-term goals, such as getting good grades and earning a high income at work. What we know about the benefits of happiness tells us that the happier people are, the more likely they are to pursue, persevere, and obtain these favorable outcomes. In fact, this is true when comparing happy people with their unhappier counterparts. But what about differences between people on the positive side of the spectrum? Do the extremely happy achieve more than the very happy? Surprisingly, the answer is no. When individuals complete happiness surveys that use a one to ten scale, those scoring around an eight often tend to fare the best in achievement. Why might the eights of the world outperform their friends and neighbors who are nines or tens? It could be that eights benefit from the creativity and energy of happiness, but also maintain a touch of worry that helps to motivate them.

Let’s analyze this “number 8 phenomenon” in more depth. We found an interesting and surprising result when we examined data from college students. In 1976, thousands of students from elite colleges, small liberal arts schools, large state universities, and traditional black colleges completed a large survey, which included a single question about their levels of cheerfulness. Twenty years later, when the students were about 37 years old, they were contacted again and asked to report their incomes. It may seem incredible that a single item filled out on a particular date two decades earlier could be used to predict income years later, but it did. The happy folks seemed to be outearning the unhappy people, but the next-to-happiest group was earning the most!

Similar results can be found in an analysis of a huge sample by Shigehiro Oishi, who analyzed the satisfaction scores of over 100,000 respondents from all over the world. Those who scored well on happiness—the sevens, eights, and nines on a ten-point scale—had higher incomes and more advanced educations than both the tens and those who were unhappy.

How is it possible that a person can achieve more happiness, or put on the emotional brakes if they seem to be getting too much joy in the wrong places? For that matter, how is it possible to even know if we have too little, too much, or just the right amount of happiness? As we shall explain below, it all depends on which aspects of happiness one is considering. Because happiness is complex and multifaceted, most people are quick to make one-sided and sweeping pronouncements about whether or not it is a worthwhile pursuit. But in the extraordinarily important issue of the optimal levels of happiness, it is necessary to take a deeper, more intricate view of subjective well-being and its role in people’s lives.

What Do You Mean By Being Happy?

There are many types of happiness. Happiness can include optimism and joy, but it also includes feelings of calm and harmony. This is why subjective well-being researchers try to take a broad view. We are interested not only in the specific emotions that make up happiness, but also in how these emotions work together as a constellation.

We are interested, for example, in the way that positive and negative emotions balance one another, and in how strongly each of these emotions is felt. Although happiness is beneficial, some forms of happiness may be less so, and some forms of negative emotions may be more helpful than others.

Take the case of feeling positive emotions very intensely. Although extreme emotional highs feel good, they are generally not where the action is in terms of the optimal level of happiness. Some studies show, for instance, that people who are prone to intensely positive feelings are also more likely to experience intensely negative feelings. These folks are just intense people, and the price they pay for their joyful exuberance when things are going well is the intense anger or depression when things go poorly. Of course, we all experience the occasional highs that come when we get married or receive an
unexpectedly large end-of-the-year bonus, but this sense of euphoria rarely lasts. Those individuals who chase emotional highs, and view excited, euphoric emotions as synonymous with happiness, endanger themselves. These folks set themselves up for failure because it is difficult, if not impossible, to stay intensely happy.

Our physiology and psychology are not built to produce or handle constant euphoria. People who chase continual emotional highs will usually fall short because the biological cards are stacked against their being able to sustain this emotional intensity. In the quest for continuing intense positive emotions, some individuals turn to drugs such as methamphetamine and cocaine. In addition, euphoria-chasers may run some health risks as well. Just as the physiological arousal associated with chronic stress takes a toll on health, so too can the sustained arousal of intense positive emotions.

We recommend that people think of happiness in terms of mildly pleasant emotions that are felt most of the time, with intense positive emotions being felt occasionally. If you feel fairly energetic and upbeat most of the time on most days, and are generally satisfied with your life with only the occasional complaint, you are, by our definition, happy. Some of us will feel more intense emotions and some of us less intense emotions due to our different temperaments, but frequent positive emotions should be the goal, rather than continuing intense highs.

Do Worry, Be Happy

When one of the authors, Ed, had a dialogue with His Holiness the Dalai Lama in front of an audience of thousands, he showed the esteemed monk the quote from Flaubert that says that to be happy, one must be stupid. The Dalai Lama laughed aloud, and said that some happiness is definitely stupid happiness. It is silly to be happy when a bear is chasing you, and some people are indeed happy in a shallow, unthinking way. Thus, although His Holiness counsels happiness, he does not counsel blind, thoughtless pleasure. Although he recognizes that negative feelings are very often harmful, he does not recommend constant exuberance for no reason whatsoever. Although the first enemy is stress and depression, we must also be wary of “stupid happiness.”

Even when things are going well, there can be a negative emotional snake hiding in the grass. Research on goals and emotions conducted by Eva Pomerantz shows that there may be some hidden psychological trade-offs associated with the pursuit of achievement and success. Working toward goals is good for happiness, and happiness in turn is beneficial to our personal strivings. However, Pomerantz’s work suggests there is more to the story. In her study, Pomerantz noticed that the more heavily individuals invested in personally important goals, the more people worried about achieving them.

Consider some goals that are personally important to you. Perhaps you want to start a home business, or write a meaningful toast for your parents’ anniversary celebration, or catch a plane with a tight connecting time. Chances are, in each case, you will experience a degree of stress related to performing well and achieving your goal. The more heavily you invest in success, the more stress you are likely to feel, although the amount of worry will also depend on your temperament. This is another case where some amount of negative emotion can motivate us to do a good job. If you take the view that everything will always turn out all right regardless of what you do, you may not prepare enough.

People have successful home businesses because they do sweat the small stuff, give memorable toasts because they take the time to prepare, and make their connecting flights because they scurry, not amble, across the airport. The upside to all this is that the more heavily people invest in their goals, tolerating some stress along the way, the more happiness they experience when they are successful. This might be why there is such a thing as “eustress,” positive stress, in which people feel stress in combination with positive emotions. Indeed, we have found that in nations that are relatively higher in both stress and pleasant emotions, there also tends to be high life satisfaction.

The research presents an interesting quandary. If the pleasant feelings of happiness serve as motivators, why are people willing to tolerate the stress involved with challenging goals? Why don’t we just throw our hands in the air and choose easier, less anxiety-provoking aspirations? The answer lies in the fact that, for most people, happiness is not their only goal. Giving a touching, humorous, and well-received toast can be a worthwhile pursuit, regardless of whether some anxiety is involved. In one study, it was shown that kids who are working toward important goals achieve more joy when they achieve those goals, but they also experience more worry about those goals. The psychologist Maya Tamir has investigated this same
phenomenon and found that people are often willing to experience a wide range of affect—both good feelings and bad feelings—if those moods will likely lead to final success. That is, most folks are generally willing to accept a little worry and guilt in pursuit of other worthy goals. Furthermore, it might be that our creativity is higher when we experience both positive and negative moods, not just positive ones. In one study on the workplace, positive emotions predicted creativity. But employees who had positive emotions and some negative emotions, in a supportive work environment, were the most creative.

We acknowledge that stress keeps us alert and helps us navigate safely through rush-hour traffic. We understand that a bit of performance anxiety can be just the motivator we need to prepare a terrific presentation at work. The mild stress that motivates us to take on challenges has been called “eustress.” Thus, the pursuit of happiness is much more than hectic grasping at a feel-good emotion. Instead, most folks want to pursue just the right amounts of happiness, and at the appropriate times and places. However, not all negative emotions are the same. Both Australian and Canadian researchers have found that depression lowers life satisfaction more than worry does. Stress that is accompanied by uncontrollable events, such as the fatal illness of a child, is not so likely to be beneficial.

Conclusions

Some people are sick and tired of positive psychologists trying to make them happier. One woman with cancer objected loudly when overly positive friends told her that her cancer would be a “great learning experience.” Kind of like when your sewer line gets plugged and your toilet flushes back into your bathtub during a party, and this is just one more growth experience. There are better and worse ways to cope with these misfortunes, but some people object when every misfortune is labeled as a happy opportunity. Some things are good and some things are bad, and it makes happiness into silliness to deny this.

Psychologists have rarely discussed optimal levels of happiness, or whether it is possible to be too happy. For the most part, people in the psychology profession have been focused on helping those unfortunate souls who suffer from depression, chronic anxiety, or frequent anger. But psychologists have, on a few occasions, argued against putting undue emphasis on simply being happy.

Martin E. P. Seligman, the founder of the positive psychology movement, is a notable exception. According to Seligman, happiness is more than just living a pleasurable life full of titillating conversation, delicious food, and soothing massages. He encourages people to look at other aspects of happiness, including living a meaningful and engaged life, that do not always feel good in the short term but that ultimately deliver lasting satisfaction. He suggests that sometimes to achieve life satisfaction and meaning, we must sacrifice some pleasant feelings and even experience some negative feelings. The trade-off is worth it, however, because long-term satisfaction, engagement, and meaning are worth the price of occasional negative feelings along the way. Although high life satisfaction is considered to be a good thing, chronic euphoria is not a desirable goal.

The psychologist Robert Schwartz maintains that there is an optimal balance between positive and negative thinking, with some negative thinking being necessary for effective functioning. Emotions are like a gas gauge, giving us important feedback about what is happening on the road of life—many miles of smooth driving or a sputtering loss of power. But for those people who strive only for positive emotions or those individuals who encourage you to be ever happier, it is like having the gas gauge stuck on full. Anyone who has driven a car with a broken gauge knows that it is missing vital feedback. It is good to not have an empty tank, but it is also good to have a gauge that accurately shows us how much gas we have.

The Mona Lisa gives us a hint about the desirable level of happiness. Scientists recently computer-analyzed the emotions expressed in this famous lady’s face, and concluded that she is 83 percent happy, with about 17 percent negative emotions such as fear and anger mixed in. Interestingly, we find that people who are happy, but not perfectly so, do well in many domains of life. Perhaps Leonardo da Vinci was onto something, and the widespread appeal of his famous painting may be due to the fact that his lady projects the look of success. Think about a frowning Mona Lisa who looks distraught; probably not someone you would want to date. But a superhappy smiling-face Mona Lisa might look like a cheerleader—fun, but possibly superficial. A happy Mona Lisa might look like she would be fun at the beach, but maybe not wise enough to run a country. Positive emotions are beneficial, but a few negative emotions can help us to
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be more fully functioning individuals. Thus, our admonition: Be like Mona Lisa! We don’t mean feel negative emotions 17 percent of the time – that is probably a bit too much in most circumstances – but allow yourself to feel them sometimes, against a backdrop of mostly positive feelings.

Do not let others, including the authors of this book, dictate your level of positivity. Happiness, like spirituality, is partially a private pursuit, defined by individuals based on their personal values. Be wary when people tell you to live for the moment, to strive for an exciting life, or that you ought to be happier. Maximize your psychological wealth, and this will mean occasionally experiencing a few negative emotions. Decide for yourself what your optimum level of happiness is, keeping in mind that being in a frequent mild good mood is functional, and negative emotions, so long as they are felt only occasionally, can be helpful too. Then enjoy pursuing the goals and values that are important to you.

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Living Happily Ever After

A major theme of this book is that happiness does not just feel good, but that it also is beneficial to success. We can function well when we are happy, and chronically unhappy people tend to fail at the important tasks of life. When we are in a positive mood, we tend to interact better with others, think more creatively, and have more energy. We are not talking about acting cheerful or giddy – we are talking about being in at least a mildly positive state. Happiness is good for you, and those around you:

• Those who are engaged and happy at work on average are better workers.
• Happy people tend to have more and closer friends.
• Happy people seem to have better health on average, and live longer.
• Happy people are more pro-social in trusting and helping others.
• Happy people have more peaceful and cooperative attitudes.

Thus, the take-home message of this book – the point we very much hope sticks with you – is that happiness is worthwhile because it can be very beneficial! It will not only help you feel good, but will make you more likely to succeed in social relationships, spirituality, work, and health. In short, happiness is a vital, useful life resource that you need to cultivate. It will add greatly to your overall psychological wealth. And the good news is that happiness is something you have control over. Of course, there are some things that affect your well-being over which you have only slight control: for example, your genes and the society around you. Many things, however, you have direct control over – your attitudes, choices, and activities – and these have a substantial impact on your happiness. For example, spiritual
emotions, such as gratitude and compassion, can be developed with practice; they are under your control. Although you may not be able to simply will yourself to be happy, you can with practice learn to stand tall in terms of well-being. In tough times, of course, we need the help of others – our family and friends, and perhaps even a therapist or coach. Happiness need not be a lonely endeavor; others are there to help and to be helped by us.

Psychological wealth is like a multivitamin: it helps us in several ways. It is not magic and won’t cure all our problems, but it has tonic effects. Just as a multivitamin can promote health and prevent illness, psychological wealth can help with success in many different areas of life. Psychological wealth won’t automatically give you everything you want, but it is your best shot at the life you value. And without it, other aspects of your life won’t mean much. When people raise their children, it is typically their aim to give them the ability to be psychologically wealthy. Most folks try to instill a sense of value, advocate a spiritual approach to life, attempt to inculcate a positive attitude, and emphasize the importance of social relationships. Schools, youth television programming, and children’s literature all share clear messages that speak to the importance of the various aspects of psychological wealth. When we plot our own lives, psychological wealth should similarly be our overarching goal.

Happiness is good for you, but you don’t necessarily need more of it, any more than you necessarily need more vitamins. Are you happy enough? If you were happier, could you function better, or as well? Just because people write books about happiness and tell you to be happier doesn’t mean that many of you are not already happy enough. And it is important to consider the different types of subjective well-being when you consider whether more happiness is better. For example, you might want more satisfaction with life, but feel good about the amount of positive emotions you experience. Or you might want more work satisfaction, but feel very good about your marital satisfaction. Thus, wanting to be happier requires you to carefully consider what type of happiness it is that you desire to increase.

Toward the Happy Society: National Well-Being Accounts

Most programs, books, and workshops about happiness focus on individual well-being. They make promises about and provide steps for achieving more happiness on an individual level. But if happiness is so beneficial, shouldn’t there be some discussion about widespread happiness? Shouldn’t we be having a collective conversation about raising the well-being of whole societies? Just as antismoking campaigns are not simply about getting individuals to quit smoking, but are also about promoting community and environmental health, we can also talk about whole societies flourishing emotionally. We need national accounts of well-being to parallel national economic accounts, because societies take notice of things that are measured. When measures are available, societies try to take steps toward improving numbers that are too low. If we have a measure of poverty, for example, as a nation, we tend to pay attention to it. If we assess the number of divorces in our society, we can discuss whether or not it is a matter of concern. When figures are published measuring our schoolchildren’s success in different subjects, the attention of politicians is grabbed when the figures are disappointing.

What might we monitor in national accounts of well-being? There are many policy-relevant target groups that we could examine if we had national accounts of well-being. We would be able to track, for example, whether kids are happier or less happy than they were in the past, and which kids are having problems. Are our children becoming more stressed or depressed? Are there segments of the child population who are flourishing? People harbor opinions about the quality of life of contemporary children, but without national data it is difficult to arrive at useful, firm conclusions. We could also track which workers are engaged, and which ones hate their work, and why. Another question is whether there are pockets of misery, for example certain ethnic groups, that require societal concern. Are there groups related to policy discussions, such as caregivers of the elderly, who are miserable, and could profit from organized services, such as adult day care for their patient? Are there activities, such as commuting, that are causing increased stress and lower life satisfaction in modern societies?

Most people in industrialized nations score above neutral on measures of happiness; however, high stress and burnout also characterize many people in modern societies. Many are not engaged at work, or are often bored and stressed. Thus, even though the majority of people are above the neutral point of overall happiness, and in at least the slightly positive zone, for many people there is still much room for improvement. Many people can be happier and more engaged at
work; many children can enjoy school more, and depression among kids is a major societal concern.

Building a society that maximizes well-being, not just economic growth, should be an aim of the nations of the world. We believe that the science of happiness has begun to provide a framework that can extend policy discussions beyond an almost exclusive reliance on income and material growth, to ask what will now create a truly better, happier society. We can’t ignore money and economic prosperity, but as a society we don’t want to focus on it as our only criterion of success. National accounts of well-being can provide a broader framework for evaluating improvement, and help us weigh our progress with factors in addition to money, such as societal trust, engaging work, happy children, and rewarding leisure.

The Happiness Recipe

As we mentioned at the beginning of this book, Cinderella was said to have lived happily ever after in the tradition of all fairy-tale endings. How can we be sure that she, and you, will “live happily ever after”? Many books about happiness give you some secret about how to get it, or a simple magic ingredient that will make you happier. Some even propose that if you just think in a positive way about things you want, they will automatically come to you. But we have seen in this book that many things lead to happiness and psychological wealth, and that you need more than one simple ingredient to live the fullest life. No single secret is likely to make you or Cinderella happy forever; no Prince Charming can ensure eternal bliss. Instead, it takes a recipe to do the trick, and happiness is an ongoing process. Here is our list of fundamental ingredients that make up the delicious dish of happiness.

Have Direction: Important Goals and Values

Humans are unique among animals in many respects; perhaps chief among them is the ability to live virtuously and find purpose in life. As humans, we actually require a sense of meaning to thrive. Lives that seem pointless leave us despondent and listless. We do not operate simply on instinct. We need to have values that we care about and outcomes that are worth working for. If we have goals that spring from our values, and aims we care about beyond our own momentary happiness, we are able to gain satisfaction from working for the things about which we care deeply. Recently, we taught a class in which we assigned the participants two activities. The first was a hedonistic activity. We instructed them to go out and do something fun (but legal!). Go dancing, enjoy a nice meal, that kind of thing. Next, we asked that they go out and engage in a meaningful experience, one that they themselves could find purpose in. This could include volunteering, cleaning up litter, helping a niece with homework, or any other activity that might sound rewarding, but not necessarily fun. A week later, the participants came back to us to report on their experiences. Without exception, they thought the hedonistic activities were fun. Test driving a new car and eating a fancy dessert felt good in the moment. But the positive effect seemed to wear off quickly. The vast majority of the class participants told us that if they had to recommend one of the two types of activities to a friend, they would suggest the meaningful activity. Even though the meaningful activities weren’t always fun, they tended to feel good later because they resonated with deeply held personal values. Taking stock of your values, and making sure you live a life that is consistent with them, is a vital part of psychological wealth.

Strong and Supportive Relationships

To put it simply, other people are crucial for our happiness, as we described in chapter 4. We find meaning, comfort, and entertainment in our relationships. Some folks need lots of family and friends around; others need only a handful of strong relationships. But we all need people to love and to love us. One key to close relationships is the positive (also called Gottman) ratio—many more positive than negative interactions. So remember to be positive most of the time with others. Remember that criticism and correction are permissible if they are not too frequent, but they need to occur within an overall context of a positive relationship built on praise, support, and favors. A world without others who care about us and about whom we care would be a cold, lifeless place. As adults we need to have others and do things for them to experience psychological wealth.
Material Sufficiency

As much as we would like to recommend positive attitudes and spiritual growth alone, the truth is that we live in a physical world. We are shackled to this life by our bodies, and material goods therefore play a part in our well-being. Our bodies have many physical needs, and when these are not met it can detract from our happiness. In order to be at our happiest, we need good health; sufficient resources, such as food, to meet our basic needs; and adequate money to experience some of life’s pleasures. In chapter 6, we showed that to be happy we don’t need to be rich, but material sufficiency beyond poverty is clearly helpful to happiness. Although wealthy people tend on average to be happy, and it is a myth to believe they are not, we must be careful of materialism – valuing money and things more than we value people, love, and our society. We also must be careful that our material desires don’t rise forever, or we can feel poor no matter how rich we become. Health and material sufficiency are helpful to happiness because they free the mind for other things, but they are not sufficient for happiness. And if the pursuit of wealth interferes with our relationships and other aspects of psychological wealth, our well-being and that of those around us will suffer.

Cultivating the Spiritual Emotions

Positive emotions make us feel good, and feeling positive most of the time is a key ingredient of a happy life. We want to feel proud of our accomplishments and loved by others. We want to enjoy our work, friends, and leisure. However, in chapter 7, we discussed how the spiritual emotions that connect us to others are particularly important because they increase the well-being of others. Furthermore, these are emotions that we can cultivate. We can develop our gratitude toward others and our love for them. We can nurture feelings of compassion for those less fortunate than ourselves, rather than developing a superiority complex. And we can develop a sense of awe at the beauty and the order of the universe. Emotions that connect us to others and things larger than ourselves are a helpful route to happiness because they are under our control – we can generate these emotions with our thoughts. The spiritual emotions are essential to psychological wealth because they help us transcend our own individual worldview and connect us to something larger than ourselves. Importantly, they are also likely to make those around us happy.

Inborn Temperament

Happiness, like height and depression, has a genetic component. As described in chapter 9, it helps to possess a biological predisposition to be happy. Some folks are lucky and are born with “happy genes” – that is, they tend to be extroverted and not to worry overmuch. Although happiness comes naturally for these people, they must still be careful to take the other steps to happiness – genes don’t guarantee happiness, but only help it. Just as a person born with high intellectual ability does not necessarily know a lot unless she makes an effort to learn, or a child with promising talent must develop it to achieve artistic mastery, a person with a happy temperament must work to fulfill his or her happiness potential. A person born with an unhappy temperament will necessarily need to exert more effort to be happy, and sometimes even need help from others to overcome stress or depression. Remember that genes are part of the story, but not the whole story. For instance, gene expression can be changed by our environment. Although temperament can aid happiness, just as athletic ability can help us succeed in sports, it must be cultivated by the habits of mind and behavior we develop. Our happiness set point can be changed.

Intelligent Forecasting and Wise Choices

There is no substitute for good old-fashioned wisdom. We all know people who seem hell-bent on messing up their lives. Despite being smart, kind, good-looking, or well-to-do, these folks seem almost incapable of making good choices with regards to dating partners, saving and spending, or career choices. You probably know someone who is stuck in a job that is a bad fit for her, or someone who gravitates toward problematic romance. By contrast, most of us also know others who seem to almost always make smart decisions. They have a strong sense of identity and personal boundaries, and they have a grasp of what long-term happiness requires. In order to be happy, we don’t have to be prescient and fully understand the future. What we need is to understand some of the fundamentals
of happiness forecasting, such as those reviewed in chapter 10, and then make important choices with long-term goals in mind.

Many of the errors we make are a natural by-product of how we think. There is too much information in the world for our brains to easily digest, so our subconscious minds take little short cuts. Because of this, people consistently make forecasting errors that lead them away from rather than toward happiness. The focusing illusion, for example, causes folks to focus on a single obvious feature of a choice and overlook other important features. For instance, when you go house hunting, you might be easily taken in by a large yard or particularly cute attic room while overlooking the quality of the electrical wiring or the noise late at night from a nearby street. Another forecasting problem comes from not getting firsthand experience with the choice, but relying on your imagination. It is easy for most folks to picture themselves sunning on a tropical beach, but most people overlook the less-than-pleasant flight to their vacation island. Similarly, nobody should choose a career, such as physician, lawyer, farmer, or teacher, without obtaining relevant experience. through volunteer work, summer jobs, or talking with someone in the given profession. Finally, people need to remember the importance of ongoing activities, goals, and attitudes to happiness, understanding that no set of life circumstances guarantees long-term happiness. The use of intelligent forecasting allows each of us to make better choices to maximize our psychological wealth.

AIM Your Mind

Have you ever taken a long road trip on a sunny day? Perhaps you wore sunglasses for so long that you were surprised at the color of the sky when you finally took them off! Our minds work in much the same way, filtering the world around us. In chapter 11, we described how the attitudes you develop toward the world, and the accompanying mental habits, have a lot to do with how happy you are. Some folks develop the habit of noticing what could go wrong, dwelling on failures, or complaining about problems. This kind of negative interpretation of the world is a sure way to make yourself unhappy. Happy people, on the other hand, see possibilities, opportunities, and successes, and interpret most of what goes on in a positive light. When they think of the future, they are optimistic, and when they review the past, they tend to savor the high points. Positive interpretation is one of the most exciting elements of psychological wealth because it is one that you have the power to change. But, for individuals in the habit of negative thinking, reading this book alone won’t be enough for a turnaround – more active work is required to become a positive thinker. New habits of thinking and responding to others must be planned, rehearsed, and practiced. Just as with a diet, or breaking a bad habit, there will be backsliding into the old ways. Pride will overshadow gratitude, and practice and effort will be needed over a period of months to break out of chronic negative thinking. With work and motivation, however, you can move upward in happiness, and become a more pleasant person for your family and friends to be around.

We don’t pretend that developing positive AIM will be easy for all of you. Some of you grew up in places where griping seems endemic and people demonstrate their intelligence by criticizing others. Some of you have spent decades of your life finely honing your skills of seeing the faults of others and complaining about them. So remember the three steps of the AIM model. Attention – attend to the beautiful, the good in others, and the things that are going right. Interpretation – sure, people are imperfect and make mistakes. But most people are doing their best to lead a good life, and people with serious problems usually deserve your compassion. Memory – take time to savor the good things in your past. Sure, there were some bad things, but isn’t it time to put those behind you and move on to creating a happy life in the present? Happiness is partly under your own mental control, based on attention, interpretation, and memory.

Living as Though Happiness is a Process, Not a Place

Journalists often ask us whether there is anything we have learned in our studies that we apply to our own lives. The answer is yes. We integrate many things from our research into our own lives, but learning that happiness is a process, not just a set of good circumstances, has been especially helpful. Like most people, we had come to think if we could get all of our ducks in a row – a good income, success at work, a good mate, and so forth – then our happiness would be guaranteed. Like Cinderella, we got these things. And then the question became: What now? One answer is more ducks – striving for more things. But we came to realize that it is enjoying the activities and the striving that create happiness, and that getting
the ducks provides only short-term boosts to happiness. If a person hopes to win a certain award, working for the award had better be enjoyable, because the award itself will produce only a short burst of happiness. In contrast, activities and striving for our goals is a lifetime endeavor.

Think for a moment about the father and son writing this book. Think about how we might approach this long process. We might think that writing the book is a drag – we have to research, read, write and rewrite, and endlessly go over our grammar and spelling. But we might predict that the outcome is worth the effort because our book might be very successful, it might make a difference in someone’s life, it might educate people, it might lead to other professional opportunities for us. Of course, none of these things might happen, but the issue is whether writing the book is worth a lot of unpleasantness because it might lead to success. Our point here is that happiness requires exactly the opposite frame of mind – we must enjoy writing the book and promoting the book. Then, regardless of whether it is successful or not, we will have had a very enjoyable time. Of course, it would be nice if the book did well in the marketplace, but the more important thing for our own happiness is that we enjoyed working together and got joy from thinking about the content of a book that might help people. In fact, we can say that this has been our experience. We haven’t argued, have had many stimulating discussions about the content in this volume, and have learned new things in authoring the book. We have enjoyed talking to others to get ideas for the book, and trying out different ideas on ourselves. With happiness as a process, not a place, the book has already been a great success for us – and any sales of the book will be a bonus. Of course, occasionally we must endure unpleasant activities and hardship to obtain certain goals. But we are saying that this should be the exception rather than the rule. If most of your goals are unpleasant to work for, you better change either your goals or your attitudes.

Whether you are a famous movie star, the president of the United States, a Forbes list billionaire, or a Nobel Prize winner, you can be unhappy or happy. Whether you have everything you ever wanted or live a simple life, you can be happy or unhappy, because process is the key. We have asked people who have won large awards, such as the Nobel Prize, whether the award made their lives happy – they say it did for a day, a month, maybe even a year, but life continues and they must find new activities to enjoy.

There is a temptation when envisioning a happy life to think only of desirable life circumstances – money, health, and friends – and certainly these things can help. But we hope that we have also shown you that happiness requires more – positive attitudes and working toward meaningful goals and values. Perhaps most important, you need to understand that, as we have repeatedly, happiness is a process, not a place; a way of traveling, not a destination. Happiness requires positive attitudes about life and the world, and continuing fresh involvement with activities. A life full of meaning and values, supportive social relationships, and rewarding work is the framework for a happy life. The processes of happiness within that framework require positive attitudes, spiritual emotions such as love and gratitude, and material sufficiency.

Changing Your Set Point

Many things that we look to for happiness make us happy for only a short time because we grow accustomed to them. In psychology jargon, we adapt. A raise or promotion at work, a daughter marrying a great guy, winning an award – these can be real boosts, but usually don’t change our long-term level of happiness. They make us happy for a month or two, and then we drop back to our old baseline. So the search is on for things that can raise our baseline, which can lead to long-term increases in our happiness. Some really good and bad things can do this – finding a wonderful marriage partner on the positive side, or losing that partner on the negative side. But even with these large good and bad events, we adapt to some extent over time.

As we describe above, how you travel and react, your positive AIM, is the most important aspect of raising your set point. Changing your set point for happiness also requires that you understand the types of happiness, and what is possible in terms of changing them. Happiness includes life satisfaction, feelings of meaning and purpose, and positive emotions and interest. It also includes the spiritual emotions, such as love and gratitude. However, happiness is not a continual high of elation or ecstasy, and it is not an absence of all unpleasant emotions, such as worry and sadness; occasionally these are appropriate and beneficial. The search for intense highs and avoiding all negative emotions can even be harmful. You don’t want to be continually
elated or ecstatic, because then you could not react to new good events and activities. This is why heaven must wait; we can’t experience heaven on this earth, as some try doing with drugs, because if we do, it creates a hell in which we can no longer function as healthy adult humans who can respond to the wonderful things that occur in life. Raising your set point means feeling positive most of the time, but not continual bliss.

Conclusions

Our book has the ambitious goal of describing how you, and the next generations, should live your life. We do not describe the concrete details or the differing paths people might take. We do describe the components of psychological wealth that are essential for a good life. To have the highest quality of life, you must live a life full of meaning, values, purpose, and strong social connections: a life filled primarily with positive emotions, including the spiritual emotions, such as love and gratitude, with occasional negative emotions in situations where they are helpful; a life built around activities in which you enjoy working toward your values.

People have values besides their own happiness, and therefore we must sometimes sacrifice our own short-term enjoyment to obtain those other valued goals. We might, for example, visit people in the hospital because we value their friendship and want to cheer them up, even though we find a hospital visit unpleasant. We do activities that we think are required or the right thing to do, even when we don’t enjoy them, in order to act morally. Here it is important to keep the different types of happiness in mind, and the difference between enjoyment and life satisfaction. Many valued activities, even when unpleasant, can increase our long-term life satisfaction because they make our overall lives better, even if they lead to less pleasure at the moment. And they may even bring greater pleasures in the future, because they improve our circumstances, or strengthen our relations with others. Regardless, we often do the right thing without considering whether it will increase our own happiness, and that should increase our psychological wealth.

Money will do us no good if it does not increase our psychological wealth, and at times the pursuit of money can detract from psychological wealth by distracting us from other important values. To flourish,