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

Different men seek after happiness in different ways and by different means, and so make for themselves different modes of life....

—*Aristotle*

If 40 percent of our happiness is rooted in intentional activity, then precisely which activities or strategies can help you reach your desired level of well-being? Many of us persist in searching for “the one” true secret path to happiness (or to career success or to spiritual fulfillment and so on), like the one diet that will work when all others have failed. In truth, there is no one magic strategy that will help every person become happier. All of us have unique needs, interests, values, resources, and inclinations that undoubtedly predispose us to put effort into and benefit from some strategies more than others. For example, an extravert may be more likely to stick with an activity that brings her into regular contact with other people, and a very nurturing person may benefit more from an activity that grants him opportunities to take care of others. Furthermore, some people are best served by working on an area of specific weakness (whether it’s pessimism or overthinking or problems with friendship), and others profit from engaging in a happiness strategy that meshes with their personal ideal of happiness (be it positive thinking or gratifying relationships or fulfilling work). This general “matching” notion is supported by much recent research.¹

It is also fairly intuitive. If you want to become physically fit or chuck an addiction, there are many programs and strategies you can try, and you would be prudent to choose one that fits your goals, resources, and lifestyle best. Interestingly, although the importance of good fit is widely recognized, even obvious, in the domains of diet and fitness, it is rarely considered in regard to a person's emotional life. Yet fit is absolutely critical. So much so that I'll go out on a limb here and say that if there's any "secret" to becoming happier, the secret is in establishing which happiness strategies suit you best. Once you have done so, half the battle is won; the way to greater happiness is in your hands.

Three Ways That Strategies Can Fit

When it comes to determining which happiness strategies will work best for a particular individual, I believe in taking an idiographic, or personalized, approach. The goal is person-activity fit. When you choose wisely, you will feel motivated to try a particular happiness activity, persist at it, and experience its rewards. It goes without saying that a person needs to make an honest effort in trying a new strategy in order to achieve any benefit. However, even the most ardently pursued activities won't bring happiness for every single individual. One of the chief reasons that many of us fail in our efforts to become happier is unfortunate choosing, picking a strategy or approach that is either inherently fruitless (like pursuing wealth, approval, or beauty, as discussed in the previous chapter) or not well suited to us. A good person-activity fit can be achieved in a number of ways. These ways, described below, can work independently or in concert. Let's consider all the options.

Fit with the source of your unhappiness. The first approach is to contemplate what underlies your own unhappiness. Leo Tolstoy famously opened *Anna Karenina* by declaring: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." As a psychologist who studies individuals, not families, I prefer the following restatement, which has its own truth: "Happy people are all alike; every unhappy person is unhappy in his or her own way." The research bears this out; there are many varieties and sources of unhappiness. Each individual is unhappy for a unique constellation of reasons. Some of us feel apathetic and powerless over our lives, whereas others are convinced that the future is bleak. The crux for some is an inability to obtain much pleasure from daily activities. For others, it's being too shy to join in social

events or being traumatized and unsettled by past experiences. This means that particular happiness-enhancing activities may uniquely address our specific problems or areas of weakness. The pessimist may benefit from cultivating optimism, the pleasure-lacking individual from savoring, the traumatized person from learning coping skills, and so on.

Fit with your strengths. Person-activity fit, however, does not have to be based on repairing your specific weaknesses. Alternatively, you can start by identifying your strengths, talents, or goals. For example, an achievement-oriented person may do well at pursuing significant life goals or taking up competitive sports as a way to boost his happiness, while a creative person may choose to express gratitude or forgiveness through painting or writing. Indeed, different people can attain happiness in different ways, so it makes sense that some of us should focus on a particular set of happiness-increasing activities, while others should focus on an entirely different set of activities.

Fit with your lifestyle. Think about the extent to which the activities you choose can be adapted to your needs and lifestyle. For example, if your life is stressful and hectic, then you can choose activities (like counting blessings) that don't take any extra time out of your day. If you are satisfied with your relationships, but not with your work, then you can choose activities (like increasing flow or striving for new goals) that can help you enjoy your job more and pursue novel opportunities. If you're not spiritual or religious, then you can pass on the religion strategy. If you're a lifelong practitioner of concentrative meditation, then you can opt out of the happiness activity that involves meditating. Much like a diet that you can individualize to fit your food preferences, you can tailor the happiness strategies to fit your personality and your way of life. There are probably as many ways to achieve happiness as there are to lose it.

Corniness, Again

Finally, I have to raise the issue of corniness again. It's possible that you will read over the list of the dozen happiness activities and observe that some of these activities, perhaps many of them, appear hokey or undoable to you. You may even react with distaste: "This is not for me!" I myself have had this experience.

It's not uncommon, and it doesn't mean that you are destined never to become happier. The reality is that some of us have an aversion to advice that seems overly sentimental or simplistic. We can't picture ourselves "counting blessings" or "savoring life's joys" or "learning to forgive," because these suggestions smack of mawkishness and even naiveté to us. Such reactions are authentic, and I can't dispute them. Fortunately, if this reaction describes you, you have a choice. Other activities are available that may be a better fit for your interests, needs, and values. However, even the corniest-sounding exercise can grow on you and end up being practiced sincerely and from the heart. Chris Peterson, professor at the University of Michigan and one of the founders of positive psychology, admitted once that he couldn't bring himself to write gratitude letters, which he regularly assigned to his own students. When he finally forced himself to do it, he wound up masking any embarrassing sentiments with humor and ended up feeling insincere. Needless to say, the exercise did not succeed in boosting his happiness. So he tried again, and this time he says, "I spoke from the heart."

Person-Activity Fit Diagnostic

Learning that there are several ways to make a strategy fit makes it all seem very complicated. How do you go about selecting the set of activities that are the optimal fit for you? Which *type* of fit is best? Fortunately, the answer is simple and straightforward. I have developed a self-diagnostic test that conveniently incorporates all the different ways of measuring fit, whether it is fit with your weaknesses, your strengths and goals, or your needs and lifestyle. This test of person-activity fit uses a systematic, empirically based approach to determine which set of happiness activities (out of twelve) will be most valuable for you to try. Set aside fifteen to thirty minutes to complete it in a quiet setting—the test requires effort and concentration—and be sure to rate all twelve activities presented. How you answer this diagnostic is crucial to everything else that you will learn in this book. But that having been said, it's not a test in the sense that there are right or wrong responses but rather an opportunity to define yourself, so the only prerequisite is to be honest and true.

PERSON-ACTIVITY FIT DIAGNOSTIC

(adapted from Sheldon)

INSTRUCTIONS: Consider each of the following 12 happiness activities. Reflect on what it would be like to do it *every week* for an extended period of time. Then rate each activity by writing the appropriate number (1 to 7) in the blank space next to the terms *NATURAL*, *ENJOY*, *VALUE*, *GUILTY*, and *SITUATION*.

People do things for many different reasons. Rate why you might keep doing this activity in terms of each of the following reasons. Use this scale:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not at all			somewhat			very much

NATURAL: I'll keep doing this activity because it will feel "natural" to me and I'll be able to stick with it.

ENJOY: I'll keep doing this activity because I will enjoy doing it; I'll find it to be interesting and challenging.

VALUE: I'll keep doing this activity because I will value and identify with doing it; I'll do it freely even when it's not enjoyable.

GUILTY: I'll keep doing this activity because I would feel ashamed, guilty, or anxious if I didn't do it; I'll force myself.

SITUATION: I'll keep doing this activity because somebody else will want me to or because my situation will force me to.

1. Expressing gratitude: Counting your blessings for what you have (either to a close other or privately, through contemplation or a journal) or conveying your gratitude and appreciation to one or more individuals whom you've never properly thanked.

—NATURAL —ENJOY —VALUE —GUILTY —SITUATION

2. Cultivating optimism: Keeping a journal in which you imagine and write about the best possible future for yourself or practicing to look at the bright side of every situation.

—NATURAL —ENJOY —VALUE —GUILTY —SITUATION

3. Avoiding overthinking and social comparison: Using strategies (such as distraction) to cut down on how often you dwell on your problems and compare yourself with others.

—NATURAL —ENJOY —VALUE —GUILTY —SITUATION

4. Practicing acts of kindness: Doing good things for others, whether friends or strangers, either directly or anonymously, either spontaneously or planned.

—NATURAL —ENJOY —VALUE —GUILTY —SITUATION

5. Nurturing relationships: Picking a relationship in need of strengthening, and investing time and energy in healing, cultivating, affirming, and enjoying it.

—NATURAL —ENJOY —VALUE —GUILTY —SITUATION

6. Developing strategies for coping: Practicing ways to endure or surmount a recent stress, hardship, or trauma.

—NATURAL —ENJOY —VALUE —GUILTY —SITUATION

7. Learning to forgive: Keeping a journal or writing a letter in which you work on letting go of anger and resentment toward one or more individuals who have hurt or wronged you.

—NATURAL —ENJOY —VALUE —GUILTY —SITUATION

8. Doing more activities that truly engage you: Increasing the number of experiences at home and work in which you “lose” yourself, which are challenging and absorbing (i.e., flow experiences).

—NATURAL —ENJOY —VALUE —GUILTY —SITUATION

9. Savoring life’s joys: Paying close attention, taking delight, and replaying life’s momentary pleasures and wonders, through thinking, writing, drawing, or sharing with another.

—NATURAL —ENJOY —VALUE —GUILTY —SITUATION

10. Committing to your goals: Picking one, two, or three significant goals that are meaningful to you and devoting time and effort to pursuing them.

—NATURAL —ENJOY —VALUE —GUILTY —SITUATION

11. Practicing religion and spirituality: Becoming more involved in your church, temple, or mosque or reading and pondering spiritually themed books.

—NATURAL —ENJOY —VALUE —GUILTY —SITUATION

12. Taking care of your body: Engaging in physical activity, meditating, and smiling and laughing.

—NATURAL —ENJOY —VALUE —GUILTY —SITUATION

HOW TO CALCULATE YOUR “FIT” SCORE AND DETERMINE YOUR SET OF BEST-FITTING ACTIVITIES:

STEP 1: For *each* of the 12 activities, subtract the average of the GUILTY and SITUATION rating from the average of the NATURAL, ENJOY, and VALUE ratings. In other words, for each of the 12 activities:

FIT SCORE = (NATURAL + ENJOY + VALUE)/3 © (GUILTY + SITUATION)/2

STEP 2: Write down the four activities with the highest FIT SCORES:

1) _____ 3) _____
2) _____ 4) _____

Date: _____

As you can see, the Person-Activity Fit Diagnostic yields a short list of four happiness activities for you to undertake as you begin the happiness-increasing program described here. Some of you will be surprised by your short list and thus will have learned something valuable about yourself. Others will find their short lists to be exactly what they expected. In any case, depending on your level of energy and motivation, you may choose initially to engage in only *one* of the four activities or up to two or three simultaneously. *Feel free to jump ahead after this chapter and only read about the activities in Part II of this book that suit you best.* With time, as you make progress, you can add more activities or even advance to trying out those that yielded somewhat lower fit scores. The six chapters making up Part II will give you the “goods” on each of the twelve happiness activities, describing in detail how precisely to implement them and why.

The rationale behind the Person-Activity Fit Diagnostic is that a particular happiness-increasing strategy will match you better if it feels natural to you and you are truly motivated to pursue it—that is, you want to do it because you value doing it and because you find it enjoyable and *not* because you feel forced or pressured into doing it, out of either guilt or a desire to please. The fit score is in large part a measure of what Ken Sheldon and his coauthors call self-determined motivation—that is, a commitment to pursue a goal that’s grounded in one’s genuine interests and deeply held fundamental values.² Research suggests that if you have this kind of motivation in striving for greater happiness, you will continue to put effort into the endeavor and be ultimately more likely to succeed.³ In other words, where there is a good fit, you will try harder and feel right about what you’re doing.

The results of a recent study by one of my graduate students confirm these

benefits of person-activity fit.⁴ We randomly assigned participants to carry out a single happiness strategy (in this case, practicing either gratitude or optimism) over a two-month period; they also completed the Person-Activity Fit Diagnostic. As we anticipated, participants who were lucky to be assigned the activities that fitted them were more likely (1) to report finding their practice “natural” and “enjoyable” after the fact, (2) to continue engaging in the activities even after the study was over, and (3) to derive greater happiness as a result of practicing them.⁵ So, there you have it: the significance of fit!

P.S. More Options

There are several reasons why I present exactly twelve activities in this book. First, I chose only evidence-based happiness-increasing strategies whose practice is supported by scientific research. Second, I sought to include a wide variety of activities, so that every individual could find a set right for him or her. This is why there are twelve and no fewer. Nonetheless, there’s a risk that even an activity with a high fit score may not at first work for you. In that case, you need to persist at it, or attempt a different activity, or try a combination. Research has shown that when it comes to changing something fundamental about themselves, people often need to make multiple attempts. For example, one study recruited hundreds of individuals who were successful at losing weight and maintaining the weight loss for at least five years.⁶ Most recounted trying several different diets and forms of exercise to lose the weight, and it took four or five tries (sometimes more) for them finally to succeed. This is another reason why it is worthwhile to choose from a range of strategies.

Don’t be constrained, however, by your list of four best-fitting activities. I have found that people who find a particular well-fitting activity tend to find several other complementary activities to fit as well⁷—that is, certain happiness strategies “go together” with other strategies. So, in Part II, after the description of each one of the twelve happiness activities, I suggest a set of two others, based on research evidence from my lab, that you might find valuable to try even if you did not establish it as one of your four primary activities. For example, the very first strategy I describe is expressing gratitude. If this activity has yielded a high fit score for you, you should give it your best shot. If you feel yourself becoming happier, continue to express gratitude on a regular basis. At this point, however, you may also add one or more activities to undertake from your set of

four best-fitting ones. And if gratitude appeals to you and seems to be especially effective, there are two others that you might consider trying: practicing kindness and learning to forgive. To this end, skip ahead to the kindness or forgiveness sections if you like.

For your convenience, I've created a grid in the Appendix that shows which happiness-increasing strategies go together. Again, use this grid to help you find additional helpful happiness activities besides your list of four best-fitting ones, but generally it's a good idea to first exhaust that list of four.

Final Words

Aiming for greater happiness is no small endeavor, requiring effort and commitment. Taking these first steps may be a bit daunting, but it is also empowering because the control in how you undertake this path (or whether you choose to do so) resides entirely in you. The Person-Activity Fit Diagnostic has this power. Selecting an appropriate activity to undertake vastly increases the chances that you will succeed. On the other hand, if the wrong strategy is chosen, it is likely to fail, and you may give up altogether. The fit diagnostic has been developed to help prevent you from feeling frustrated and to optimize the way you determine the happiness-enhancing strategies that will be most effective for *you*—that is, the four strategies that fit your current values, goals, and needs. Again, I encourage you to start with that set of strategies. Jump ahead now to your best-fitting activity. Alternatively, many people may benefit from opting to read about them all. Finally, it's critical to your success to read about *how* and *why* such happiness-enhancing activities work. This important material is presented in “The Five Hows Behind Sustainable Happiness” (Chapter 10).