



Improving Happiness

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

Happiness. How elusive it can seem yet how we prize it.

Ask anyone if they'd like to be happier and most will tell you yes. But how much can we change our level of happiness? And how important is it?

In my last column, I discussed the benefits of happiness. I noted how happiness improves our social relationships, our health, our outlook, and our creativity. Clearly it makes sense to improve our happiness as much as we can.

And the good news is that we can become happier. It's within our power to change our overall level of happiness. According to the research, we can make only a moderate improvement, but it's worth going for.

Dr. Martin Seligman, in his book *Authentic Happiness*, reveals that each of us has an average level of happiness, which is set by our genetics. This can be called our set point. On a scale of happiness that ranges from 1 to 7, one person's set point may be a 2 while another's might be a 6. The first person is generally not very happy while the second one generally is. In studies among adults, the average set point is 4 ½.

But that's not all there is to it. Seligman says our genetics accounts for about 50% of our mood at any given time.

Two Other Factors

There are two other key factors to take into account. The first pertains to the circumstances of our life and the second to our cognitive perception of our life's events.

The circumstances refer to what happens to us. These are the events in our life over which we have little or no control. Maybe we just got a raise in pay or maybe we lost our job. Maybe we found the house of our dreams or maybe we just got evicted from the one we're in.

When something good, or bad, happens in our lives, our mood changes for a while. But, studies show, we tend to return to our set point. Here are some examples of what happens when we experience an extreme change...

When people win the lottery, they're happier for two to three months, but then they return to their set point, their average level of happiness before the big win. Conversely, when something sad happens such as losing a loved one, people remain sadder than normal for two to three months, and then they return to their set point. (For those whose sadness persists for more than four months, that's a sign of a deeper depression for which I recommend therapy.)

Some controllable circumstances of our life that can improve our happiness include being married, living an active social life, and being religious. All are correlated with greater

happiness. On the other hand, climate and education (how much schooling we've had) do not correlate with greater happiness. Even personal wealth, physical attractiveness, and objective ratings of physical health do not correlate with greater happiness.

What We Can Change

The second factor, our cognitive perception, is the area over which we can have the greatest influence. This includes our view of the world and what's happening around us.

You can improve your happiness by adopting a more rational, non-negative approach to life in three different areas:

- Relating to the past – People who experience satisfaction, contentment, and fulfillment concerning events in their past are happiest. Dwelling on negative events from the past interferes with happiness and may bring about sadness or anger. Conversely, recalling positive events from the past boosts happiness. Helpful hints: By feeling gratitude or thankfulness for past events, you can strengthen your positive memories. By using forgiveness, of yourself or others, you can help to reverse your negative recollections.
- Relating to the future – Studies show that those who view the world with greater optimism, hope, and faith experience greater happiness. You develop an optimistic outlook when you explain the future in a positive way. Through hope, you show a specific type of optimism that finds universal causes for positive events in the future. Through faith, you harbor the feeling that things will turn out okay. Helpful hint: You can boost optimism by recognizing any pessimistic thought, challenging it, and arguing against it.
- Relating to the present – The happiest people experience greater joy and calm in the present moment, and feel as if they're "in the flow." Helpful hints: It's all about boosting your pleasures and gratifications, and savoring them. Your pleasures are sensory and emotional. They require little if any thinking, are usually of short duration, and have a comparably short effect on happiness. Also, the more you repeat the pleasurable experience over a short period of time, the less pleasure and happiness it brings. The pleasures include bodily sensations that come through taste, smell, and touch, as well as seeing and hearing. Your gratifications come from particular activities you like to do. These are longer lived and include such activities as rock climbing, a good conversation, dancing, or spending time working on your favorite hobby.

Try making some of these changes and see how much you can improve your happiness. In addition, you may want to read the book, *Authentic Happiness*, for an even greater understanding.

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