

Lasting contentment can be ours, say happiness experts, if we look in the right places.

What Makes Us **HAPPY?**

BY LISA FIELDS

A DREAM HOME, that longed-for trip to an exotic locale, a new car.... Sure, they boost our mood for awhile. But for long-lasting effects, new evidence points us down a different path.

Studies have yielded surprising insights into why some people are happier than others. Landmark twins research from the University of Minnesota found that roughly 50 percent of the difference in happiness from one individual to another is genetically determined. We don't inherit particular traits that make us more or less optimistic; rather, our DNA is responsible for what researchers refer to as a

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"happiness set point." "You can win the lottery and it might temporarily raise your happiness... and a death in the family brings you down, but you drift back," says Kevin Haroian, director of the Minnesota Center for Twin & Family Research. "You're always going through hills and valleys in life, but your overall general attitude is your happiness set point."

An additional 10 percent of the difference in happiness levels is influenced by life circumstances and environmental factors that can shift daily, says Sonja Lyubomirsky, happiness researcher at the University of California, Riverside. (Think about the boost you get when you're praised for a job well done or how your mood sours when you're enduring dreary weather.)

Because happiness is intangible and difficult to measure, these percentages serve as rough guides, rather than hard-and-fast rules, and they're influenced differently by each person's perception of happiness. The field of positive psychology (the study of happiness) has found that people who tend to be happier perceive all events more positively than unhappy people, who are more likely to sulk after a boss criticizes their work or find faults in seemingly pleasant situations.

After accounting for our inherited happiness quotient and life circumstances, this leaves only about 40 percent of our individual differences within our personal sphere of influence. We'd do well to focus on that 40 percent, says Sonja Lyubomirsky. "Changing one's intentional activities may provide a happiness-boosting potential that is at least as large as, and probably much larger

than, changing one's circumstances," she explained.

Research points to four key areas where intentional change will reap the most benefit to our happiness: family, community, work and faith.

Family

In 1938, the still-ongoing Grant Study was launched at Harvard University, tracking the lives of 268 Harvard students from age 18 onward to determine, among other things, what characteristics, habits and life experiences allow people to flourish.

The study confirmed several things that common sense tells us are true: That having a loving childhood predicts happiness in adulthood. That men are happier in their mature years if they're close with their children. And that one of the predictors for happiness in old age is being in a good marriage.

The secret to happiness is giving and accepting love, says George Vaillant, director of the Grant Study from 1972 to 2004, because people need to establish meaningful connections with other people in order to truly feel joy.

"What characterizes the positive emotions faith, hope, love, awe, gratitude, which lead to happiness, is that you can't feel any of those without connection," Vaillant says. "You don't feel joy, love, compassion on a desert island."

The Grant Study men who



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GEORGE VAILLANT, *director of the Grant Study from 1972 to 2004*

never allowed themselves to fully give and receive love (even if they were married) were some of the unhappiest study subjects. "Love is dangerous because it makes us vulnerable," Vaillant says.

If you weren't born into a loving family, you can create your own "family" with friends or relatives; blood connections are irrelevant, as long as you treat your "family" as such.

"It isn't that relatives are so important; it's the ability to both make connections and to take the connections in," Vaillant says.

"Giving and accepting love has to be a two-way street."

Community

The community that you build around yourself—primarily your friends—can help boost your happiness. It's not enough to surround yourself with warm bodies, though; in order to reap true joy from friendships, you must have trust and dependability.

"All the happiest people have close relationships—at least a few people you can really count on," says University of Illinois psychology professor Ed Diener, a leading researcher in the field of posi-

tive psychology, who notes that meaningful friendships need to be reciprocal. "Be a person whom others can count on. Research shows that the happiest people tend to think of others, not just themselves."

Some people believe that friends aren't as important as relatives—because certain friendships dissolve when someone changes jobs or moves to another city—but research has shown that both support systems provide mood-boosting benefits.

Friendships can be particularly rewarding for people who have drastically different interests, compared to their family members. Unlike relatives, you can choose your friends, so

you can create a supportive community of like-minded people with similar passions. "It could be that we're wired to feel more relaxed and happier around supportive people," Diener says. "Physiological studies have found that having a friend with you makes a hill look less steep and makes you less anxious about a stressful situation."

Lonely people with no confidants tend to be unhappy. Today, with an increased reliance on technology and telecommuting, more people are isolated. Data from the University of Chicago's esteemed benchmark General Social Survey (GSS), which has tracked Americans's happiness levels since 1972, revealed that in 2004, one in four people had no one to discuss significant events with.

Loneliness negatively impacts health and longevity, so it's worthwhile to nurture meaningful relationships. Although you may be unable to alter your happiness set point, you can change habits like negative thinking, which can sabotage friendships and happiness.

"Focus on what's good in people and what's going well in your life," Diener says.

HAPPINESS IS....

DANES ARE THE HAPPIEST people on earth, according to the World Happiness Report 2013. Close behind Denmark at the top of the national contentment rankings are Norway, Switzerland, Netherlands and Sweden. These are the results of a Gallup World Poll of 156 countries that took place from 2010 to 2012.

An earlier happiness report, which drew from a Gallup poll completed in 2011, also gave top honors to Scandinavian countries Denmark, Finland, and Norway.

So what makes Danes so happy?

Although wealth matters, "having someone to count on in times of trouble," as the authors put it, matters more. Social policies in Denmark and other Scandinavian countries provide a safety net to protect every citizen from the worst effects of unemployment, illness or dependency.

Other important variables that contributed to happiness, according to the authors, were long life expectancy, freedom, absence of corruption and generosity, as measured by charitable donations.

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Work

Work provides meaning and purpose to your life, and it's very closely tied with happiness. Studies have shown that completely disabled people are less happy than other people, largely because they're unable to do work of any kind. Research has also found that being laid off from work causes a severe dip in happiness that many people

don't completely recover from, even several years later, once they've found another job.

A 2010 European Working Conditions survey found that, in most European countries, 80 percent or more of respondents said their jobs gave them a feeling of work well done. Likewise, American Enterprise Institute president Arthur C. Brooks, using GSS data,

“BEING A WIFE AND MOTHER IS A DREAM JOB”

Tanja Koechli, 43, lives in Meilen, Switzerland, with her husband, five biological children, one adopted child and two foster children.

"I really am lucky. I have a wonderful family. We're doing well financially, we have no health problems, and for me being a wife and mother is a dream job. I have found my place in life. Bringing up children, giving them a home, encouraging their strengths, and working on their weaknesses is meaningful and sustainable. It gives me pleasure and satisfaction.

"But happiness is so fragile if you make it dependent on external factors. Circumstances in life can change faster than we think. I love my family but it would put too much of a burden on them if I made them responsible for

my happiness. I believe King David, the psalmist, was right when he said: 'Being united with God is my highest good.' Because I know that and can safely entrust my life to his keeping, I am truly happy. Perhaps one of the happiest people alive."



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ED DIENER, a leading researcher in the field of positive psychology



"WORK MEANS A LOT TO ME"

Mirjam Lukasse, 53, is a Norwegian midwife with a PhD. She is also an associate professor and postdoctoral researcher. She lives with her husband in Oslo, but her career has taken her around the world, including 10 years in Pakistan.

"Work means a lot to me. Enjoying your job makes everything else much easier and more pleasant, and I prioritize work before much else. In my

job I get a chance to challenge myself, learn new things, meet new people, go abroad, and contribute to improvements within midwifery. It's fun to teach midwife students; they are so eager to learn. It feels wonderful when I supervise students to produce a written assignment that becomes better than either of us had expected.

"My research gives me an opportunity to achieve my own goals and to help others achieve theirs. I get a strong feeling of happiness every time I publish a scientific article and when we are granted funds for research projects.

"Of course, my health, my marriage and my faith contribute to my happiness. And my visits in troubled countries have made me grateful for living in Norway."

found that more than 80 percent of Americans also are satisfied with their jobs.

The best way to increase your personal happiness through your work is to find enjoyment in what you do. "The key thing is to work in a way that your skills meet your passions," Brooks says. "It has to create value in your life and value in the lives of others."

Value means different things to different people. For breadwinners, having the ability to financially support the family is rewarding. But spending too much time at the office can backfire; workaholics may get caught up with their meaningful work at the expense of other sources of happiness. "They get compensated for work but don't see the other three [family, com-

OUR POLL

WE ASKED 6000 OF OUR customers in Finland, Germany, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovenia and Russia this question: Which of the following is most important to your happiness: faith, work, family or community? The vast majority (73 percent) ranked Family no. 1.



munity and faith] so much, and they say, 'Why am I so unhappy?' Brooks says. "For your happiness portfolio, you need to think about all four of those things, not just work."

You can boost your mood through work, even if you don't earn a paycheck, as long as you're passionate about what you do. Raising children and volunteering outside the home qualify as meaningful work from a happiness standpoint. "It's the belief that you're earning your success," Brooks says. "It doesn't matter if you're earning money."

Faith

In the 21st century, when people seem to be more interested in money, pop culture and tech gadgets than old-fashioned values like spirituality and religion, it's refreshing to know that people can rely on faith and spirituality to become a happier person. Part of the reason is that to follow your faith, it's likely that you'll need to be a part of a community, and belonging to a like-minded group produces positive feelings.

"The whole point of spirituality is connection," George Vaillant says. "It almost always involves people."

Countless studies and polls have shown that as a group, religious peo-

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"I GOT TO KNOW NICE PEOPLE"

Christian Kaaber, 53, of Nivå, Denmark, is an antiquarian bookseller, married, with two grown children. Like many Danes, he is active in a number of groups, including the Danish Antiquarian Booksellers' Association, Danish Bibliophilic Club, Association for Book Craft, and the local history society.

"The main pleasure for me is to collaborate with active people and to share my leisure time with others who enjoy the same interests and eventually may become very close friends. I think Danes are generally reserved, unlike Americans, for instance, who may socialize a lot with neighbors. In Denmark, if you want to meet people, it's usually a good idea to look for associations to join. Personally, I have never met

so many good people from my town than during my active years in Lions Club. I got to know nice people I otherwise wouldn't have."



ple are happier than people who don't rely on their faith, likely because of their interpersonal connections. But this doesn't mean that you'll need to follow an organized religion to glean benefits. Faith can also apply to very secular situations.

"Hope, trust, forgiveness, awe—these are the emotions that lead to happiness or well-being, but they're often confused with religion rather than with mental health," Vaillant says. "I don't know that Einstein ever darkened a synagogue door, but he spent his entire life talking about awe, a belief in a power greater than yourself."

While some people interpret faith to mean trust, others identify faith with their belief systems. For those who equate faith with religion, making a conscious effort to attend spiritual events can help people with fewer social connections interact with a meaningful group of people who share similar values. Vaillant found that Grant Study men who had close relationships with members of their extended families were less likely to seek out spiritual experiences, but men who were disconnected from friends and family became increasingly more religious over time.

"Faith provides comfort," Vaillant says. "You get your well-being or connection where you can. If you don't have a loving wife of 50 years and 12 devoted grandkids, maybe it's a good idea to go on a spiritual pilgrimage."



"I FIND HAPPINESS IN THE AWE"

For Mirjam Booij-Hendriks, 50, a wife and mother in Nieuwleusen, Netherlands, faith is a cornerstone of her well-being. It was during a sudden confrontation with her own mortality that she reached a new level of religious awareness.

"In 1994 my husband fell ill with kidney failure, and I was diagnosed with possible ovarian cancer. Leading up to my operation, I experienced my ultimate struggle with God. I was facing death and feared what would happen with my children now that both of us

were seriously ill. But finally I surrendered to the God of love. I found peace in realizing that, whatever happened, he would provide for us in his way. My tumor was benign, and my husband eventually received a donor kidney. But the comfort I found in my faith kept me going through years of caring for my children and husband. It strengthened my trust in God and is the foundation I still build on. I find happiness in the awe and deep satisfaction in little things like a ladybug or a smile. I know my Creator desires a relationship with me. He called and I answered."