Happiness: Lessons From A New Science

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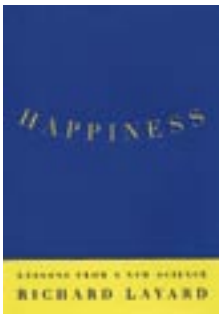
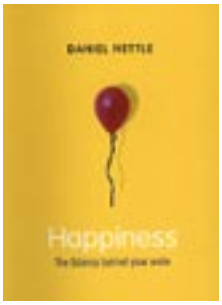


Happiness: Lessons From a New Science

BY RICHARD LAYARD

Penguin Press, 2005, 310 pages



Happiness: The Science Behind Your Smile

BY DANIEL NETTLE

Oxford University Press, 2005, 216 pages

A RECENT MACY'S HOME SALE SUPPLEMENT entices buyers with a simple statement: "It's all about the pursuit of happiness." Their ad agency must not have read new books by Richard Layard and Daniel Nettle, who refute traditional economic views that equate personal happiness with material gain.

Since 1950, postwar capitalism has led to an unprecedented standard of living in the West. Yet it has not translated into an equal upsurge in human happiness. Statistics indicate that while higher income does boost levels of happiness among people at or below the poverty line, this doesn't hold true for the rest of the population.

Layard and Nettle seek out the reasons behind these trends. Their books are part of the growing interdisciplinary field of hedonics (the study of happiness), which draws on neuroscience, applied economics, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and psychology. The authors reflect this diversity: Layard founded Europe's leading economics research center, at the London School of Economics; served as an economic adviser to the British government; and also became a member of the House of Lords. Nettle is a lecturer in psychology at the University of Newcastle. Their books also reflect a shift in research. For most of its history as a social science, psychology ignored the concept of happiness and focused instead on pathology. But more and more, psychologists are interested in exploring what happiness is, what conditions generate it, why it seems not to last, and what we can do to cultivate and sustain it.

According to Layard and Nettle, at least two forces prevent us from attaining happiness through material goods. First, we become habituated to what we get and then crave more, or something else. Secondly, we compare what we have with others. We're happy with our paycheck until we find out our brother-in-law's paycheck is bigger. We're content with our house until we see our neighbor has more rooms. Nettle calls this a product of our evolution. The brain systems that control pleasure (satisfaction) are not identical to those that control desire (aspiration). So even when one part of our brain is feeling satisfaction, another part is urging us to want even more. The paradox is that we are conditioned neither for happiness nor unhappiness, but for pushing ourselves to tackle new challenges that enhance our fitness for survival. Happiness is merely an imaginary goal that gives us direction and purpose. Without recognizing this tendency in ourselves, he argues, we are prone to letting it trick us into making choices that don't maximize happiness. Buying yet another pair of shoes, no matter how chic, won't bring the fulfillment we may long for.

Layard points a finger at predictable culprits: Changes in gender roles and divorce rates, television, geographical mobility, debased moral values, and the rise of individualism all undermine happiness, according to his book. Layard's arguments won't seem new to people who already prefer going for a hike with friends or sharing dinner with family to watching TV. His message is akin to what so many spiritual leaders and philosophers have said for millennia: Enjoy things as they are, without comparing yourself to others, and discover what truly makes you happy. He encourages us to tame our rat-race instinct and train ourselves—using, for example, cognitive therapy, education, and Buddhist meditation techniques—to live in a more balanced way, not simply driven by competition for status. He also calls for enacting public policies to help create a different kind of society. He suggests, for instance, spending more money on mental health so that we reduce unhappiness, instead of simply focusing on getting happier.

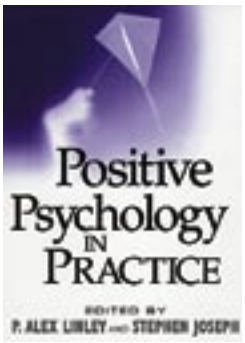
The two authors cover similar terrain, but use different tones and approaches. Layard's book is more of an exhortation for enlightened policymaking, and it can feel a bit preachy. Nettle's book provides a clearer understanding of the pursuit of happiness, offers more interesting research findings, and questions whether we can actually change people's happiness through public action. However, both authors write in an accessible style for the lay reader and reach parallel conclusions: Happiness comes from within, and expecting large gains in happiness is unrealistic. But if we broaden our pursuits beyond the acquisition of wealth and status, happiness may arrive on its own.

—Mirka Knaster

Positive Psychology in Practice

EDITED BY P. ALEX LINLEY AND STEPHEN JOSEPH

Wiley, 2004, 770 pages



AS EDITORS P. Alex Linley and Stephen Joseph note in their preface, positive psychology—the scientific study of what makes people feel happy and fulfilled—is a burgeoning discipline. At this crucial point in the field's development, they want their book to be a definitive resource—not just for colleagues in academia, but for practitioners as well.

Over 42 chapters, *Positive Psychology in Practice* offers plenty of provocative research findings. Psychologist Tim Kasser, for example, makes an important contribution to economics by showing that when people pursue materialistic values—such as wanting to be wealthy and attractive—they report less happiness and lower life-satisfaction. Kennon Sheldon and Sonja Lyubomirsky report that simple practices, such as counting your blessings, may increase your happiness for a sustained time. This finding is significant because previous researchers have long believed a person's potential for happiness is more or less determined by genetics at birth.

This book distinguishes itself by not only reporting on breakthroughs in positive psychology, but by emphasizing how these findings can be applied. A section dedicated to work includes a provocative chapter on how "transformative leadership"—characterized in part by leaders who do what is ethical, rather than what is expedient or cost-effective—may promote employees' physical and mental health. Another essay discusses potential applications of positive psychology to youth organizations.

The book is especially relevant to psychotherapists. For example, Chiara Ruini and Giovanni Fava introduce a technique called well-being therapy, which draws on research suggesting that therapists can help patients not only by addressing psychological problems but by teaching them to develop *positive* characteristics as well, such as self-acceptance and a sense of purpose.

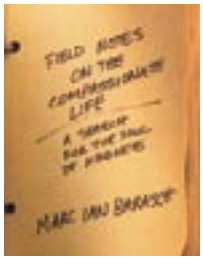
Linely and Joseph have certainly succeeded in creating a comprehensive overview of positive psychology. Though their book is more practically minded than most academic compilations, the volume's breadth, and sometimes its prose, might put off non-academics. Even so, it is a terrific resource for anyone interested in the important science of positive psychology.

—Christine Carter McLaughlin

Field Notes on the Compassionate Life: A Search for the Soul of Kindness

BY MARC IAN BARASCH

Rodale, 2005, 367 pages



EARLY IN HIS BOOK, Marc Ian Barasch makes clear that he has no illusions about human behavior. He knows that even the most well-intentioned people fall prey to selfishness and apathy, and "there are days compassion seems as notional as a dusting of powdered sugar on a devil's food cake." But he can't shake the idea that "a compassionate life is more fulfilling," and he finds himself fascinated and inspired by people who exude empathy. *Field Notes on the Compassionate Life* chronicles his attempts to better understand these people who so powerfully embody the better side of human nature—and to see if there's hope for more of us (including Barasch himself) to be more like them.

His "search for the soul of kindness" leads him across a slew of scientific discoveries into the nature of compassion and altruism. Some of this research will be familiar to readers of this magazine, whether it's primatologist Frans de Waal's studies of empathy in apes or psychologist Richard Davidson's research linking meditation to heightened states of positive emotion. But Barasch has done all readers a service by covering so much of this research in a single volume. In just over 350 pages, he provides an engaging and very thorough overview of the tremendous strides scientists have made toward understanding the roots and the extent of human goodness.

Barasch draws on this science to help explain and interpret the behavior of some remarkable individuals. He structures the book around stories of people who astonish him with their displays of altruism and empathy. Some of these people, like the Dalai Lama, are well-known icons of compassion. But Barasch also encounters people like Fleet Maull, a convicted felon-turned-Buddhist social activist who leads "street retreats," where people experience a week of homelessness to attune themselves to the plights of others. Barasch, a journalist by trade, goes on one of these retreats, and his account is one of the highlights of the book—an honest, detailed portrait of humanity at its best and worst.

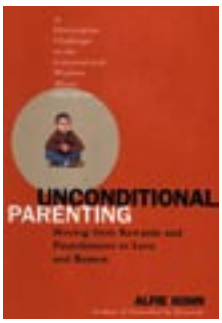
Field Notes is most engrossing when Barasch brings us along on his quest not only to appreciate goodness but to live it—to face all of his (and our) moral and emotional shortcomings, and work to rise above them. He's a likable and helpful guide on this journey, and though he doesn't quite locate the "soul" of kindness, which would be akin to discovering the meaning of life, he should convince even the most cynical readers that there's good reason to strive for a more compassionate world. Like all of us, Barasch is just trying to be a better person. His book shows that reaching this goal can be hard, but it is possible.

—Jason Marsh

Unconditional Parenting: Moving from Rewards and Punishments to Love and Reason

BY ALFIE KOHN

Atria Books, 2005, 264 pages



MOST BOOKS ABOUT parenting offer tips for handling kids when they act up: how to get them to go to bed without a fuss; how to cure their picky eating habits; how to stop them from talking back. But Alfie Kohn wants to dissuade parents from making obedience their ultimate goal. Instead, Kohn, who has been writing about parenting and education for more than 20 years, says that parents need to ask themselves, "What are your *long-term* objectives for your children?"

"Unconditional parenting" is the term that Kohn uses to describe a relationship where the quality and quantity of parental attention is not limited to punishing a child's bad behavior and rewarding good behavior. Time-outs, positive re-enforcement, natural consequences, and other commonly prescribed parenting techniques have no place in unconditional parenting. Kohn argues that when we rely on external motivators such as rewards and punishments, we are teaching our children that their worth depends on their actions. Unconditional parenting, on the other hand, assumes the best of the child before us and tries to address the whole person, not just the unwanted behavior.

For example, Kohn describes a tantrum his then four-year-old daughter, Abigail, had soon after the birth of her brother. While conventional advice would recommend withdrawing parental attention or removing privileges as a "natural" consequence, Kohn says the right response would be to give children like Abigail more attention—perhaps through a special storytime—to address the problem behind their tantrums. He suggests that it is when our children are at their very worst that they need us the most. "Unconditional parenting assumes that behaviors are just the outward expression of feelings and thoughts, needs and intentions," he writes. If we leap to punish the "bad" behavior, we are effectively telling our children that they mean less to us when they act up, and we miss an opportunity to address deeper issues.

Kohn has two children and understands that day-to-day life threatens to overwhelm even the most conscientious parent. But he strongly encourages his readers to begin questioning their methods and motives. "All of us have considerable room for improvement," he writes. "This is as good a time as any to turn things around." He bolsters his arguments with copious footnotes and 12 pages of references, as well as by sharing numerous real-life stories about his own experiences and epiphanies.

Kohn marshals all this information to make a persuasive argument. Readers who are interested in raising moral and compassionate children will be challenged and inspired by *Unconditional Parenting*.

—Dawn Friedman