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Happiness, it's Up to You!

In 1978, a team of psychologists from Northwestern University and the University of Massachusetts published a study in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (Vol. 35, No. 8, pages 917-927) that found lottery winners were not significantly happier than control-group participants and that patients with spinal-cord injuries “did not appear nearly as unhappy as might be expected.”

A growing number of researchers are questioning whether people create a set point of resiliency, and whether they return to a particular level of preset happiness when environmental factors disrupt their lives completely. If this is so, anyone should be able to predict how happy they will be. If you can predict happiness then it means you can control it.

Let's assume you are the driver of your well-being. What can you do to change your set point?

Survival vs. Happiness. You can begin by understanding that happiness was not the primary concern in early human development. We were built to survive, to meet our basic needs for nourishment, warmth, reproduction and to avoid danger. The pursuit of happiness has become more important only in recent history as people were able to meet their basic needs relatively easy.

Money vs. Time. David Schkade, PhD, a university of Texas professor suggests that money does factor into people's feelings of contentment, but that it matters more how people use their free time. In *Science* (Vol. 312, #5, 782, pages 1908-1910), Schkade found that people who made more than \$90,000 a year were nearly twice as likely to report being “very happy” as those that earned less than \$20,000. “Money makes a difference in getting you safe, warm and fed,” he says. “But then once those things are taken care of, it comes down to how you are spending your time: Are you doing the things you like to be doing?” The findings suggest that people are never satisfied with the money they make, they are always working on the money they don't yet have. It is only when people use their money to spend more time on leisure that they experience an increase in

“happiness”. If you find you are waiting to have time to do more enjoyable things, you might want to rethink that practice.

Attitude. My mother often reminded me that, “the only thing you really have control over is your attitude”. If you believe things will go well, they usually do. If you are determined to see the bright side of every situation and to find blessings in every event, then you will have a better experience.

Self-Talk. Your attitude is often influenced not by what you hear from others, but how you talk to yourself. You can minimize unpleasant feelings just by telling yourself what you need to hear. You do not have to pretend that everything is wonderful; you simply want to avoid making things worse. Pay close attention to the messages you send yourself and avoid dwelling on problems, focusing on faults, exaggerating situations, name calling, dredging up the past or making false assumptions. Instead, give yourself the credit you deserve for meeting goals and doing good deeds. Love yourself the way you are.

Keep a record. If you are not sure how you might be influencing your happiness, a great way to spot patterns is to keep a daily record of your thoughts. In a notebook or journal track your thoughts and moods for the next couple of weeks. Try to determine what thoughts usually occur when you feel bad. Once you recognize a pattern, take action to adjust your thinking and replace self-defeating schemes with more positive ones.

The bottom line: happiness is in your reach. Stretch a little harder, you will soon have it in your grasp.

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