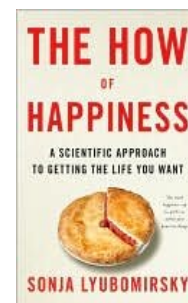


A Professional Summary Mill, Inc. Summary of
The How of Happiness
A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want
Book by: Sonja Lyubomirsky–New York: The Penguin Press, 2008
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Introduction

This book by research psychologist and professor at the University of California, Sonja Lyubomirsky, differs from most other self-help books in that it is scientifically founded. Lyubomirsky does not simply offer advice; instead she breaks down the goal of happiness into a series of activities, and she provides extensive evidence for how and why each activity works.

The book is divided into three parts. The first deals with happiness in general. It addresses the importance of being happy, each person's potential for happiness and how to fit the happiness activities into real life. The second section includes twelve different happiness activities with real examples and multiple methods of execution for each. The third part of the book encourages readers to develop their activities into habits, so happiness may be maintained. Lyubomirsky also includes a postscript about depression that she encourages those who need to read before embarking on their journey toward happiness.

Chapter One: Is It Possible to Become Happier?

In the first chapter, Lyubomirsky focuses on where people's happiness is derived from. According to Lyubomirsky, each person's capacity for happiness can be broken down into three areas. The first fifty percent is an intrinsic set point for happiness that is genetically predetermined, similar to intelligence or a propensity for weight gain. Little can be done to alter this set point of happiness. The second ten percent is circumstantial. Many assume that a better job, a nicer car or a new wardrobe will make them happy, but that is simply not true. People adapt very easily to new circumstances, so while a sudden change can sway one's happiness for a time, eventually he or she will go back to their set point.

The third area of happiness is the focus of the rest of the book. Forty percent of a person's potential for happiness is determined by his or her own behavior. Lyubomirsky finds this large percentage an encouraging number for those plagued by unhappiness. "This is terrific news. It means that all of us could be a great deal happier if we scrutinized very carefully what precise behaviors and thoughts very happy people naturally and habitually engage in" (22). She does warn that like anything else worth pursuing, happiness requires hard work. However, scientific evidence indicates that it will be worth it, as happy people reap physical benefits, such as better health and longer lives.

Chapter Two: How Happy Are You and Why?

As was introduced in the previous chapter, all people have a set point for happiness. Some people are very naturally happy and are able to remain thus despite adversity, while others' lives are fairly comfortable, but they are unable to enjoy the good. This difference of perspective is due to their inherent happiness levels. Lyubomirsky includes two quizzes in this chapter: one to determine a subjective happiness level, and one to determine whether one is depressed.

Next, Lyubomirsky includes some happiness myths. The first is that happiness must be found; rather, it is created through intentional activities that each person has the power to do. The second myth is that happiness will be a result of a change in circumstances; however, they actually only nominally affect long-term

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happiness. Two circumstances that people especially tend to believe will make them happier are material wealth and beauty. Material wealth tends to be dissatisfying. “Indeed, not only does materialism not bring happiness, but it’s been shown to be a strong predictor of unhappiness” (43). Beauty also affects happiness less than most would think, possibly because it simply does not factor in to anyone’s reflection on how happy they are. However, believing oneself to be beautiful (regardless of the physical truth) will lead to increased happiness. The third myth is that people are either happy or not, but it is possible to overcome aptitudes toward unhappiness through intentional lifestyle changes.

Humans are able to adjust very rapidly to changes in circumstances. This force is known as hedonic adaptation. After a relatively short period of time, people become used to the new circumstance, and it ceases to affect their lives as strongly as before. An interesting example is marriage. Newlyweds are shown to have increased levels of happiness for only the first two years of marriage, after which they return to their original set points. There is strong scientific support for the theory of set points, which was displayed nicely in the case of identical twins separated at birth. They had exactly the same genetic code, but extremely different lives, yet both reported the same level of happiness. Therefore, becoming happier is dependent on each individual making the concerted choice to do things that will make him or her feel happy. “In sum, our intentional, effortful activities have a powerful effect on how happy we are, over and above the effects of our set points and the circumstances in which we find ourselves” (64).

Chapter Three: How to Find Happiness Activities That Fit Your Interests, Your Values, and Your Needs

There is not one simple activity that will work to make everyone happier. Rather, it is like finding a diet or exercise plan—each person will benefit from something slightly different. Lyubomirsky describes three ways the different happiness strategies can fit. The first way is to determine the source of unhappiness and combating it. A pessimist may benefit more from cultivating optimism more than another activity, because that is what the root of their problem is. The second option is to fit in the happiness activities with one’s strengths. Someone who is creative can use that to find unique ways to show gratitude or forgiveness. Make the activities work for you. The activities also need to fit into an individual’s lifestyle. If an activity cannot be readily implemented into a person’s lifestyle, it will only serve to frustrate them further when they fail. Lyubomirsky includes another quiz that helps determine which happiness activities are best suited to each reader. She encourages readers to focus on their top matches, rather than attempting everything. “Where there is a good fit, you will try harder and feel right about what you’re doing” (77). It is also critical to know how and why each activity works.

Chapter Four: Practicing Gratitude and Positive Thinking

The first happiness activity is to practice gratitude. That means more than just saying thank you; it is rather an attitude for all of life. “People who are consistently grateful have been found to be relatively happier, more energetic, and more hopeful and to report experiencing more frequent positive emotions” (90).

Lyubomirsky includes eight ways that gratitude affects happiness. It promotes relishing the positive things in life by focusing on those good things. It boosts self-esteem by making one realize how much others do for him or her. Gratitude is also a good coping mechanism for stressful and traumatic situations. By appreciating what is still there after a loss, people can face adversity much better. Gratitude encourages moral behavior, because those who are grateful for that which they have received are more likely to in turn help others. Gratitude can establish social bonds, for when a person sees how much others do for them, they feel more connected to the world and particular individuals. Gratitude also allays jealousy; by focusing on what oneself has, one does not focus on what others have. Gratitude can

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diminish negative feelings, because they are incompatible. Finally, gratitude helps people avoid hedonic adaptation by never letting them become complacent about a good change in circumstances.

Some ways to practice gratitude are to write in a gratitude journal. In her studies, Lyubomirsky found that on average, those who wrote several things they were grateful for once a week became happier. Different people can use different activities to focus on gratitude, such as substituting ungrateful thoughts for grateful ones, or getting a gratitude partner to share blessings with. It also helps to vary the method of expression, for it ceases to be meaningful if it is done in the same way every single time. Finally, by directly expressing gratitude to the person to whom one is thankful, one will foster a special connection that is beneficial to both parties.

The second happiness activity is cultivating optimism. Optimism is a celebration of the past and present with a positive outlook for the future. There are two different kinds of optimism—big and little. Little optimism is used in specific situations, while big optimism is a general outlook on life. One strategy to cultivate optimism is the Best Possible Selves, which instructs a person to list where they would ideally like to be in five years, and then has them set that ideal into goals, with smaller subgoals. It is also key to identify those pessimistic thoughts that hold one back. By examining them and replacing them, one not only filters out the bad, but can actually solve the problem through examination. Optimism has to be habitual. It must be practiced to the point that it is a natural part of life. “The positive spins and the silver linings will come about automatically and habitually, such that you would need to ‘practice’ optimistic thinking effortfully and intentionally only during times of stress, insecurity or heartbreak” (110). It is important to remember that being optimistic does not mean denying the bad in the world—it simply means focusing on how situations can work out.

Avoiding overthinking and social comparison is the third happiness activity. Overthinking creates unnecessary pessimistic thoughts, rather than establishing true insight into a situation. Social comparisons are almost inevitable—it is nearly impossible not to notice others. However, comparison is often destructive. Upward comparisons lead to feelings of inferiority, while downward comparisons can lead to such feelings as guilt.

It is essential to break away from overthinking and social comparison. Five ways to do that are by distracting oneself; mentally saying “Stop!” whenever such thoughts come to mind; set aside a period of time each day specifically for rumination; confide in a someone who is sympathetic and trustworthy; write out the ruminations in order to make sense of them. It is also very important to establish a new life perspective that will allow one to solve problems, rather than dwell on them. Another key to success is dodging situations that will trigger overthinking or comparisons. Finally, think about the big picture. If a person stops to ponder whether their dilemma will still be relevant in a week, a year, or when they are dead, they will often realize how insignificant it truly is, and they will be able to move forward.

Chapter Five: Investing in Social Connections

Practicing acts of kindness is the fourth way to achieve happiness. “It may be ironic, but being kind and good, even when it’s unpleasant or when one expects nothing in return, may also be in the doer’s self-interest. This is because being generous and willing to share makes people happy” (126). After conducting a study, Lyubomirsky found that those who practiced kindness found it most effective when they did multiple acts in a single day. This is possible because most people already do kind things daily, and it simply was not significant enough to do one kind thing a day. There are many benefits do practicing kindness, including bettered perception of others and oneself, as well as creating social change. Each act of kindness is a link in a change of forward social movement.

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Some different ways to effectively practice kindness in order to bolster happiness are to know that timing is everything. Doing too little will have no impact, while doing too much may lead to stress. It is also necessary to vary the ways in which one shows kindness. Doing different things with different people will make each time special and meaningful. Know that kindness is for the benefit of others, and it will sometimes occur at your expense, but as long as that is not habitual, kindness will lead to happiness.

Very happy people have high-quality relationships with others, which is why nurturing social relationships is the fifth happiness activity. Psychological studies have shown that relationships and community are essential to human survival; therefore, good relationships lead to human happiness. One of the most beneficial aspects of community is support in difficult times. Most would agree that love is one of the ultimate goals of life, and finding loving relationships is the ultimate happiness. Also, happy relationships are basically immune to hedonic adaptation, meaning they will continue to bring pleasure as long as they last.

Some strategies for making relationships work are to commit to the amount of time necessary to truly communicate. It is not enough to simply be in the presence of someone, watching TV with them. Express admiration, appreciation, and affection. Direct positive feelings about another to them through speech and physical touch. When others have something positive occur in their lives, celebrate with them. Be involved in their success and failures and actively listen to them. Manage conflict in such a way that a fight is over an issue, not over the character of those involved. Finally, even if two people do not have much in common, it is still possible for them to have a successful relationship if they are interested in each other's activities.

Romantic relationships are not the only ones that matter. Friendships are extremely valuable as well, and there are several strategies to make them. It is again critical to make time for the relationship as well as to communicate. Be supportive and loyal to friends, and hug them. "Frequent hugging is enthusiastically endorsed by popular magazines and Web sites as a means to increase happiness, health and connectedness to others. If this is your cup of tea, the science is there to prove it" (148). Those who hug are happier than those who are physically aloof.

Chapter Six: Managing Stress, Hardship, and Trauma

No life is going to be happy all the time, but by developing strategies for coping, the sixth happiness activity, people can better deal with negative situations when they do occur. There are different varieties of coping, applicable to different situations. The first is problem-focused coping, which involves attempting to solve problems. The next is emotion-focused coping. Some behavioral strategies for emotion-focused coping include distraction, exercise, or support from friends. Cognitive strategies include trying to learn from the experience, acceptance, and religion. Researchers suggest that teaching people both strategies will equip them with the tools to cope in many different types of situations. Sometimes, trauma is inevitable, and then Lyubomirsky suggests finding some benefit in the situation. "Construing benefit in trauma involves seeing some value or gain (a silver lining, if you must) in your loss or negative life event—for example, a change in life perspective, a feeling that one's life has greater value, or a sense of personal growth" (155). This is a very effective coping strategy, as well as being able to grow after a traumatic situation. A person can be transformed after a traumatic event, ending up even better than they were before it happened. There are three options after a challenge, and those are: survival, recovery and thriving. Survival is barely hanging on after something happens; recovery involves getting back to the original level of happiness; thriving takes learning from the situation to better oneself to a new and increased level of happiness.

Some strategies for coping include finding meaning through expressive writing. Writing enables one to make logical observations and connections among the different aspects of the trauma, thereby gaining insight. Writing or conversing about the potential benefits of a trauma is another way to cope. When one becomes overwhelmed with negative thoughts about a bad situation, it is necessary to mentally dispute them using the ABCDE technique. A is for adversity; B is for beliefs triggered by the problem; C is the

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consequences of the problem; D is disputing the negative belief; E is to energize by considering optimistic explanations.

Learning to forgive is the seventh happiness activity. Forgiveness is a total transformation of how one thinks about one who has wronged them. Lyubomirsky asserts that one has forgiven “when you have experienced a shift in thinking, such that your desire to harm that person has decreased and your desire to do him good (or to benefit your relationship) has increased” (171). Forgiveness, however, is something a person does for himself. It hurts you to not forgive.

Ways to practice forgiveness include appreciating being forgiven. Knowing that others have forgiven one may make it easier for them to forgive others. Another technique is imagining forgiveness and how it will make you feel to forgive someone, even if you cannot physically forgive him. Writing a letter of forgiveness works similarly. Practicing empathy can allow one to picture the motivations of those who have wronged them; it also helps to consider the whole person—not just the part of them that wronged you. Focus less on their misdeed, and it will become easier to forgive. It may be beneficial to make contact with the person and forgive them face-to-face. Finally, make forgiveness a habit.

Chapter Seven: Living in the Present

Flow is a state of intense absorption in whatever one’s present task is, and the eighth happiness activity is to increase flow experiences. Flow is good for you not only because the activity is intrinsically enjoyable, but because by repeating flow activities, one naturally challenges oneself. Some ways to increase flow are to control your attention to an activity. Instead of constantly multi-tasking, take time to appreciate each activity. Adopt the values of being open to new things and always learning. Think of the activities that cause flow, and try to do them more often. Make mundane tasks into things to be enjoyed by creating smaller activities within them on which to concentrate. When in conversation, focus as intensely as possible on the other person and really listen to them. Participate in smart leisure. Instead of just zoning out in front of the TV, do activities that are really enjoyable. As far as work is concerned, most people tend to see themselves as having either a job, career, or calling. Those who consider themselves to merely have a job are quite unhappy and are merely getting by. Those with a career see room for advancement and improvement and are quite satisfied. Those with a calling love their work, and they would probably still do it without pay. Strive for superflow, a state in which you are totally transcendent.

The ninth happiness activity, savoring life’s joys, is one of the most important aspects of happiness. Some strategies for savoring include relishing ordinary experiences (i.e. Stop and smell the roses). Another is to savor and reminisce with family and friends. It is quite easy to gain pleasure in sharing a positive memory with another. The ability to transport yourself is a good tool when the present is not very good is also a great technique. Along with that, the ability to replay a happy day can be effective as well. When good things happen to you or others around you, celebrate them wholeheartedly. Be open to beauty and excellence. “It may appear immensely challenging to experience awe in response to mundane daily life—reading the sports pages, watching a movie, walking through the park—but it’s an ability well worth cultivating. Don’t go through life wearing blinders to everything that is touching, beautiful, virtuous, and magnificent” (197). Be mindful of the here and now. Take pleasure in the senses. Create a savoring album to look at occasionally filled with pictures of the things in life that bring you joy. Savor with your camera—instead of taking pictures of everything, pick subjects with meaning. Seek bittersweet experiences—good ones that will inevitably end. Wax nostalgic, for it can create feelings of happiness over past joys. Writing, however, is not a good method for any of these activities, for it can make the experience too structured and deplete it of its pleasure.

Chapter Eight:

The tenth happiness activity is committing to your goals. Benefits include having something to strive toward and look forward to. Having goals also raises self-esteem and creates confidence. Pursuing goals

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provides an impetus for daily life, and it also helps create good time management skills. Often times, pursuing goals leads to interactions with other people.

There are different kinds of goals. Intrinsic goals are ones that are personally rewarding for their own sake. Authentic goals are those that are rooted in a person's deepest interests. Approach goals for their positive aspects, rather than pursuing a goal to avoid a negative consequence. A person's goals should all complement one another, because if they are in conflict, none will be fulfilled. It is also important to have flexible and appropriate goals for one's station in life. Taking up a new activity is a goal that will lead to happiness more than any attempt to shift circumstances. Choose goals that fit any of these characteristics, and your happiness will come as a benefit to achieving them.

It is critical to commit to your goals and be passionate about them. However, it is also important to be flexible enough to know when to amend those goals. A good way to achieve goals is to break them down into smaller parts that will not be as difficult to do.

Chapter Nine: Taking Care of Your Body and Your Soul

Happiness activity eleven is one many people do without the motivation of becoming happier. It is practicing religion and spirituality. Religion benefits people in more ways than simply spiritually. Religious people have been shown to live healthier and longer lives than nonreligious people. Certain religions' moral codes are potential explanations for this phenomenon, but religious people's relationship with God that holds them strong in times of trouble also benefits them, as does the idea that God has purpose in everything that happens.

There is a difference between religion and spirituality. While religion is a part of spirituality, it is generally a structured, communal activity, whereas spirituality is an individual's quest for the sacred. However, those who do not believe in a higher power can still benefit from this technique by finding the sacred in normal life. Prayer and meditation are the two most important activities, as they are what connect people to God.

The final happiness activity can be broken down into subcategories, the first being taking care of your body (meditation). "An avalanche of studies has shown that meditation has multiple positive effects on a person's happiness and positive emotions, on physiology, stress, cognitive abilities, and physical health, as well as on other harder-to-assess attributes, like 'self-actualization' and moral maturity" (241). Meditation is a very calming practice, and it should be performed in solitude and with discipline, as it is quite difficult to effectively clear one's mind for longer than a few seconds.

The second category of taking care of your body is physical activity. Though the notion that the endorphins released during exercise make people happier has been scientifically discredited, there are still positive effects to physical activity. These benefits are tied to self-esteem and mastery of a skill. Find an activity that is enjoyable, and then work at it in such a way that you gradually improve without overdoing it.

The third category of taking care of your body is acting like a happy person. Though it seems so simple, it is very effective. Simply smiling, whether with good reason or not, will increase happiness and lead to a happier response to external stimuli. Also, those who smile more will get the look of a smile etched onto their faces in the form of wrinkles, and they will be perceived as happier and nicer. Finally, people who smile and act friendly will be treated in kind by the outside world.

Chapter Ten: The Five Hows Behind Sustainable Happiness

While it is easy to begin behaviors that lead to happiness, sustaining them is much more difficult. One way to keep up happiness activities is by positive emotion. Moments of pleasure create spirals, leading to higher well being in multiple areas of life. Positive feelings and thoughts can also dissuade negative feelings. Happiness activities also encourage positive experiences. Different experiences lead to different types of

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pleasure, all of which are valuable. One is not to be preferred over another, but it is the smaller ones that occur intermittently that are immune from hedonic adaptation. The source of pleasure is also important, for some types of pleasure may be good in the moment, but will lead to guilt or other negative feelings afterward.

Timing is important to maintaining happiness. If an activity becomes too routine or is done too infrequently, it will cease to have meaning. Likewise, doing the same thing repeatedly will cause it to lose its effect on your happiness. “When you take up a happiness activity, be sure to jazz up your routes to the beach, both literally and figuratively. Effort matters, without question, but so does how you put it into practice” (270).

Social support is the third way to sustain happiness. Those who make a goal are much more likely to keep it if they have others backing them up than if they go at it alone. The fourth way is through motivation, effort and commitment. It makes sense that to keep at something, one must focus on it, and do it no matter what. In the case of a relationship, two people put aside many other obligations to spend time together, and in the same way, happiness requires time. Commit to your goals every single day.

The final way to maintain a goal is to make it habit. Do it so that eventually, it does not even require thought. The habit should be to instigate a happiness activity, not to do the same thing repeatedly. Make it a habit to pray, but do not always pray for the same thing in the same way.

Conclusion

Lyubomirsky ends the book with an afterward detailing her own journey to happiness through the writing process. She also includes a postscript on depression, giving useful information for those who may need to deal with that issue. She includes definitions, causes, and effective treatments. Lastly, she includes an appendix of additional happiness activities that may be suitable to a person’s needs.

This book is extremely informative and thorough, and it can be an intense project to read and implement in its entirety. However, Lyubomirsky reminds the reader frequently to focus on those chapters that will meet his or her specific needs, which is quite reassuring. She says that not all activities will be effective for everyone, so it is not essential to read them all in order to benefit.