

Nourish to Flourish

Nourish to Flourish brings together practitioners' voices and creative practices, and wide-ranging reviews of books that support strengths-based approaches to human interactions.

Book Appreciation

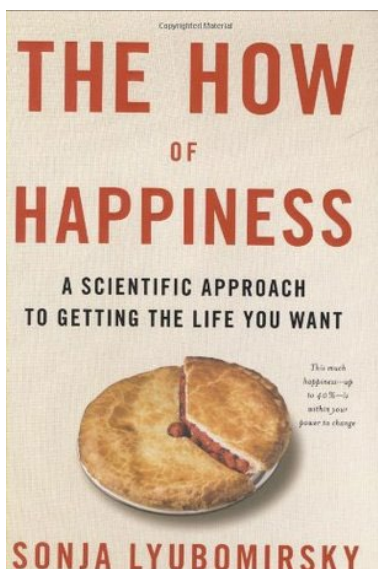


Neena Verma

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The How of Happiness: A New Approach to Getting the Life You Want

By Sonja Lyubomirsky
Penguin, 2008
ISBN – 978-0-14-311495-6



Have you tried using Google to search for “happiness”? If not, let me tell you that you can expect over nine hundred million results. And have you tried searching for “happiness” books on Amazon? Let me tell you that you can expect over fifty thousand results.

Searching for a research-grounded, practice-oriented book on the subject, I found several with an overly simplistic and rosy-eyed approach, but very few with substance. I picked *The How of Happiness* by Sonja Lyubomirsky because this book offers an authentic guide on “happiness”, substantiated by scientific research, yet speaking to the heart as much as it speaks to the mind. From scholarly explanations, to the significance in the context of everyday life, to the

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Happiness is about the 'experience of joy, contentment, a sense that life is good and worth living.'

myths muddling the phenomenon of true, abiding “happiness”, to helping the reader learn in simple and practical ways to create and sustain happiness for oneself ... this book delves deep into all, and more. It is not often that I begin reading a book at the end. But the postscript on “If you are depressed” did not just evoke my curiosity but also affirmed my own belief that “happiness” and “depression” can be explored in a shared realm.

Core proposition

Happiness, the author suggests, is the “holy grail of life”. She offers a “forty percent solution” proposition, arguing that, while fifty percent of the difference in our happiness can be explained by our genetically determined **happiness set-point** (one’s innate characteristic potential for happiness) and ten percent by life-circumstances, as much as forty percent of our happiness is for us to create and influence ourselves through conscious and **intentional effort** – wisely choosing to live such activities that help us create, sustain and enhance our happiness.

Happiness, she argues, is more meaningful and deeper than what is depicted in the “ubiquitous smiley face and the inspirational posters”. As she explains, happiness is about the “experience of joy, contentment, a sense that life is good and worth living”, and an abiding wellbeing that each of us embodies in our own unique ways – whether through cheerfulness, serenity or productivity. The author insists that happiness is not an object out there to be found through a passive pursuit. It is rather an active life-process that we undertake to create and sustain happiness through conscious choice and intentional effort. She emphasizes that while life challenges do stress happy people as much as anyone else, their innate sense of wellbeing helps them cope and work through challenges with poise and strength.

Many readers may not need an elaboration as to why it is important to be happy. But I guess some may be curious to know how happy they are. The author shares a **subjective happiness scale** that she has developed to help one guess one’s happiness set-point. At first glance, this scale appeared simplistic. But as I read, I realized that each of the four simply worded statements is actually an invitation for authentic self-inquiry. If you like being honest with yourself, the scale would help you design a meaningful happiness project for yourself, especially if you also choose to rate yourself on the depression scale that follows immediately.

Delving into **myths of happiness**, the author explains why life circumstances are given little space on the happiness pie. Citing scientific research, the author clarifies that while genes have a strong influence (as much as fifty percent) on our happiness temperament, life events make little impact because humans

Humans tend to adapt quickly and remarkably well to hedonic, sensory or physiological changes.

tend to adapt quickly and remarkably well to hedonic sensory or physiological changes. She assures readers that, though happiness set-points can't be changed, it is nonetheless very much (forty percent) within an individual's choice and ability to manoeuvre one's happiness levels through the intentional effort of investing in undertaking "wisely selected" activities in sync with one's personal make-up.

Along with the "forty percent solution", "creation of lasting happiness" and "intentional effort", a unique offering of this book is the concept of **person-activity fit**. The author shares a self-diagnostic test that she has developed to help one ascertain what happiness activities would best suit an individual. Pursuing such wisely selected activities that serve one's goals and strengths, according to the author, helps one stay motivated and make the desired intentional effort.

A treasure house of happiness

Part II of the book is a treasure house of happiness activities that would be a delight to both professionals and individuals interested in self-help alike. The rich platter of various happiness activities is sure to have at least one for each reader. I found several of these activities relevant and valuable for me. However, it is "forgiveness" that sang to my heart. While it is easy to argue why and how forgiveness helps, it is hard to practice forgiveness. The author gives practical and effective ways to practice forgiveness. Apart from practicing "imagine forgiveness" and "charitable attributions" strategies myself, I also used a couple of others with my coaching clients, helping them to not just forgive the transgressor but also seek release from their own emotional hurt.

The author makes it very simple and easy to start practising these research-evidenced activities.

Combined with the person-activity fit test, the clustering of various activities, detailing of strategies pertaining each, discussion about timing and variation, and the scientific way to turn happiness-inducing behaviours into lasting habits; the author makes it very simple and easy to start practising these research-evidenced activities in actively creating and enhancing one's happiness. Appendix 1 offers a quick reckoner of the various mutually supportive happiness-enhancing strategies.

The book's distinctive appeal

What makes this book stand apart with engaging intellect and evocative appeal is author's deft and appropriate blending of scholarly explanation and practical wisdom. She explains profound concepts in simple, jargon-free and easy to relate

The author makes a case for trying 'happiness-increasing activities,' even for severely depressed individuals.

to language. She cites extensive research, offers practical advice and shares several moving stories. I felt particularly touched and inspired by Judith's story: she "chose to be happy", returning to college at fifty-two despite having lived through difficult life circumstances and a likely low set-point for happiness.

Sometimes endings hide meaningful beginnings. This book's postscript provokes one to take a fresh view of depression. Affirming a positive psychology proposition, the author makes a case for trying "happiness-increasing activities", even for severely depressed individuals without necessarily waiting to be first cured of depression. While these activities may not cure depression, there is a strong likelihood that they "lighten the burden and darkness of depression".

What else?

The book's postscript evokes more than just curiosity. I am filled with respect for the author for her courageous choice of giving space to the very urgent and timely topic of depression in her happiness book. It would have been nice to read in greater detail about how conscious happiness creation and enhancement can help one face and work through depression. That said, I understand that this topic is complex and important enough to deserve a book exclusively devoted to the theme. I would keenly wait for that. Further, it would be interesting to learn if and how various happiness activities as elaborated in this book relate to the famous positive psychology character strengths. The author begins the book with Mary Oliver's poetry. And I close this book appreciation with the same ...

*Sometimes I need
only to stand
wherever I am
to be blessed*

Mary Oliver

The book is easily available at online marketplaces and leading bookstores.



Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky is a highly respected positive psychologist and happiness pioneer. She is a distinguished professor and the vice-chair of the Department of Psychology at the University of California, Riverside (UCR). She has done extensive research on "happiness" spanning her long career as a scientist and researcher in the field of psychology. She directs the Positive Activities and Well-Being Laboratory at the UCR. She has published numerous scholarly articles on happiness as well as two best-selling books, *The How of Happiness* and *The Myths of Happiness*.

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