5.

Investing in Social Connections

If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?

—Talmud

The centrality of social connections to our health and well-being cannot be overstressed. "Relationships constitute the single most important factor responsible for the survival of homo sapiens," writes one social psychologist.[1] I don't think this is an overstatement. One of the strongest findings in the literature on happiness is that happy people have better relationships than do their less happy peers.[2] It's no surprise, then, that investing in social relationships is a potent strategy on the path to becoming happier. This chapter describes two happiness activities that have social connections in common: practicing kindness and nurturing relationships.

Happiness Activity No. 4: Practicing Acts of Kindness

The moral dimension of being kind, generous, and giving is undisputed. The Bible exhorts us "to be generous and willing to share" (1 Timothy 6:18), and a principled, moral person helps those who are in need and, when necessary, sacrifices his own well-being for another. Indeed, the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer wrote: "Compassion is the basis of all morality." From a

very early age we are inculcated with the idea that kindness and compassion are important virtues. Of course we are taught to develop and apply these virtues for their own sakes, because by definition, it is the right, good, and ethical thing to do. What scientific research has recently contributed to this agelong principle is evidence that practicing acts of kindness is not only good for the recipient but also good for the doer. It may be ironic, but being kind and good, even when it's unpleasant or when one expects or receives nothing in return, may also be in the doer's self-interest. This is because being generous and willing to share makes people happy.

The Milk of Human Kindness Is…Happiness

To be sure, the notion that doing acts of kindness can make a person feel good is not exactly novel. Writers, philosophers, and religious thinkers have appreciated this truth for centuries. "If you want to be happy, practice compassion" is a common refrain of the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism, the fourteenth Dalai Lama. "True happiness consists in making others happy," according to a Hindu proverb. And Scottish-born essayist Thomas Carlyle quipped that "without kindness, there can be no true joy." Nice thoughts, but their veracity had until recently not been tested systematically, using the scientific method. My laboratory was the first, to my knowledge, to accomplish this. Previous research had only reported correlations (but not causation) between happiness and helping. For example, we know that happier people are more likely to describe themselves as doing frequent altruistic acts (e.g., shopping for sick friends or stopping to help strangers), to spend a greater percentage of their time helping others, and to perform behaviors at the office that go beyond the call of duty (e.g., helping colleagues with work problems despite their own heavy workloads).[3] These findings are illuminating, but they have little to say about whether doing all those things (helping strangers or colleagues) actually *makes* people happy.

To address this very question, my collaborators and I conducted a happiness intervention (or experiment) in which we recruited participants into two groups and asked them to perform five acts of kindness per week over the course of six weeks.[4] The first group was instructed to do these acts anytime throughout the week, but the second group was instructed to do the five acts on one single day each week (e.g., all on a Monday). These were our exact instructions:

In our daily lives, we all perform acts of kindness for others. These acts may be large or small and the person for whom the act is performed may or may not be aware of the act. Examples include feeding a stranger's parking meter, donating blood, helping a friend with homework, visiting an elderly relative, or writing a thank-you letter. Over the next week, you are to perform *five* acts of kindness. The acts do not need to be for the same person, the person may or may not be aware of the act, and the act may or may not be similar to the acts listed above. Do not perform any acts that may place yourself or others in danger.

Every Sunday night our participants turned in their "kindness reports," in which they described the acts of kindness they had done each week, to whom, and when. Examples of the types of kind acts that they performed ranged widely, from very small, simple helpful behaviors to fairly big ones—e.g., "bought a friend a sundae," "washed someone else's dishes," "donated blood," "stayed with a friend on her first night at a new place," "visited a nursing home," "helped a stranger with computer problems," "let my sister borrow my car for the weekend," "gave a homeless man $20," and (my personal favorite) "told a professor thank you for his hard work."

The results were a bit surprising. As expected, being generous and considerate made people happy—that is, the participants who committed acts of kindness over the course of the study experienced a significant elevation in their happiness. But interestingly, this boost was reported only by those who showed their weekly generosity all in one single day. So, although both groups who committed kind acts described themselves as being much more helpful after the intervention than before, the group that was instructed to distribute its five weekly acts of kindness over the course of the week didn't become any happier. Why did this happen? My hunch is that because many of the kind acts that the participants performed were small ones, spreading them over seven days each week might have diminished their conspicuousness, their prominence, and their power or made them less distinguishable from the participants' habitual kind behavior. After all, most of us do minor thoughtful and helpful things on a regular basis, and we may not even be aware of it.

So we see evidence in this study for the notion that optimal *timing* is critical for a happiness activity to be effective. In the section on gratitude (in Chapter 4), I noted that when we asked people to count their blessings on a regular basis, only those who did it once a week (versus three times a week) were rewarded

with an increase in well-being. So you need to determine precisely how, when, and how often to commit to a happiness-enhancing practice in order to maximize its success. The results of our kindness intervention suggest that doing more than is your custom (at least when it comes to kindness) is ideal.

Our study was the first to show that a strategy to increase kind behaviors is an effective way to elevate happiness. Since then we have been conducting longer and more intensive investigations, working out how and why this and other strategies work. For example, we did another study in which we asked people to commit acts of kindness, though this time we checked in on them a month after the intervention had ended, to determine whether their happiness levels were preserved.[5] Furthermore, some of our participants had the opportunity to *vary* the kindnesses that they performed, whereas others did not. At the beginning of the study everyone was asked to make a list of acts of kindness that they would "like to do more in the future" and that are "easily repeatable on a daily basis." For example, they might choose to do an extra household chore, send e-cards to family members, help someone carry or pick up something, give their pet a special treat, or make breakfast for their boyfriend. Those in the "high variety" condition could mix and match any three acts they wanted to do each week, but those in the "low variety" condition had to perform the same three acts every week for ten weeks in a row.[6]

This second kindness study confirmed for us, once again, that doing acts of kindness on a regular basis makes people happy for an extended period. But the extent to which people vary what they do makes an enormous difference. Indeed, those participants who had to repeat their three kind acts over and over again actually dropped in happiness by the middle of the study before bouncing back to their original levels. These individuals probably found their exercise to be just another item on their to-do list—that is, a tedious experience that detracts rather than adds to happiness. If an activity is meant to enhance well-being, it needs to remain fresh and meaningful. Of course, when you embark on your own happiness-increasing program, you will do so by your own free will, not because an experimenter in a white lab coat is prompting you. Indeed, when you select an activity that fits you, you are choosing, by definition, to do something that you value and that you believe you will enjoy. This is empowering in and of itself. The singular act of choosing an activity can make you feel brighter and gladder even before you commit your first act of kindness (or gratitude or whatever else). Nevertheless, this study alerts us to be mindful of not falling into a rut when practicing our chosen strategy. Spicing up your happiness strategies will be

worth the effort. (See Chapter 10 to hear more.)

Why Does Doing Kind Deeds Make People Happy? Let Us Count the Ways

Plentiful evidence for the reasons (or mechanisms) for why helping brings happiness comes from psychological theory and research. Being kind and generous leads you to perceive others more positively and more charitably(e.g., "the homeless veteran may be too ill to work" or "my brother really tries at math, but it doesn't come easily to him") and fosters a heightened sense of interdependence and cooperation in your social community (e.g., "it takes a village to raise a child" or "we must all pitch in to improve the environment"). Doing kindness often relieves guilt, distress, or discomfort over others' difficulties and suffering and encourages a sense of awareness and appreciation for your own good fortune. In other words, helping others makes you feel advantaged (and thankful) by comparison (e.g., "I'm grateful that I have my health"). Indeed, providing assistance or comfort to other people can deliver a welcome distraction from your own troubles and ruminations, as it shifts the focus from you to somebody else.

A considerable benefit of kindness is its impact on self-perception. When you commit acts of kindness, you may begin to view yourself as an altruistic and compassionate person. This new identity can promote a sense of confidence, optimism, and usefulness. Helping others or volunteering for a worthy cause highlights your abilities, resources, and expertise and gives you a feeling of control over your life.[7] You may learn new skills or discover hidden talents—for example, by honing your teaching aptitude or social skills, through uncovering a flair with children, or by learning the workings of a hospital. This in itself can confer a sense of efficacy and accomplishment. Some researchers argue that acts of kindness can even promote a sense of meaningfulness and value in one's life.[8]

Finally, and this is probably the most important factor, kindness can jump-start a cascade of positive social consequences. Helping others leads people to like you, to appreciate you, to offer gratitude. It also may lead people to reciprocate in *your* times of need.[9] Helping others can satisfy a basic human need for connecting with others, winning you smiles, thankfulness, and valued friendship. My laboratory actually obtained evidence for this dynamic in our second kindness intervention. We measured not only how helpful our participants were and how much their happiness increased over ten weeks but

also the extent to which they perceived gratitude in those they helped. Indeed, we found that a chief reason that being kind to others made our participants happier is that it led them to recognize how much the recipients appreciated their kind acts.

So there are multiple ways that kindness can make us happier. Surveys of volunteers, for example, show that volunteering is associated with diminished depressive symptoms and enhanced feelings of happiness, self-worth, mastery, and personal control—a "helper's high."[10] Although these studies can't disentangle causal direction (i.e., "Does volunteering make people feel good about themselves, or are people who feel good about themselves more likely to volunteer in the first place?"), studies that follow volunteers over time strongly suggest that it's the munificent behavior of the volunteers that enhances happiness and not the other way around.

Consider an unusual study that followed five women volunteers over a three-year period.[11] These five women, all of whom had multiple sclerosis (MS), were chosen to act as peer supporters for sixty-seven other MS patients. They were trained in active and compassionate listening techniques and instructed to call each patient for fifteen minutes once a month. The results showed that, over the three years, the peer supporters experienced increased satisfaction, self-efficacy, and feelings of mastery. They reported engaging in more social activities and enduring less depression. Indeed, when interviewed, these five women described having undergone dramatic changes in their lives as a result of their volunteering experience. For example, their role as peer supporters appeared to shift their focus away from themselves and their problems and toward others. They recounted acquiring improved, nonjudgmental listening skills and becoming more open and tolerant of other people. They also reported a stronger sense of self-esteem and self-acceptance—for example, confidence in their ability to cope with life's ups and downs and in managing their own disease. One woman stated. "There's no cure for MS, but I really feel that I'm able to handle whatever comes my way."

Remarkably, the positive changes experienced by the five women peer supporters were larger than the benefits shown by the patients they supported. For example, the volunteers witnessed a boost in their global life satisfaction that was seven times greater than that shown by the patients! Furthermore, the benefits experienced by the peer supporters grew as time went on—an incredible finding, given that the benefits incurred by most happiness interventions (no

matter how powerful) tend to diminish over time.

This was a small study, with only five participants,[12] but it nicely illustrates the multiple rewards of helping. Although volunteering (or community service) is a unique type of helping activity, involving sustained commitment within an institutional framework, it shares many of the same features, and benefits, as other, more spontaneous or mundane types of helping behavior.

How to Practice Kindness

I have some very altruistic friends. One who especially comes to mind is always there for other people, always saying yes, forever sensitive to a situation when he's needed. I don't know how he does it, how kindness has become so habitual to this man, but many of us need to practice consciously and intentionally what comes so easily to him. Then again, the advantage for the rest of us is that doing something over and above what we are used to will give us an extra lift, a special boost in positive well-being.

I have come across numerous books, magazine articles, and Web sites advocating doing acts of kindness,[13] and I always get the sense, perhaps unfounded, that they patronize the reader a bit. If you decide to become a more generous, compassionate, and giving person, you will know what you should do. Ever babysat for a harried parent when you weren't asked? Ever traveled to see a friend in need? Donated your money or your time? Smiled at someone who needed a smile even when it was the hardest thing to do at that very moment? Needless to say, the options for helping are unlimited. You only have to open your mind to the possibilities for kindness; if you look with fresh eyes, they are all around you.

Furthermore, no particular talent, measure of time, or amount of money is required. The deed need not be grand or complicated. Moreover, if you're ever at a loss about *what* act of kindness, generosity, or charity to carry out, you need to look no farther than your home, your workplace, or your community. Sometimes people go to great lengths seeking special causes to which to dedicate themselves when those special causes could be their spouses, children, coworkers, or old friends. An acquaintance with a baby at home related to me a story about her husband. He was a cello player and had learned about a community service music program that involved visiting nursing homes once a

month and entertaining the residents there. Despite a grueling work schedule that left him with little time to see his wife and baby daughter, he started taking out several hours per month to do this. He was very earnest and well-meaning about the new endeavor. But his wife was beside herself. “How can he play for strangers when he doesn’t have time to entertain his own little girl?” she complained to me. Choose your acts of kindness with care, as any change in your behavior can have unintended consequences, good or bad. Above all, you don’t have to be a Mother Teresa or the Dalai Lama; the acts can be small and brief.

Timing is everything. The first step in practicing the kindness strategy is to select which acts you intend to do, how often, and how much. The results of my intervention studies suggest that this is an important decision point. If you do too little, you won’t obtain much benefit in happiness. If you do too much, you may end up feeling overburdened, angry, or fatigued. My suggestion is to follow the model of the one group in my first kindness intervention that was rewarded with the biggest increases in happiness—namely, pick one day per week (say, a Monday), and on that day (and on no others) commit one new and special large act of kindness or, alternatively, three to five little ones. I say “new and special” because you likely already dole out numerous small and large kindnesses every day, and the kindness strategy calls for doing something extra, something that pulls you out of your usual routine. If you always let cars ahead of you in line or you already volunteer at a hospital once a week, then, of course, don’t make those your new and special acts of kindness. Resolve to do something else.

Variety is the spice of life. A second implication stemming from my kindness studies is to mix up, spice up, *vary*, what you do. Putting change into a parking meter or doing an extra chore gives you a lift the first few times you do it, but after a time you will adapt to the new habit, and it will no longer grant the same amount of happiness. (This doesn’t mean that you should necessarily stop doing it, only that you’ll be obliged to add another act of kindness to your routine.) Major commitments that involve regular contact with other people—e.g., tutoring a middle school student, visiting a sick neighbor, fund-raising for a cause—may not lend themselves to the same degree of adaptation and may continue delivering benefits to you (and others!) in terms of happiness, self-esteem, and other resources and skills.

Continually varying your acts of kindness takes effort and creativity. Here are some ideas. First, if you're short of money or other resources, give the gift of time: Offer to make a needed repair, weed a garden, take a child to the playground, or look over someone's taxes. Second, surprise someone—with a home-cooked meal, an outing, a gift, a letter, or a phone call. Third, each week try to do more of something that doesn't come naturally. For me, it's being courteous to telemarketers. For another person, it may be offering a sincere smile and hello (or thank you) to a passerby or the cashier at the grocery or fully listening (with eye contact) to a friend's concerns. Fourth, work to develop your compassion—that is, the willingness and ability to sympathize with others' plights and points of view. It may be a cliché, but it's really very difficult to put yourself in another person's shoes, to see the world from his perspective. Imagine what it would be like to be unable to pay your bills, to be laid off, to care for a disabled child, to be illiterate, or to be too weak to change a lightbulb. Offering assistance each week to such a person can help enhance your gratitude and develop and reinforce your compassion. Fifth, at least once a week do a kind deed about which you tell no one and for which you don't expect anything in return. Resolve not to sit around and wonder why other people aren't as considerate as you. This resolution will fortify your conviction that you are not being generous solely for approval and admiration, and this will deepen your sense of value, meaning, and self-worth.[14]

Chain of kindness. Standing at the cash register at Whole Foods recently, I overheard a twenty-something guy in front of me tell the cashier, with great embarrassment, that he was $1.15 short of his grocery charge. I don't remember ever doing this before, but I immediately offered him the $1.15. He was at first a bit taken aback and then incredibly and genuinely grateful. He thanked me earnestly and at length. The experience was unexpectedly exhilarating and wonderful (even to me, who does research on kindness!). A dollar is so trivial, I thought, and here was someone who indisputably appreciated and valued what I did. He had a wide and self-conscious smile on his face, yet as he hurried out, I saw him helping a woman in a wheelchair to lift her groceries.

In designing your unique kindness strategy, remember that acts of kindness often have such ripple (or "pay it forward") effects. The recipient may be cheered, surprised, or comforted, and your thoughtful act may trigger him or her to return the favor to other individuals, who may in turn be more generous the next day, and so on. In other words, one benevolent act can set in motion a series

of kind acts. Another way that acts of kindness can have positive social consequences is that, as recent research shows, simply witnessing or hearing about a kindness leads people to feel "elevated" (warm in the chest, being "moved" and awed) and increases their desire to perform good deeds.[15] After observing the heroic acts of kindness by New York City firefighters, emergency personnel, and others in the aftermath of 9/11, TV viewers left their couches and went on to donate blood at two to five times the normal rate.[16]

A final caveat. All the recommendations outlined here are aimed to maximize how much happiness you receive as a result of committing to a kindness strategy. Sometimes this involves doing less or stopping what you're doing. I want to underscore that most people act compassionately and generously not primarily for their own benefit, but for that of others. Thus they may continue volunteering or repairing or teaching or listening or cleaning or donating because it's their moral duty. So, take my suggestions with a grain of salt. At times you'll be called to help others at the expense of your own well-being. As long as this is not a persistent pattern in your life and a key cause underlying your unhappiness, you should consider saying yes.

When Kindness Is Pernicious

The platitude that being kind to others can bring you happiness has several important qualifications. The first is that certain categories of helping behavior are actually detrimental to physical and mental health. The one researchers know the most about is full-time caregiving for a chronically ill or disabled loved one. Studies show, for instance, that caregivers of spouses with Alzheimer's disease show depression levels *three times* greater than the average person.[17] Caregivers of spouses with spinal cord injuries report severe physical and emotional stress, burnout, fatigue, anger, and resentment. Furthermore, these caregivers are even more depressed than their disabled partners.[18] The caregiving job is relentless and often accompanied by grieving for the loss of companionship or the impending loss of life. Of course, this doesn't mean that caregiving should be forsaken, but benefactors need to recognize the detriments, so that they can prepare for them and cope as best they can. Indeed, any helping behavior that is burdensome, interferes with your daily goals and functioning, or causes bitterness would surely backfire as a path to happiness, though it may remain the appropriate, honorable, or right thing to do.

Another caveat is that a kind act needs to be done freely and autonomously to bring the maximum improvement in well-being. If you are forced to help someone, you may still believe that you are a generous and decent person, and you may still garner the appreciation and gratitude of the one you helped, but these benefits could be outweighed by the resentment you might feel or the sense of being taken advantage.

Finally, other people may not always welcome your kindness. Helping someone can put him in an uncomfortable position, making him feel needy, disadvantaged, and beholden. Consequently, instead of gratitude and appreciation, the response from the recipient may be something closer to hostility and resentment. Your attitude and approach can diffuse or minimize such potential feelings. When you undertake your weekly acts of kindness, don't behave self-righteously or condescendingly. Don't puff up your abilities and resources or talk down to the person you are helping. And unless the situation is critical, don't help those who don't want your help.

Postscript: Kindness Versus Wealth

As I recounted in Chapter 2, there is now overwhelming evidence that money doesn't make people happy—or, more precisely, that it doesn't make people as happy (and for as long) as they suppose. What if I told you that becoming a more generous, compassionate, and charitable person would make you happier than earning a higher income? Would you believe me? I actually won't allege this because there are no data that directly compare kindness and wealth. But there is plenty of anecdotal evidence. The most persuasive, in my mind, comes from the example of Bill Gates, who announced that he would give up his day-to-day duties as chairman of Microsoft in 2008 to devote more energy to philanthropy. He is the richest man in the world, according to Forbes, yet he spends a great deal of time and effort *giving his money away*—more than half of his fortune, to be exact. Since 2000, for example, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has donated $6 billion—more than most nations—to improve health in developing countries, including hundreds of millions of dollars for vaccinations for children and for medical research, and $2.5 billion for education for the poor. It is entirely possible that one of his donations will make more of a difference in the world than anything he has ever done as Microsoft chairman. Why does he do it? I can't say, except to speculate that it makes him as happy to give money away as to make it. "It's fun, and it is also an enormous responsibility," is how Gates

explains his philanthropy. “But having my job at Microsoft is also fun and a huge responsibility. That is true for being a parent. Many of the most important things in life are like that. Why else would you want to get up in the morning?”[19]

Another fascinating example is that of Sherry Lansing, the first woman to run a major Hollywood studio. She gave up power, fame, and riches (as head of Paramount Pictures) to pursue philanthropy full-time. According to news reports, her associates and friends were stunned. But it appears that she may be far wiser than they are in appreciating what truly makes for lasting happiness. She’s been busy starting a nonprofit foundation that targets cancer research and education, advocating on behalf of stem cell research, and fund-raising for human rights causes. Presumably, Lansing finds this more gratifying than a seven-figure salary.

Reading Guide

If you benefit from this activity, you may also want to try:

1. Savoring life’s joys (Happiness Activity No. 9, Chapter 8)
2. Increasing flow experiences (Happiness Activity No. 8, Chapter 7)

Happiness Activity No. 5: Nurturing Social Relationships

One of the themes of this book is that in order to become happier, we must learn to imitate the habits of very happy people. Happy people are exceptionally good at their friendships, families, and intimate relationships. The happier a person is, the more likely he or she is to have a large circle of friends or companions, a romantic partner, and ample social support. The happier the person, the more likely she is to be married and to have a fulfilling and long-lasting marriage. The happier the person, the more likely she is to be satisfied with her family life and social activities, to consider her partner her “great love,” and to receive emotional and tangible support from friends, supervisors, and coworkers.[20]

The causal relationship between social relationships and happiness is clearly bidirectional. This means that romantic partners and friends make people happy, but it also means that happy people are more likely to acquire lovers and friends. This conclusion, which my colleagues and I have put forth on the basis of numerous studies, is actually rather optimistic. It implies that if you begin today to improve and cultivate your relationships, you will reap the gift of positive emotions. In turn, the enhanced feelings of happiness will help you attract more and higher-quality relationships, which will make you even happier, and so on, in a continuous positive feedback loop. In other words, by applying this happiness-increasing strategy, you will embark on what psychologists call an upward spiral.

What's Great About Relationships?

Why are social connections so important to well-being? Because good social relationships serve many vital needs.

Lessons from Darwin. An article titled "The Need to Belong"[21] has become a classic in social psychology, and I can now appreciate why. Its authors lay out a persuasive case that humans are powerfully motivated by a pervasive drive to seek out and maintain strong, stable, and positive interpersonal relationships. We strongly resist the breakup or dissolution of relationships and friendships, and without a sense of belongingness, we suffer numerous negative consequences for our physical and mental health. This is not surprising; most scientists would agree that a desire to form and preserve social bonds has an evolutionary basis. Human beings would not have been able to survive or reproduce without such a motivation. Social groups hunted together, shared food, and fought off common enemies. Adults who pair-bonded bore children, protected them from predators and from the elements, and raised them to maturity. "No man [or woman] is an island," proclaimed John Donne, and "The Need to Belong" has shown us the reasons why.

Social support. One of the most important functions of a social bond is the provision of social support in times of stress, distress, and trauma. I know firsthand (and the research confirms) that there may be no better coping mechanism than confiding or sharing a problem with a friend or intimate. Social

support can be tangible (e.g., driving us to the hospital), emotional (e.g., listening, reassuring, and helping us generate solutions or alternate perspectives on problems), and informational (e.g., providing financial advice). Indeed, people with strong social support are healthier and live longer.[22] An intriguing analysis of three communities of very long-living people—Sardinians in Italy, Okinawans in Japan, and Seventh-Day Adventists in Loma Linda, California—revealed that they all had five things in common. At the top of that list were "Put family first" and "Keep socially engaged."[23]

All you need is love. My four-year-old used to insist that we teach him a new word at bedtime. One night I tried something new. "Your word tonight is 'love,'" I said. "I knoooow what looove means! I love *you*, Mommy." "But what does it mean that you love me?" He thought about this. "It means I want to kiss you a lot. And I want to live with you forever." In ten years he might regret having said that, but I think that definition of *love* is perfect. From the time of their conception to the moment of their death, human beings are embedded in relationships with others. It is within interpersonal relationships that most of us experience for the first time the emotion of love—the most wildly happiness-inducing emotion there is—and find meaning and purpose in our lives. Of course, as everybody knows, love has its ups and downs; nonetheless, most identify it as one of the chief things that makes them happy.[24]

Less hedonic adaptation. As the pie chart theory vividly portrays, all our life circumstances combined (health, wealth, age, job title, ethnicity, residence, life events, etc.) have only a small influence on our happiness. This is primarily because we so rapidly adapt to any circumstantial life change. For example, as we acquire income and consumer goods that we desire (e.g., gadgets, computers, cars, homes, or swimming pools), our aspirations simply rise to the same degree, thereby trapping us in a hedonic treadmill. In one study that surveyed people over a thirty-six-year period, respondents were asked how much income was needed by a family of four to "get along."[25] The higher the person's income, the more they estimated was required for a family of four. Remarkably, the estimate for "get along" income increased almost exactly to the same degree as did actual income, suggesting that the more you have, the more you think you "need."

But what about our friendships, family, and intimate relationships? Do we adapt to them as easily and quickly as we adapt to material goods? The answer

turns out to be no. One economist has shown, for example, that people's desires for happy marriages, for children, and for "quality" children (as bizarre as that term sounds) do not change as they successfully attain those things.[26] In other words, there is something special and unique about relationships, and we would do well to strengthen, nourish, and enjoy them.

Strategies for Investing in Relationships

Because at least 90 percent of adults eventually marry, most of my recommendations in this section refer to strengthening intimate (or "romantic") relationships, such as marriages. However, you'll recognize that many of the suggestions apply to other kinds of close relationships, such as with close friends and family members. *Pick one strategy from the array below, and start doing it* today.

John Gottman is a marriage researcher who has psychologically dissected hundreds of married couples. His book *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* is, in my opinion, the best marital advice manual on the market by far.[27] I have talked it up to dozens of acquaintances and friends—indeed, to anyone who currently is, has been, or wishes to be in a committed romantic relationship. Even if your relationship is already solid, there is always room to strengthen and enjoy it even more. In his research, Gottman videotapes married couples and systematically observes how they behave and talk with each other. He then follows them over time to see what happens in their relationship. Based on these observations, he is able to predict with 91 percent accuracy which couples will stay together and which will divorce. This level of predictive accuracy, I should add, is unprecedented in the field of psychology.

Make time. So, what are the secrets of the successful marriages? The first is that the partners talk…a lot. The successful couples spend five hours more per week being together and talking.[28] The first recommendation, therefore, is to commit to extra time each week with your partner, perhaps starting with one hour and working your way up toward more. Spend five minutes every day expressing appreciation or gratitude for particular behaviors (even if it's simply to say, "Thank you for taking care of the bills this month"). Furthermore, before you part in the morning, find out *one thing* that each of you is going to do that day. When you meet again in the evening, have a "reunion conversation" in a

low-stress setting, and *listen.* Coming from a household with two full-time jobs and two small kids, I fully appreciate that this is easier said than done. Be creative. If you're in a situation similar to mine, then return from work fifteen minutes before your kids do (or your babysitter leaves), or allow them to watch a fifteen-minute video or play a video game immediately when you come home. (The potential adverse effects of the media are far outweighed, in my expert opinion, by the benefits of a better marriage.) If children aren't the issue, then create a routine to reunite, taking a walk together, sitting on the couch, having a drink in the kitchen—whatever works. It doesn't have to be the moment you step in the door. My husband used to be notorious for his—dare I say it?—rigidity in needing time to put his stuff away, putter around, and glance at the paper before he could even think about saying, "How was your day?" The immediacy of babies' demands changed that.

There are several other ways to reserve time together. First, make every effort (including creatively reshuffling work or hiring a sitter or carpooling) to schedule several hours together once a week, and make it a dedicated ritual. It could be Thursday night or Friday lunch or Sunday morning. During this time you can talk or do something side by side in silence, take a hike, enjoy each other's company. Ideally, share an experience together, like taking a drive somewhere (to look at a view or a historic building), cooking together, reading poetry out loud, going out to dinner or to a sporting event.

Second, create a media-free zone in your home and reserve it for conversations only. If you're the kind of couple who truly shares listening to music or watching television (laughing, discussing, mocking), then by all means continue. But for most, television watching and Web surfing rob us of our intimacy and time together. It's remarkable how many couples insist that their harried lives leave them with utterly no time to spend with each other, yet if you ask them how many hours a week they watch TV, you'll be surprised.

Regarding whether it's right to take time away from work (if it's even possible) or children (if you have them) to dedicate to your relationship, this is a no-brainer. A massive literature shows that people who are lonely or in unhappy relationships suffer severe ill effects, including depression, anxiety, jealousy, stress, and impaired health. Needless to say, your job and your children will suffer if your marriage or partnership is tense, hostile, or unhappy.

Express admiration, appreciation, and affection. One of the key conclusions of two decades of research on marriages is that happy relationships are characterized by a ratio of positive to negative affect of five to one.[29] This means that for every negative statement or behavior—criticizing, nagging, lecturing—there are five positive ones. Make your weekly goal to raise your positive affect ratio. You can do this, first, by increasing the number of times you show affection to your partner—verbally (e.g., saying or e-mailing, "I love you," more often), physically (no need to explain this), or through other behaviors (like kindness). I once heard a family expert say, "A spontaneous kiss while doing household chores can do wonders."

Second, communicate your admiration and gratitude directly. This is something that most of us don't do often enough. Recall the large German study that showed that it takes an average of two years to adapt to the wonderfulness of marriage; after that, we start taking each other and the relationship for granted. Giving genuine praise (e.g., "I'm so proud of what you did") not only makes your significant other happy but inspires her to strive for greater heights. Indeed, in the most flourishing relationships partners evoke the best in each other, helping them come closer in reaching their ideal selves. This has been termed the Michelangelo effect.[30] Just as Michelangelo unearthed an ideal form by sculpting a block of marble, so romantic partners can support and facilitate each other to do the same. Because satisfied and stable couples are relatively more likely to idealize each other,[31] they may be more likely to reinforce each other's positively biased perceptions, helping make them come true.

Third, to increase respect, value, and admiration for your partner, there are some exercises that can be accomplished on your own on a weekly basis. Here's a sample four-week plan. During Week 1, you could write a list of attributes that initially attracted you to your partner or that you appreciate right now, and for each characteristic you generate (be it honesty, sense of humor, intelligence, punctuality, or charm), come up with at least one episode that illustrates it well. One couple told me that the secret of their relationship—she's an intelligent, sweet-tempered former model, and he's an outgoing, funny, self-described geeky journalist—is that each of them thinks he or she has the better deal. Contemplate how you might have the better deal.

During Week 2, try to remember and write about a good time in your marriage: when you first met or fell in love; when your partner showed support; when you successfully endured a difficult time together. The flip side of this

exercise—try this in Week 3—is to consider a recent or memorable thing your partner did that angered or disappointed you. Then (and this is hard) write down two or three charitable explanations for his or her behavior—that is, explanations that attribute the behavior to forces other than your partner's bad character or motives (e.g., stress, misunderstanding, well-meaning intentions, etc.). A final exercise, for Week 4, is to sit down and write about particular goals, values, or beliefs that you and your partner share.

Capitalize on good fortune. This strategy involves taking delight in your friends', family members', and partner's windfalls and successes. Social psychologists have shown that what distinguishes good and poor relationships is not how the partners respond to each other's disappointments and reversals but how they respond to *good* news.[32] Recall the last time something really good happened in your life. Perhaps you earned a promotion, received a commendation or award, were invited to a special trip, or won tickets to a sold-out show. How did your partner react when you broke the news to him? Was he thrilled and enthusiastic on your behalf, or did he ignore, criticize, or scoff at your good fortune? How did *you* last respond to your partner's sharing of good news? Personal triumphs and strokes of luck can be threatening or intimidating to close others, evoking envy (e.g., "How come he gets to go to Europe when I've wanted to go all my life?"), jealousy ("She cares more about what her boss thinks now than about me"), or anxiety ("Does this mean we'll have to move again?"). As a result, the fact that your partner appreciates and validates your good news means not only that he is pleased for you but that he respects your dreams and values your relationship. Thus how people respond to things going right for others may be diagnostic of the sense of connection between them. If your close friend or romantic partner shows genuine pleasure, support, and understanding, the relationship receives a boost in intimacy and closeness.

Starting today, resolve to respond "actively and constructively"—that is, with interest and enthusiasm—to your friend's or loved one's good news, however small. One study showed that people who tried to do this three times per day over the course of just a week became happier and less depressed.[33] If your partner is excited to tell you something, pay close attention, ask lots of questions, and relive the experience with him. If you're happy for him, express it, and, if appropriate, insist on celebrating and tell others about it. Researchers find that people who are only "silently supportive," as well as those who seem uninterested or who point out the downsides of the good news, have

relationships that are less close, less intimate, and less trusting.

Manage conflict. Observations of hundreds of couples have revealed that unhappy marriages are characterized by a particular style of handling conflict: a harsh start-up in disagreement (e.g., immediately launching into accusation or sarcasm), criticism (impugning the partner's entire character, like "What's wrong with you?"), contempt (expressing disgust with the partner by sneering, eye rolling, name calling, or demeaning), defensiveness ("I'm not the problem; it's *you*"), and stonewalling (eventually tuning out, disengaging, or even leaving the room).[34] Happy couples don't necessarily fight any less or any less loudly; they just fight differently (see below).

If any of these behaviors characterize your relationship, it may seem daunting to face up to them. But I believe that most people instinctively know how *not* to do these things; it may take thirty seconds (and a lot of self-control) to look up (rather than look down) when your spouse is sending a signal to make up, to voice a complaint ("Why didn't you call?") instead of a criticism ("You never remember anything"), or to make a tiny gesture to stay connected while fighting (as simple as eye contact or touch or a "got it"). One of the secrets of the happiest couples has been found to be something very powerful but actually simple. It involves doing a little thing in the middle of a row that deescalates tension and negativity, an attempt at patching up. One of the most common such behaviors is friendly (as opposed to hostile) humor (e.g., screwing up your face like your two-year-old). Another is expressing affection or saying something directly (e.g., "I see your point"). You've heard it before: The happiest partnerships are also strong friendships.

However, a caveat is in order here. Sometimes, no matter what you do, your primary relationship will not improve, in which case it's time to make some hard decisions. If your relationship is damaging to your self-esteem, degrading, or abusive, it's imperative to see a counselor without delay or to consider leaving.

Share an inner life. Even if you and your partner excel at doing all the other things on this list, it won't necessarily mean that you are happy and fulfilled together. In truth, a deep sense of shared rituals, dreams, and goals underlies thriving relationships. These all are elements that connect you to each other and create a singular inner life shared by just the two of you. You grow together,

explore new directions and take risks together, challenge your assumptions together, and take responsibility together.

Every week try to do at least one thing that supports your partner's roles (e.g., as parent, skier, manager, chef) and dreams (to travel abroad, to climb the corporate ladder, to go back to school, and so on). The goal should be to honor and respect each other and each other's life dreams and interests, even if you don't share them all.

What If You Don't Have or Don't Want a Romantic Partner?

Scientific research leaves no question that relationships are exceedingly important to well-being. But I don't believe that those relationships have to be romantic ones. Although in almost every study, married people have been found to be happier than their divorced, separated, widowed, or single peers, this doesn't mean that happiness is reserved only for them. Deep, long-term friendships are also important for happiness, as are other critical relationships, including those with pets.[35] Indeed, people who are single (and, in particular, women who have always been single) often have close, positive, and lasting interpersonal relationships—particularly with siblings, friends, and nieces and nephews. Studies have found, for example, that relative to married people, singles are closer to their friends and have more frequent contact with them and that lifelong single older women tend to have close to a dozen devoted decades-long friends. This evidence for the flourishing of many single people has led some psychologists to challenge the assumption that "the sexual partnership is the only truly important peer relationship."[36] Other partnerships matter too. Take note, then, that a strategy to invest in relationships can bring happiness when directed not only at lovers and spouses but at almost any significant relationship in your life.

Strategies for Making Friends

Friendships don't just happen; they are made. One prominent psychologist suggests that the magic number is to have three friends or companions you can really count on. Here are some suggestions for how to get your friendship number up to three and to make them thrive.[37] Select *one* strategy for now and take it upon yourself to implement it as soon as possible.

Make time (again). Show interest in other people and offer them encouragement. Once a friendship forms, create rituals that allow you to get together and be in touch on a regular basis—a weekly date to go to the gym, a book club, a monthly dinner out, a joint vacation, or a daily e-mail. In this way, friends become as much a priority as all the other areas of your life. However, don't control all your interactions (let your friends decide which movie to attend at least half the time), and don't overdo it; give them space when they require it.

Communicate. Self-disclosure, revealing intimate thoughts and feelings, is difficult for some individuals, but it's critical to friendships, especially women's friendships. This is because honest self-disclosure, when it occurs unhurriedly and appropriately, breeds more self-disclosure and cultivates intimacy. The flip side is to listen to your friends' disclosures and problems: Make eye contact, give your full attention, and acknowledge his or her statements. Hold off giving unsolicited advice or turning attention back to yourself by recounting your own story (e.g., "I know just how you feel"). Sometimes this is appreciated and welcomed, sometimes not. Finally, just as with a romantic partner, convey feelings of affection and admiration from time to time in whatever way feels comfortable to you—e.g., "I missed you over break," "We always have a good time getting together," "I'm so happy for you that you're expecting," "Thanks for being there." It may appear sentimental, but people are amazingly gratified to hear such words. "A kind word is like a spring day."[38]

Be supportive and loyal. Be helpful and supportive when your friends need it, and affirm their successes. As I mentioned earlier, we often feel threatened by our friends' triumphs. Instead of feeling envious, try to bask in their reflected glory. Other universal rules of friendship include standing up for your friends when they're not there, keeping secrets, not putting down their *other* friends, and reciprocating favors.[39] In the words of William Shakespeare, "Keep thy friend under thy own life's key."

Finally, hug. 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. In a one-of-a-kind study, students at Pennsylvania State University were

assigned to two groups.[40] The first group was instructed to give or receive a minimum of five hugs per day over the course of four weeks and to record the details. The hugs had to be front-to-front (nonsexual) hugs, using both arms of both participants; however, the length and strength of the hug, as well as the placement of hands, were left to the their discretion. Furthermore, these students couldn't simply hug their boyfriends or girlfriends half a dozen times; they had to aim to hug as many different individuals as possible. The second group, the controls, was instructed simply to record the number of hours they read each day over the same four weeks.

The hugging group (which partook in an average of forty-nine hugs over the course of the study) became much happier. Not surprisingly, the students who merely recorded their reading activity (which averaged a not-too-shabby 1.6 hours per day) showed no changes. So, hugging is an excellent intimacy and friendship booster. The author of the study told me that some of the students—the guys, in particular—were a bit uncomfortable and embarrassed at first but ended up generating creative ways to hug (such as embracing teammates after successes on the field).[41] Try it. You may find that a hug can relieve stress, make you feel closer to someone, and even diminish pain.[42]

Reading Guide

If you benefit from this activity, you may also want to try:

1. Practicing acts of kindness (Happiness Activity No. 4, Chapter 8)
2. Taking care of your body (Happiness Activity No. 12, Chapter 9)
