Happiness Inc.

**By ELIZABETH WEIL** APRIL 19, 2013 (*New York Times*) (about 1825 words)

[1] According to [Sonja Lyubomirsky](http://sonjalyubomirsky.com/), you have a happiness set point. It’s partly encoded in your genes. If something good happens, your sense of happiness rises; if something bad happens, it falls.

[2] But either way, before too long, your mood will creep back to its set point because of a really powerful and perverse phenomenon referred to in science as “hedonic adaptation.” You know, people get used to things.

[3] With her 2007 book, “The How of Happiness,” and this year’s follow-up, “The Myths of Happiness,” Dr. Lyubomirsky, a psychology professor at the University of California, Riverside, caused ripples in her field but also drew a wider audience, cementing her place in a long chain of happiness-industry stalwarts, from M. Scott Peck with “The Road Less Traveled” to Martin E. P. Seligman and “Learned Optimism” to Daniel Gilbert and his best-selling “Stumbling on Happiness.”

[4] Dr. Lyubomirsky’s findings can be provocative and, at times, counterintuitive. Renters are happier than homeowners, she says. Interrupting positive experiences makes them more enjoyable. Acts of kindness make people feel happier, but not if you are compelled to perform the same act too frequently. (Bring your lover breakfast in bed one day, and it feels great. Bring it every day, and it feels like a chore.)



The author Sonja Lyubomirsky, a psychology professor at the University of California at Riverside, shown at home in Santa Monica. Credit Emily Berl for The New York Times

[5] Dr. Lyubomirsky — 46, Russian and expecting to give birth to her fourth child this weekend — is an unlikely mood guru. “I really hate all the smiley faces and rainbows and kittens,” she said in her office. She doesn’t often count her blessings or write gratitude letters, both of which she thinks sound hokey even though her research suggests they make people happier.

[6] For years, she even worried that the study of how to increase happiness would make her work sound too applied, too lightweight, too much like that of a life coach. For a decade, she focused instead on categorizing characteristics of happy and unhappy people with clinical, almost anthropological detachment. But friends, family members, students, reporters — everyone — kept asking: How does it work? How can you make yourself happier?

[7] So Dr. Lyubomirsky finally turned her research toward those questions.

[8] Now, according to Barbara Fredrickson, principal investigator of the Positive Emotions and Psychophysiology Lab at the University of North Carolina, “Sonja is the queen of happiness.”

[9] “She’s one of the few people that actually does research on happiness per se,” she said of Ms. Lyubomirsky’s ascent. “It’s a supply-and-demand issue.”

[10] One day this winter, a young graduate student knocked on Dr. Lyubomirsky’s office door, seeking her opinion. The student was thinking of designing a study to see if expectant fathers were happier after their wives gave birth. Or maybe she should study what’s the most happiness-inducing way for a woman to tell her partner she’s pregnant? (Dr. Lyubomirsky, who is fairly practiced in this department, liked the second option.)

[11] Later, another student fired up her laptop to discuss data that appeared off. “Look at this state of gratitude, that’s really weird,” Dr. Lyubomirsky said, puzzling over the graph. “What happened here? Was this March?” The school calendar influences student-research subjects: everybody is happier right after spring break.

[12] Among the big dials people can tune to affect personal happiness is how much we compare ourselves to others. As Dr. Lyubomirsky has found in her lab (and many of us find around the office or at a bar), unhappy people compare a lot and care about the results. They tend to feel better when they get poor evaluations but learn others did worse than when they get excellent evaluations but learn others did better.

[13] In one experiment, documented in “The Myths of Happiness,” Dr. Lyubomirsky asked two volunteers at a time to use hand puppets to teach a lesson about friendship to an imaginary audience of children. Afterward the puppeteers were evaluated against each other: you did great but your partner did better, or you did badly but your partner was even worse.

[14] The volunteers who were happy before the puppeteering review cared a bit about hearing that they had performed worse than their colleagues but largely shrugged it off. The unhappy volunteers were devastated. Dr. Lyubomirsky writes: “It appears that unhappy individuals have bought into the sardonic maxim attributed to Gore Vidal: ‘For true happiness, it is not enough to be successful oneself. ... One’s friends must fail.’ ” This, she says, is probably why a great number of people know the German word schadenfreude (describing happiness at another’s misfortune) and almost nobody knows the Yiddish shep naches (happiness at another’s success).

[15] Late one afternoon at California-Riverside, Dr. Lyubomirsky grabbed her bag and walked at breakneck pace through the mystifying campus to a weekly meeting with her advisees. At a long table, she tended to her pregnancy blood-sugar needs by eating an individual-size chocolate cheesecake from Whole Foods while students recounted being cornered in front of their posters at a recent conference.

[16] “Someone came up to me and said, ‘Oh, do you really do this for real?’ ” she recalled — meaning, write gratitude letters. “I said, ‘Um, no,’ and then he said, ‘Do other people who study this do them?’ ”

[17] Dr. Lyubomirsky said: “Weird. Scientists should be unbiased. Just because I do a study on the effects of meditation doesn’t mean I should be meditating. I’m probably less biased if I don’t meditate.”

[18] Science and happiness are not a perfect fit. The American philosopher William James is also considered the father of American psychology, and, as Dr. Lyubomirsky herself is well aware, once you leave philosophy aside, conclusions that psychological research lets us draw about how to be happy tend to sound a bit flat.

[19] Dr. Lyubomirsky is a surprising apostle of mirth. Born in Moscow, she emigrated with her parents and brother to the United States at age 9 with the help of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. Settling in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., the Lyubomirsky elders didn’t adapt very quickly: both switched to jobs for which they were hugely overqualified. For years, Dr. Lyubomirsky’s mother cried every time she heard Tchaikovsky. Sonja taught herself English by watching “The Love Boat.” (She speaks without an accent.) Her brother, Ilya Lyubomirsky, an engineer, said she was “quiet and very studious as a young girl.” By high school, he said, she “blossomed socially” into “having a way with people.”

[20] During her first semester at Harvard, she took a course from Brendan Maher, the psychology professor credited with changing psychology from a soft science based on descriptions to a hard one based on data, and decided she wanted to major in the field. After college, she moved west to study at Stanford, where her graduate school adviser, Lee Ross, took her for a walk in the school’s Rodin sculpture garden and suggested she study happiness.

[21] “At the time,” Dr. Lyubomirsky recalled, “only one person was studying happiness: Ed Diener. Back then it was called ‘subjective well being’ and the topic was considered very fuzzy.”

[22] To clear the haze, Dr. Lyubomirsky spent that decade trying to define what happy and unhappy people were like. According to her friend Andrew Ward, now in the psychology department at Swarthmore College, “the working assumption in those years was that happy people were rationalizing all the time.” So Dr. Lyubomirsky designed an experiment in which people ranked 10 desserts, knowing they’d get one. Each participant was then given his second or third choice and told to rank all 10 desserts again. Guess who rationalized the desserts they received? The unhappy people. As Dr. Ward remembered, “The happy people said, ‘Well, this dessert is good, and I’m sure the others are good, too!’ The unhappy people liked their desserts just fine but indicated they were extremely relieved not to have received the ‘awful’ nonchosen dessert. In other words, unhappy people derogated the dessert they did not receive, whereas happy people felt no need to do so. The implication is that unhappy people are doing more mental work.”

[23] Dr. Lyubomirsky’s academic career took a strange turn in January 1999 when Mr. Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the author of “Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience,” cherry-picked her and a dozen or so other psychology academics under 40 and invited them to Akumal, Mexico. There, Mr. Seligman, who part of the time wore a tie-dyed T-shirt with the word “YES” on the front, willed the field of positive psychology into being. On the beach near Tulum, the group members wrote a Positive Psychology manifesto. They defined the field as “the scientific study of optimal human functioning” and asserted “a new commitment on the part of research psychologists to focus attention upon the sources of psychological health, thereby going beyond prior emphases upon disease and disorder.” Under palm trees, they listened to talks — for instance, Laura King broke down the myth that “happy people are stupid.” One night they sang and recited poetry. Dr. Lyubomirsky performed Caliban’s monologue from “The Tempest.” Be not afeard.

[24] These days, Dr. Lyubomirsky is not so thrilled with how the field of positive psychology has been pigeonholed. She doesn’t consider herself a positive psychologist. The term bothers her. She thinks the word “positive” is unnecessary, in the same way some are bothered by the word “gay” in gay marriage. The idea is it’s all marriage, right? “I’m really not interested in happy people,” she insisted. “I’m interested in how happiness changes over time and what strategies can increase happiness.”

[25] At home, Ms. Lyubomirsky’s two older children — a daughter, 14, and a son, 11 — seem most consumed not with happiness but with annoyingness, ranking everybody in the family on that scale, including their 2-year-old sister. (Dr. Lyubomirsky came in first.) Three months ago the family moved out of its condominium into a spacious house. Dr. Lyubomirsky’s husband, Peter Del Greco, a lawyer who investigates securities fraud, wanted to buy a big high-definition TV. “I said to him, ‘You’re going to adapt to it.’ Of course, he still wanted it. And he adapted to it.”

[26] Dr. Lyubomirsky doesn’t think that people will really learn not to adapt. “We’re so focused on the now,” she said. “The present is so compelling. It’s hard-wired.”

[27] Since the move, she has decorated her new living room with Russian nesting dolls of Boris Yeltsin and Dennis Rodman. She has adapted to just about everything in the house except for the shower (it has six heads) and the ocean view. Yet she’s unconcerned. As she knows well, focusing too much on happiness, making it too much of a goal, tends to backfire. So she doesn’t dwell on it. “I remember when I was writing the chapter about relationships in ‘The Myths of Happiness,’ ” she said. “One day when I was driving home I finally thought: ‘Oh! I should do something nice for my husband this week.’ ”

***Correction: April 19, 2013***

*An earlier version of this article misstated a given name in a quotation by Sonja Lyubomirsky. She said that Ed Diener — not Edward — was the only person studying happiness when she began studying at Stanford.  The article also described one of Dr. Lyubomirsky’s students incorrectly. She was a graduate student, not a postdoctoral student.*