ALSO BY JONATHAN HAIDT

Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well-Lived (co-editor)

The Happiness Hypothesis

FINDING MODERN TRUTH IN ANCIENT WISDOM

JONATHAN HAIDT

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Substitute "defeat" for "kill" and you have a pretty good description of the modern Western ideal, at least in some corners of the business world. So even if Bob were just as happy as Mary, if he has an arrogant, entitled attitude and treats people badly, his life would still be spiritually and aesthetically worse.

THE HAPPINESS FORMULA

In the 1990s, the two big findings of happiness research (strong relation to genes, weak relation to environment) hit the psychological community hard, because they applied not just to happiness but to most aspects of personality. Psychologists since Freud had shared a nearly religious devotion to the idea that personality is shaped primarily by childhood environment. This axiom was taken on faith: The evidence for it consisted almost entirely of correlations—usually small ones—between what parents did and how their children turned out, and anyone who suggested that these correlations were caused by genes was dismissed as a reductionist. But as twin studies revealed the awesome reach of genes and the relative unimportance of the family environment that siblings share,[30] the ancient happiness hypothesis grew ever more plausible. Maybe there really is a set point[31] fixed into every brain, like a thermostat set forever to 58 degrees Fahrenheit (for depressives) or 75 degrees (for happy people)? Maybe the only way to find happiness therefore is to change one's own internal setting (for example, through meditation, Prozac, or cognitive therapy) instead of changing one's environment?

As psychologists wrestled with these ideas, however, and as biologists worked out the first sketch of the human genome, a more sophisticated understanding of nature and nurture began to emerge. Yes, genes explain far more about us than anyone had realized, but the genes themselves often turn out to be sensitive to environmental conditions.[32] And yes, each person has a characteristic level of happiness, but it now looks as though it's not so much a set *point* as a potential *range* or probability distribution. Whether you operate on the high or the low side of your potential range is determined by many factors that Buddha and Epictetus would have considered externals.

When Martin Seligman founded positive psychology in the late 1990s, one of his first moves was to bring together small groups of experts to tackle specific problems. One group was created to study the externals that matter for happiness. Three psychologists, Sonja Lyubomirsky, Ken Sheldon, and David Schkade, reviewed the available evidence and realized that there are two fundamentally different kinds of externals: the *conditions* of your life and the *voluntary activities* that you undertake.[33] Conditions include facts about your life that you can't change (race, sex, age, disability) as well as things that you can (wealth, marital status, where you live). Conditions are constant over time, at least during a period in your life, and so they are the sorts of things that you are likely to adapt to. Voluntary activities, on the other hand, are the things that you *choose* to do, such as meditation, exercise, learning a new skill, or taking a vacation. Because such activities must be chosen, and because most of them take effort and attention, they can't just disappear from your awareness the way conditions can. Voluntary activities, therefore, offer much greater promise for increasing happiness while avoiding adaptation effects.

One of the most important ideas in positive psychology is what Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, Schkade, and Seligman call the "happiness formula:"

$$H = S + C + V$$

The level of happiness that you actually experience (H) is determined by your biological set point (S) plus the conditions of your life (C) plus the voluntary activities (V) you do.[34] The challenge for positive psychology is to use the scientific method to find out exactly what kinds of C and V can push H up to the top of your potential range. The extreme biological version of the happiness hypothesis says that H = S, and that C and V don't matter. But we have to give Buddha and Epictetus credit for V because Buddha prescribed the "eightfold noble path" (including meditation and mindfulness), and Epictetus urged methods of thought to cultivate indifference (*apatheia*) to externals. So to test the wisdom of the sages properly we must examine this hypothesis: H = S + V, where V = voluntary or intentional activities that cultivate acceptance and weaken emotional attachments. If there are many conditions (C) that matter, and if there are a

variety of voluntary activities beyond those aimed at nonattachment, then the happiness hypothesis of Buddha and Epictetus is wrong and people would be poorly advised simply to look within.

It turns out that there really are some external conditions (C) that matter. There are some changes you can make in your life that are not fully subject to the adaptation principle, and that might make you lastingly happier. It may be worth striving to achieve them.

Noise. When I lived in Philadelphia, I learned a valuable lesson about real estate: If you must buy a house on a busy street, don't buy one within thirty yards of a traffic light. Every ninety-five seconds I had to listen to forty-two seconds of several people's musical selections followed by twelve seconds of engines revving, with an impatient honk thrown in once every fifteen cycles. I never got used to it, and when my wife and I were looking for a house in Charlottesville, I told our agent that if a Victorian mansion were being given away on a busy street, I would not take it. Research shows that people who must adapt to new and chronic sources of noise (such as when a new highway is built) never fully adapt, and even studies that find some adaptation still find evidence of impairment on cognitive tasks. Noise, especially noise that is variable or intermittent, interferes with concentration and increases stress.[35] It's worth striving to remove sources of noise in your life.

Commuting. Many people choose to move farther away from their jobs in search of a larger house. But although people quickly adapt to having more space,[36] they don't fully adapt to the longer commute, particularly if it involves driving in heavy traffic.[37] Even after years of commuting, those whose commutes are traffic-filled still arrive at work with higher levels of stress hormones. (Driving under ideal conditions is, however, often enjoyable and relaxing.)[38] It's worth striving to improve your commute.

Lack of control. One of the active ingredients of noise and traffic, the aspect that helps them get under your skin, is that you can't control them. In one classic study, David Glass and Jerome Singer exposed people to loud bursts of random noise. Subjects in one group were told they could termi-

a sense of control

nate the noise by pressing a button, but they were asked not to press the button unless it was absolutely necessary. None of these subjects pressed the button, yet the belief that they had some form of control made the noise less distressing to them. In the second part of the experiment, the subjects who thought they had control were more persistent when working on difficult puzzles, but the subjects who had experienced noise without control gave up more easily.[39]

In another famous study, Ellen Langer and Judith Rodin gave benefits to residents on two floors of a nursing home—for example, plants in their rooms, and a movie screening one night a week. But on one floor, these benefits came with a sense of control: The residents were allowed to choose which plants they wanted, and they were responsible for watering them. They were allowed to choose as a group which night would be movie night. On the other floor, the same benefits were simply doled out: The nurses chose the plants and watered them; the nurses decided which night was movie night. This small manipulation had big effects: On the floor with increased control, residents were happier, more active, and more alert (as rated by the nurses, not just by the residents), and these benefits were still visible eighteen months later. Most amazingly, at the eighteen-month follow-up, residents of the floor given control had better health and half as many deaths (15 percent versus 30 percent).[40] In a review paper that Rodin and I wrote, we concluded that changing an institution's environment to increase the sense of control among its workers, students, patients, or other users was one of the most effective possible ways to increase their sense of engagement, energy, and happiness.[41]

Shame. Overall, attractive people are not happier than unattractive ones. Yet, surprisingly, some improvements in a person's appearance do lead to lasting increases in happiness.[42] People who undergo plastic surgery report (on average) high levels of satisfaction with the process, and they even report increases in the quality of their lives and decreases in psychiatric symptoms (such as depression and anxiety) in the years after the operation. The biggest gains were reported for breast surgery, both enlargement and reduction. I think the way to understand the long-lasting effects of such seemingly shallow changes is to think about the power of shame in everyday life.

Young women whose breasts are much larger or smaller than their ideal often report feeling self-consciousness every day about their bodies. Many adjust their posture or their wardrobe in an attempt to hide what they see as a personal deficiency. Being freed from such a daily burden may lead to a lasting increase in self-confidence and well-being.

Relationships. The condition that is usually said[43] to trump all others in importance is the strength and number of a person's relationships. Good relationships make people happy, and happy people enjoy more and better relationships than unhappy people.[44] This effect is so important and interesting that it gets its own chapter—the next one. For now, I'll just mention that conflicts in relationships—having an annoying office mate or roommate, or having chronic conflict with your spouse—is one of the surest ways to reduce your happiness. You never adapt to interpersonal conflict;[45] it damages every day, even days when you don't see the other person but ruminate about the conflict nonetheless.

There are many other ways in which you can increase your happiness by getting the conditions of your life right, particularly in relationships, work, and the degree of control you have over stressors. So in the happiness formula, C is real and some externals matter. Some things are worth striving for, and positive psychology can help identify them. Of course, Buddha would adapt fully to noise, traffic, lack of control and bodily deficiencies, but it has always been difficult, even in ancient India, for real people to become like Buddha. In the modern Western world, it is even harder to follow Buddha's path of nondoing and nonstriving. Some of our poets and writers in fact urge us to forswear that path and embrace action wholeheartedly: "It is vain to say that human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquility: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it." (CHARLOTTE BRONTË, 1847)[46]

FINDING FLOW

Not all action, however, will work. Chasing after wealth and prestige, for example, will usually backfire. People who report the greatest interest in

attaining money, fame, or beauty are consistently found to be less happy, and even less healthy, than those who pursue less materialistic goals.[47] So what is the right kind of activity? What is V in the happiness formula?

The tool that helped psychologists answer that question is the "experience sampling method," invented by Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi (pronounced "cheeks sent me high"), the Hungarian-born cofounder of positive psychology. In Csikszentmihalyi's studies,[48] people carry with them a pager that beeps several times a day. At each beep, the subject pulls out a small notebook and records what she is doing at that moment, and how much she is enjoying it. Through this "beeping" of thousands of people tens of thousands of times, Csikszentmihalyi found out what people really enjoy doing, not just what they *remember* having enjoyed. He discovered that there are two different kinds of enjoyment. One is physical or bodily pleasure. At meal times, people report the highest levels of happiness, on average. People really enjoy eating, especially in the company of others, and they hate to be interrupted by telephone calls (and perhaps Csikszentmihalyi's beeps) during meals, or (worst of all) during sex. But you can't enjoy physical pleasure all day long. By their very nature, food and sex satiate. To continue eating or having sex beyond a certain level of satisfaction can lead to disgust.[49]

Csikszentmihalyi's big discovery is that there is a state many people value even more than chocolate after sex. It is the state of total immersion in a task that is challenging yet closely matched to one's abilities. It is what people sometimes call "being in the zone." Csikszentmihalyi called it "flow" because it often feels like effortless movement: Flow happens, and you go with it. Flow often occurs during physical movement—skiing, driving fast on a curvy country road, or playing team sports. Flow is aided by music or by the action of other people, both of which provide a temporal structure for one's own behavior (for example, singing in a choir, dancing, or just having an intense conversation with a friend). And flow can happen during solitary creative activities, such as painting, writing, or photography. The keys to flow: There's a clear challenge that fully engages your attention; you have the skills to meet the challenge; and you get immediate feedback about how you are doing at each step (the progress principle). You get flash after flash of positive feeling with each turn negotiated, each high note correctly sung, or each brushstroke that falls into the right place. In the flow

experience, elephant and rider are in perfect harmony. The elephant (automatic processes) is doing most of the work, running smoothly through the forest, while the rider (conscious thought) is completely absorbed in looking out for problems and opportunities, helping wherever he can.

Drawing on Csikszentmihalyi's work, Seligman proposes a fundamental distinction between pleasures and gratifications. Pleasures are "delights that have clear sensory and strong emotional components,"[50] such as may be derived from food, sex, backrubs, and cool breezes. Gratifications are activities that engage you fully, draw on your strengths, and allow you to lose self-consciousness. Gratifications can lead to flow. Seligman proposes that V (voluntary activities) is largely a matter of arranging your day and your environment to increase both pleasures and gratifications. Pleasures must be spaced to maintain their potency. Eating a quart of ice cream in an afternoon or listening to a new CD ten times in a row are good ways to overdose and deaden yourself to future pleasure. Here's where the rider has an important role to play: Because the elephant has a tendency to overindulge, the rider needs to encourage it to get up and move on to another activity.

Pleasures should be both savored and varied. The French know how to do this: They eat many fatty foods, yet they end up thinner and healthier than Americans, and they derive a great deal more pleasure from their food by eating slowly and paying more attention to the food as they eat it.[51] Because they savor, they ultimately eat less. Americans, in contrast, shovel enormous servings of high-fat and high-carbohydrate food into their mouths while doing other things. The French also vary their pleasure by serving many small courses; Americans are seduced by restaurants that serve large portions. Variety is the spice of life because it is the natural enemy of adaptation. Super-sizing portions, on the other hand, maximizes adaptation. Epicurus, one of the few ancient philosophers to embrace sensual pleasure, endorsed the French way when he said that the wise man "chooses not the greatest quantity of food but the most tasty."[52]

One reason for the widespread philosophical wariness of sensual pleasure is that it gives no lasting benefit. Pleasure feels good in the moment, but sensual memories fade quickly, and the person is no wiser or stronger

afterwards. Even worse, pleasure beckons people back for more, away from activities that might be better for them in the long run. But gratifications are different. Gratifications ask more of us; they challenge us and make us extend ourselves. Gratifications often come from accomplishing something, learning something, or improving something. When we enter a state of flow, hard work becomes effortless. We *want* to keep exerting ourselves, honing our skills, using our strengths. Seligman suggests that the key to finding your own gratifications is to know your own strengths.[53] One of the big accomplishments of positive psychology has been the development of a catalog of strengths. You can find out your strengths by taking an online test at www.authentichappiness.org.

Recently I asked the 350 students in my introductory psychology class to take the strengths test and then, a week later, to engage in four activities over a few days. One of the activities was to indulge the senses, as by taking a break for ice cream in the middle of the afternoon, and then savoring the ice cream. This activity was the most enjoyable at the time; but, like all pleasures, it faded quickly. The other three activities were potential gratifications: Attend a lecture or class that you don't normally go to; perform an act of kindness for a friend who could use some cheering up; and write down the reasons you are grateful to someone and later call or visit that person to express your gratitude. The least enjoyable of the four activities was going to a lecture—except for those whose strengths included curiosity and love of learning. They got a lot more out of it. The big finding was that people experienced longer-lasting improvements in mood from the kindness and gratitude activities than from those in which they indulged themselves. Even though people were most nervous about doing the kindness and gratitude activities, which required them to violate social norms and risk embarrassment, once they actually did the activities they felt better for the rest of the day. Many students even said their good feelings continued on into the next day—which nobody said about eating ice cream. Furthermore, these benefits were most pronounced for those whose strengths included kindness and gratitude.

So V (voluntary activity) is real, and it's not just about detachment. You can increase your happiness if you use your strengths, particularly in the

service of strengthening connections—helping friends, expressing gratitude to benefactors. Performing a random act of kindness every day could get tedious, but if you know your strengths and draw up a list of five activities that engage them, you can surely add at least one gratification to every day. Studies that have assigned people to perform a random act of kindness every week, or to count their blessings regularly for several weeks, find small but sustained increases in happiness.[54] So take the initiative! Choose your own gratifying activities, do them regularly (but not to the point of tedium), and raise your overall level of happiness.

MISGUIDED PURSUITS

An axiom of economics is that people pursue their interests more or less rationally, and that's what makes markets work—Adam Smith's "invisible hand" of self-interest. But in the 1980s, a few economists began studying psychology and messing up the prevailing models. Leading the way was the Cornell economist Robert Frank, whose 1987 book *Passions Within Reason* analyzed some of the things people do that just don't fit into economic models of pure self-interest—such as tipping in restaurants when far from home, seeking costly revenge, and staying loyal to friends and spouses when better opportunities come along. Frank argued that these behaviors make sense only as products of moral emotions (such as love, shame, vengeance, or guilt), and these moral emotions make sense only as products of evolution. Evolution seems to have made us "strategically irrational" at times for our own good; for example, a person who gets angry when cheated, and who will pursue vengeance regardless of the cost, earns a reputation that discourages would-be cheaters. A person who pursued vengeance only when the benefits outweighed the costs could be cheated with impunity in many situations.

In his more recent book, *Luxury Fever*,[55] Frank used the same approach to understand another kind of irrationality: the vigor with which people pursue many goals that work against their own happiness. Frank begins with the question of why, as nations rise in wealth, their citizens become no happier, and he considers the possibility that once basic needs are met,