

Stability of Happiness

Theories and Evidence on Whether
Happiness Can Change

Edited by

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Academic Press is an imprint of Elsevier



Academic Press is an imprint of Elsevier
32 Jamestown Road, London NW1 7BY, UK
225 Wyman Street, Waltham, MA 02451, USA
525 B Street, Suite 1800, San Diego, CA 92101-4495, USA

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN: 978-0-12-411478-4

For information on all Academic Press publications
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Typeset by MPS Limited, Chennai, India
www.adi-mps.com

Printed and bound in the United States of America

14 15 16 17 18 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Preface

The right to “pursue happiness” is one of the dominant themes of western culture, and understanding the causes of happiness is one of the primary goals of the positive psychology movement. However, before the causality question can even be considered, a more basic question must be addressed: Can happiness change? Reasons for skepticism include the notion of a “genetic set point” for happiness, i.e., a stable personal baseline of happiness to which individuals will always return, no matter how much their lives change for the better; the life span stability of happiness and happiness-related traits such as neuroticism and extraversion; and the powerful processes of hedonic adaptation, which erode the positive effects of any fortuitous life change. In addition, there are considerable empirical data to suggest that over time, people keep returning to their own baseline levels of happiness. If it is true that happiness can’t really change, then the search for the causes of happiness becomes almost moot. A person will either be happy or not, based on factors that are not amenable to control.

This book directly addresses this “elephant in the room,” the question that many positive psychologists, well-being researchers, intervention designers, and life coaches would rather avoid: Can a person’s well-being be stably altered for the better, such that it remains permanently at a new, higher level than before? After an editorial introduction (Section I), the question is addressed from several theoretical perspectives (Section II; behavioral-genetic, social-cognitive, humanistic, clinical, and social-personality) and several empirical perspectives (Section III; panel studies, longitudinal studies, intervention studies, economic studies, nation-level studies), although of course there is also considerable overlap between the theoretical and empirical sections. Then, Section IV covers thorny issues in doing longitudinal research on the stability of well-being (properly dealing with cohort effects, testing moderator effects, accounting for auto-regressive effects), providing cutting-edge analytical approaches for modeling fluctuating well-being. Finally, the book concludes (in Section V) with a summary evaluation from the Yoda of well-being research, Ed Diener. To cut to the chase, the answer to the question posed above is “Yes.” But the route to this conclusion is winding, and the potential diversions many.

This book should be of interest to anybody in the categories listed above: positive psychologists, well-being researchers, intervention designers, and life coaches. However, the book should also be of interest to public policy makers, as they seek to broker new public affordances such as education, health, or retirement assistance; to college and even high school educators

and teachers, as they seek to introduce their students to the leading frontier of these vitally important questions; and to intelligent lay-people, who are ready to go “beyond the hype” of the self-help bookshelves to get real scientific information on what they seek. What is it really going to take to boost one’s happiness, and then to keep it at the new level?

There are many edited academic books on happiness. However, with very few exceptions, the chapters in those books do not consider our foundational question, of “Can happiness change?” Instead, they simply assume that it can, and proceed to examine various personality, contextual, and cultural correlates of happiness. This book will be the first to bring the “change” question to the fore—the question that we believe must be answered before questions of “how to change happiness” can be taken seriously.

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Is It Possible to Become a Permanently Happier Person?

An Overview of the Issues and the Book

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Subjective well-being—a construct that is known more colloquially as “happiness”—is a characteristic that reflects a person’s subjective evaluation of his or her life as a whole. Although the construct is based on a person’s own perspective, it is thought to reflect something about the actual conditions of people’s lives. These conditions include both external conditions such as income and social relationships, as well as internal conditions such as goals, outlook on life, and other psychological resources. Moreover, people who evaluate their lives negatively would likely be motivated to improve the conditions of their lives, and those who evaluate their lives positively would be motivated to maintain or further improve these conditions. Thus, happiness and related constructs are thought to signal how well a person’s life is going, which should mean that as a person’s life improves, so should the happiness that that person reports.

Over the years, however, at least some researchers became quite skeptical about the possibility for change in happiness. Initial reviews of the literature suggested that few external, objectively measured life circumstances were strongly related to subjective well-being (Diener, 1984; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Wilson, 1967). In addition, some highly cited studies suggested that even individuals who had experienced extremely strong positive and negative life events (such as winning the lottery or becoming disabled) barely differed in their self-reported happiness (e.g., Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978; but see Lucas, 2007, for a reinterpretation of this finding). This evidence, when considered in the context of increasing numbers of studies showing strong heritability for reports of happiness and relatively high stability over time, led some to suggest that change was not possible

(e.g., Brickman & Campbell, 1971; Lykken & Tellegen, 1996; see also Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006, for a review).

If these perspectives are true, then they present major problems for the field of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology is the scientific study of positive human states, traits, and other characteristics, and positive psychology is premised on the notion that these desirable qualities can all be improved through the application of scientific research (at the population level) and personal effort (at the individual level). Since the very beginning of positive psychology, happiness has been one of the most important topics of study—in part because happiness is so important to most people (hence the thousands of happiness books marketed to laypeople), and in part because the right to “pursue happiness” is a right guaranteed to all U.S. citizens (and citizens of Western democracies more generally). If it turns out that greater happiness cannot be successfully pursued, then it calls into question whether higher levels of other positive personality characteristics (i.e., virtues, strengths, capabilities) are also impossible to achieve. Perhaps positive psychology is ultimately based on an illusion, and perhaps people should learn to be content with who they are and what they have, rather than continually trying to put “legs on a snake,” as it were (Gaskins, 1999).

Although there has been increasing research on the question of “sustainable happiness” (i.e., the possibility of achieving a higher level of happiness that is sustainable above one’s initial level) in the past decade, there is still little scientific consensus on whether happiness can go up and then stay up (as opposed to falling back to baseline). Some illustrations of the possibilities are given in Figure 1.1 (panels 1a–1c). Notably, Figure 1.1 references only *positive* deviations from initial baselines, but it could just as easily reference *negative* deviations. However, such “sustainable drops” in well-being are not considered in this book, except by Cummins, in Chapter 5.

Panel 1a illustrates a case in which all well-being increases are only temporary, representing mere fluctuations around a constant baseline. Because of autoregressive effects, the person always tends to return to his or her own stable, underlying baseline. This is the assumption of genetic set point theories and theories which propose complete adaptation to all changes. Panel 1b illustrates a case in which the baseline trends upward over time. For a variety of possible reasons, including learning, maturation, or steadily improving life circumstances, well-being is continually improving for this person, although there remain bumps in the road. Panel 1c illustrates a second way that well-being might go up and stay up. The panel illustrates a step function in which the baseline is elevated all at once and remains stable at the new level (the dream of those who buy lottery tickets!). Together, the three panels also illustrate that individual baselines can be located relative to a population baseline, so that we may talk about individual change with respect to population baselines as well as with respect to the person’s own prior levels of

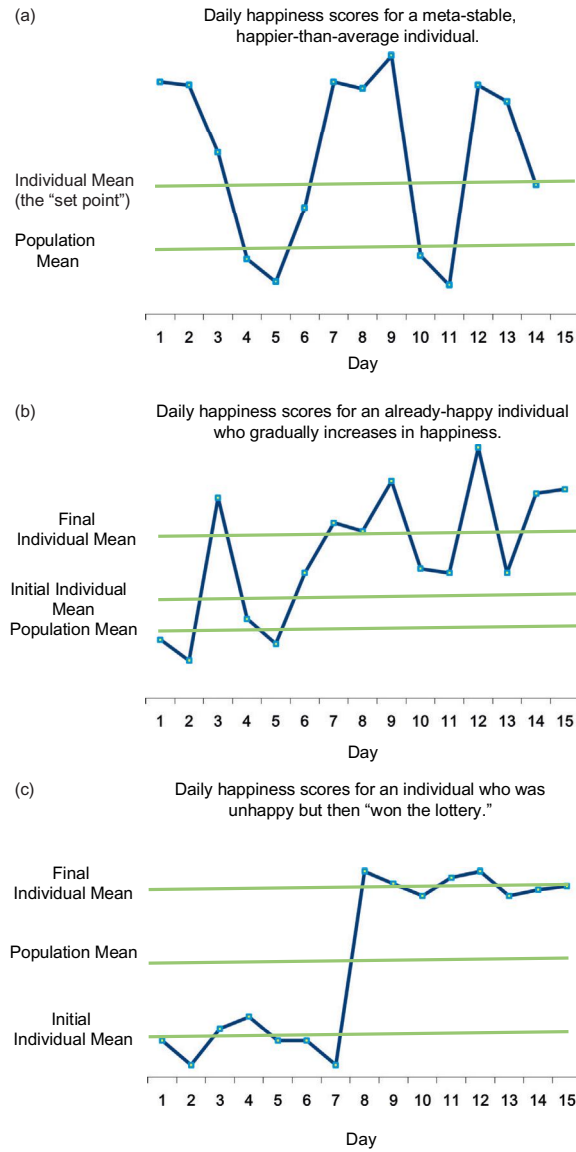


FIGURE 1.1 Daily happiness scores.

well-being. One implication of the autoregressive perspective is that stable patterns of positive change should be rare, the further the person's initial baseline is from the population baseline. An already very happy person should have more difficulty gaining and maintaining new happiness than a person who is only of average happiness initially. In contrast, a person who

starts out below the population mean might have an easier time increasing in happiness, to at least a state of moderate contentment.

The goal of this book is to bring together leading scholars with a broad range of perspectives to discuss the question of whether happiness can change. The book is structured in such a way as to highlight three specific sets of issues regarding the extent to which happiness can change. First, in the early parts of the book, we highlight theoretical approaches to understanding change in happiness. In other words, if happiness can or cannot change, it is important to consider why that might be and what theoretical explanations can account for this phenomenon.

For instance, one possibility is that although happiness can change in the short term, long-term levels may be determined primarily by in-born genetic predispositions. In 1996, David Lykken and Auke Tellegen published an article called “Happiness is a stochastic phenomenon,” which argued that people’s happiness levels are fixed, at least over the long term, by genetic factors that are not changeable. Although people of course fluctuate in the short term in their happiness levels (i.e., they have moods), they will always tend to return to their particular baseline well-being level in the end, “regressing to their own mean,” as it were. This mean is commonly referred to as the “happiness set point.” In concluding their argument, based on twin study data, Lykken and Tellegen (1996) stated that “trying to become happier is like trying to become taller”—in other words, it will not work.

Although Lykken later backed away somewhat from this position (Lykken, 1999), it remains a widely accepted perspective on the question of whether happiness can change. In this book, Røysamb, Nes, and Vittersø, re-examine this issue, focusing specifically on the theoretical implications of behavioral genetic research on subjective well-being. After providing a very lucid discussion of behavioral genetic approaches, along with a review of behavioral genetic research, they then discuss what the moderate heritability estimates really mean for research on subjective well-being and for individuals who wish to improve their lives. Their discussion points out that the simple tendency to equate “heritable” with “unchangeable” is probably not justified.

Another theoretical reason for pessimism concerning the happiness change question is the phenomenon of hedonic adaptation. Hedonic adaptation, akin to sensory adaptation (Helson, 1964), refers to the tendency to cease noticing particular stimuli over time so that the stimuli no longer have the emotional effects they once had. For instance, we might assume that people who win large sums of money in the lottery will at first be ecstatic but may later adapt as wealth becomes their “new normal.” However, hedonic adaptation may also apply to many other life changes besides monetary ones, such as a new car, a new spouse, or a new child. What once provided a thrill becomes a mere part of the background. This phenomenon gives rise to what has been referred to as the “hedonic treadmill” (Brickman & Campbell, 1971); in this view, pursuing happiness is like walking up an escalator going