



## SELF-COACHING GUIDE #6: HAPPINESS

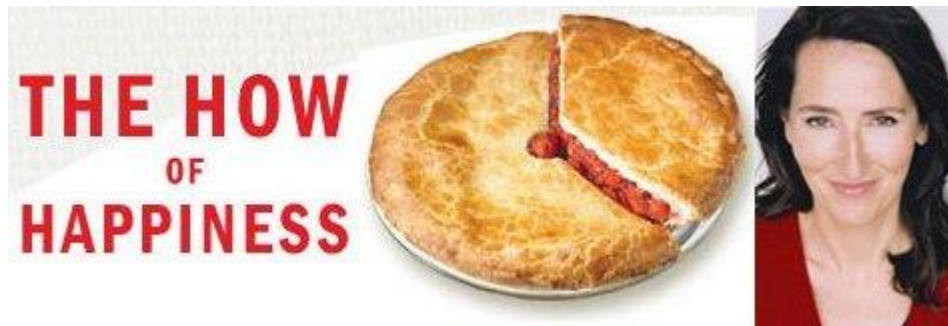
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## 1. Sonja Lyubomirsky and The How of Happiness



*What makes us happy? How can we become happier? And is happiness sustainable?* These are the fundamental questions [Sonja Lyubomirsky](#) addresses in [The How of Happiness](#), subtitled "A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want."

Lyubomirsky, a professor of psychology at UC Riverside who's devoted her career as a research scientist to studying happiness, believes that our individual level of happiness springs from three primary sources:

### A) Our Genetic Set Point

Fifty percent of our happiness derives from a genetically determined "set point," Lyubomirsky writes:

The set point for happiness is similar to the set point for weight. Some people are blessed with skinny dispositions: Even when they're not trying, they easily maintain their weight. By contrast, others have to work extraordinarily hard to keep their weight at a desirable level, and the moment they slack off even a bit, the pounds creep back on.

So those of us with low happiness set points will have to work harder to achieve and maintain happiness, while those of us with high set points will find it easier to be happy under similar conditions.

### B) Our Life Circumstances

"Life circumstances" determine a scant 10% of our happiness, Lyubomirsky continues:

[O]nly about 10 percent of the variance in our happiness levels is explained by differences in life circumstances or situations--that is, whether we are rich or poor, healthy or unhealthy, beautiful or plain, married or divorced, etc. If with a magic wand we could put [a group of people] into the same set of circumstances (same house, same spouse, same place of birth, same face, same aches and pains), the differences in their happiness levels would be reduced by a measly 10 percent.

Lyubomirsky notes that this finding runs contrary to many of our efforts to obtain happiness:

One of the great ironies of our quest to become happier is that so many of us focus on changing the circumstances of our lives in the misguided hope that those changes will deliver happiness... An impressive body of research now shows that trying to be happy by changing our life situations ultimately will not work.

Why do life changes account for so little? Because of a very powerful force that psychologists call hedonic adaptation...

Human beings are remarkably adept at becoming rapidly accustomed to sensory or physiologic changes. When you walk in from the bitter cold, the warmth of the crackling fire feels heavenly at first, but you quickly get used to it and may even become overheated... This experience is labeled physiological or sensory adaptation. The same phenomenon, however, occurs with hedonic shifts--that is, relocation, marriages, job changes--that make you happier for a time, but only a short time...

Human beings adapt to favorable changes in wealth, housing, and possessions, to being beautiful or being surrounded by beauty, to good health, and even to marriage...

Although we may achieve temporary boosts in well-being by moving to new parts of the country, securing raises, or changing our appearances, such boosts are unlikely to be long-lasting. The primary reason...is that people readily and rapidly adapt to positive circumstantial changes.

The implication is that almost all efforts to increase and maintain happiness through changes in life circumstances are doomed to fail. Even the most positive changes will eventually be taken for granted as we adapt to them, and their long-term impact on our happiness will be minimal.

### **C) Intentional Activities**

The remaining 40% of our happiness is determined by our behavior--intentional activities that we might call "happiness strategies." This is the core of Lyubomirsky's thesis: We can't alter our genetic set points, and changes in life circumstances don't have a lasting impact on our happiness, but we can increase and sustain our happiness through intentional activities:

If we observe genuinely happy people, we shall find that they do not just sit around being contented. They make things happen. They pursue new understandings, seek new achievements, and control their thoughts and feelings. In sum, our intentional effortful activities have a powerful effect on how happy we are, over and above the effect of our set points and the circumstances in which we find ourselves. If an unhappy person wants to

experience interest, enthusiasm, contentment, peace and joy, he or she can make it happen by learning the habits of a happy person.

The bulk of "The How of Happiness" is devoted to exploring a dozen (well, actually 14\*) activities described by Lyubomirsky as "evidence-based happiness-increasing strategies whose practice is supported by scientific research." These include:

1. Expressing Gratitude
2. Cultivating Optimism
3. Avoiding Overthinking and Social Comparison
4. Practicing Acts of Kindness
5. Nurturing Social Relationships
6. Developing Strategies for Coping
7. Learning to Forgive
8. Increasing Flow Experiences
9. Savoring Life's Joys
10. Committing to Your Goals
11. Practicing Religion and Spirituality
12. Taking Care of Your Body:
  - Meditation
  - Physical Activity
  - Acting Like a Happy Person

(\* I'm not sure why Lyubomirsky treats the final three "Taking Care of Your Body" activities as a single strategy. There's clearly a relationship among them, but they're also sufficiently distinct to merit separate consideration. Perhaps 12 just feels better than 14.)

Lyubomirsky describes precisely what these somewhat generic terms mean in this context, provides a rationale for why they work (typically drawing upon examples from her research), and explores what they might look like in practice. She doesn't say that these are the *only* meaningful happiness strategies, but separately they meet her standard for being "evidenced-based," and together they constitute a list sufficiently broad "so that every individual could find a set right for him or her."

And Lyubomirsky believes it's essential to choose happiness strategies that best address the sources of our unhappiness, that take greatest advantage of our strengths, talents and goals, and that can be adapted most readily to our needs and lifestyle. She offers a [Person-Activity Fit Diagnostic](#) and encourages readers to focus on the four strategies with the highest "fit scores."

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## So What About MY Happiness?

Over the past year I've felt increasingly happy, and at the moment I believe I'm happier than I've ever been. Some of this has to do with my life circumstances--I've been blessed with a rich and rewarding marriage, I love my work, and I live in one of the most beautiful cities in the world. But according to Lyubomirsky, all this has far less of an impact on my happiness than my daily behavior, the intentional activities that I pursue on a regular basis.

Although I began reading "The How of Happiness" because of a project at work, it's been a very personal experience as well. At the beginning of 2008 I realized that I wasn't as happy as I wanted to be, and I decided to do something about it. I hadn't yet come across Lyubomirsky's research about the importance of intentional activities, but it seemed self-evident to me that I needed to **do** more things that made me happier in order to **be** happier, and that's just what I experienced over the course of the year.

In December I became involved with a team that was working on a new class at Stanford, and each member of the team had to read several books as part of our background research. As I reviewed the list of possible texts, I was immediately drawn to "The How of Happiness," and while reading it I was struck by the parallels between the conclusions she had drawn from her academic research and my own experiences. And although I've always had an intuitive sense about the value of intentional activity, now I'm trying to apply Lyubomirsky's findings on "happiness strategies" to my own life even more deliberately.

According to Lyubomirsky's "Person-Activity Fit Diagnostic," the four best happiness strategies for me, in order, are: **Increasing Flow Experiences** and **Taking Care of Your Body** (both tied for first), **Practicing Acts of Kindness** and **Expressing Gratitude**.

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## Increasing Flow Experiences

First, what do we mean by "flow experiences"? The concept of "flow" was initially developed by [Mihaly Csíkszentmihályi](#) (pronounced "*cheek-SENT-me-high*"), currently Distinguished Professor of Psychology at Claremont Graduate University. In [Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience](#), Csíkszentmihályi describes flow as:

[A] sense that one's skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand, in a goal-directed, rule-bound action system that provides clear clues as to how well one is performing. Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant, or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of time appears distorted. An activity that produces such experiences is so gratifying that people are willing to do it for its own sake, with little concern for what they will get out of it, even when it is difficult, or dangerous.

My good friend Doug Edwards, currently working on a dissertation in philosophy that touches on flow, describes the concept this way:

[A] person 'in flow' is absorbed in what he is doing. All of his attention is concentrated on his activity, and his activity proceeds in a seamless, spontaneous, adept way, creating a sense of fluidity in one's action.

A key aspect of flow, according to Csíkszentmihályi, is its impact on the self:

In our studies, we found that every flow activity...had this in common: It provided a sense of discovery, a creative feeling of transporting the person into a new reality. It pushed the person to higher levels of performance, and led to previously undreamed-of states of consciousness. In short, it transformed the self by making it more complex.

The mechanism underlying this process of transformation is our desire to avoid the unpleasant states of anxiety and boredom. In a flow experience, our skills are "adequate to cope with the challenges at hand," creating a sense of balance. But if our skills increase relative to the challenges being posed, the balance tips, and we eventually become bored. If the challenges ramp up while our skills remain static, the balance tips in the opposite direction, and we feel anxious. To avoid anxiety and boredom, then, we must increase our skills (in the first case) or tackle bigger challenges (in the second case)--and in both cases, we're transformed.

Lyubomirsky, who cites Csíkszentmihályi as an important influence, believes that experiencing flow offers several specific benefits:

Why is flow good for you? The first reason is obvious: because it is inherently pleasurable and fulfilling, and the enjoyment you obtain is generally of the type that is lasting and reinforcing... Second, because flow states are intrinsically rewarding, we naturally want to repeat them...[but]... to maintain flow, we continually have to test ourselves in ever more challenging activities... We have to stretch our skills or find novel opportunities to use them. This is wonderful, because it means that we are constantly striving, growing, learning and becoming more competent, expert, and complex.

Lyubomirsky concludes:

The experience of flow leads us to be involved in life (rather than be alienated from it), to enjoy activities (rather than to find them dreary), to have a sense of control (rather than helplessness), and to feel a strong sense of self (rather than unworthiness). All these factors imbue life with meaning and lend it a richness and intensity. And happiness.

OK, now that I understand the concept and its likely positive impact on my happiness, how do I actually *experience* flow? Lyubomirsky offers several suggestions: Control your attention in order to be "fully engaged and involved" in a given activity, adopt values of openness to new experiences and lifelong learning, heighten awareness of flow experiences and strive to repeat them, and seek out challenges in your recreation and your work.

These all sound potentially rewarding, but they also seem incomplete. My sense is that flow results not only from 1) my intentional activities and attitude, but also 2) my ability to "drop into" a flow state in a given moment and 3) specific aspects of the external environment which make it more (or less) conducive to flow experiences. Lyubomirsky's suggestions address the first element but neglect the other two, and I think it's important to bear them in mind as well.

The most intense flow experience I ever had came on a 40-mile stretch of Utah's Route 14, headed west from Long Valley Junction to Cedar City.



I was in the middle of a long motorcycle trip in the summer of 1995 with my friend Doug Edwards, mentioned

above. Shortly before we reached Long Valley Junction--which was just an empty highway intersection in the middle of a desert valley--we'd been passed by a group of riders on Harleys. But soon we saw the Harleys headed back toward us--they had apparently missed the turnoff for Route 14 and had doubled back. We reached the intersection and turned west just before they did. The road ahead was a winding, twisty track through the mountains, and I was suddenly seized by an intense desire to ride fast, outrun the Harleys and beat them to Cedar City. And that's just what we did. For the next 40 miles--I have no idea how much time it took--I was totally absorbed in the process of riding fast. I felt such a sense of "oneness" with the motorcycle, even with the road, that I didn't feel like a conscious person on a vehicle but like an organic component of an integrated system. Rather than thinking and making decisions, I was simply acting, reacting, being. And as we emerged from the mountains, drifting down toward Cedar City on a long straightway, I popped back into consciousness and thought, "What the hell just happened?"

In retrospect, I see this as a classic flow experience, and I believe it was so intense not only because of my intentional activity and attitude (as per Lyubomirsky's suggestions), but also because I was able to drop into a flow state more readily than usual (because my riding skills had been heightened over the course of the long journey, and the experience of riding fast had become second nature) and because the external environment (the challenging road, the risk of crashing, the "pursuing" Harleys) was so highly conducive to flow. In Csíkszentmihályi's words, I was fully immersed in a "goal-directed, rule-bound action system that provides clear clues as to how well one is performing."



But I don't find myself riding a motorcycle through the mountains all that often--in fact, I've more or less quit riding (although my bike is still in the back of my garage.) So how do I experience flow more frequently? These days I'm finding it not at high speeds but while hanging nearly motionless a few feet above the ground at the [Stanford Climbing Wall](#). I'm not a skilled rock climber, but that's fine--it's sufficiently challenging for me just trying to make it around the perimeter of the wall on the easy "traverse" route (the climbing equivalent of a Bunny Slope at a ski resort.)

I started climbing last summer, but found it too physically taxing to go regularly. So I spent the rest of the year getting into better shape--more on that below--and just began climbing again recently. I still can't do it too often--my muscles can take the strain, but my joints still ache afterwards--but that's fine. I'm not interested in becoming an expert climber--I just want to be able to stop by once or twice a week, boulder around the wall, and lose myself for 30 or 45 minutes.

I think climbing is so conducive to flow because, once again, it's a "goal-directed, rule-bound action system that provides clear clues as to how well one is performing." The stakes are pretty low in this case--success means advancing a few more holds along a given route, while failure means falling a few feet onto a cushioned floor. But what matters is that my (novice) skills are appropriately balanced with the (modest) challenges posed by the wall's "traverse" route. I suppose I'll get better over time, but I'm not in any hurry. And--to the point of this essay--I absolutely feel happier after climbing.

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## Taking Care of Your Body

As noted above, I don't know why Lyubomirsky treats three related-but-different activities--*Meditation*, *Physical Activity* and *Acting Like a Happy Person*--as a single strategy. The fact that "Taking Care of Your Body" is one of my best-fit

happiness strategies poses a dilemma: Must I pursue all three elements of the strategy to reap its benefits, or can I pick and choose from among them?

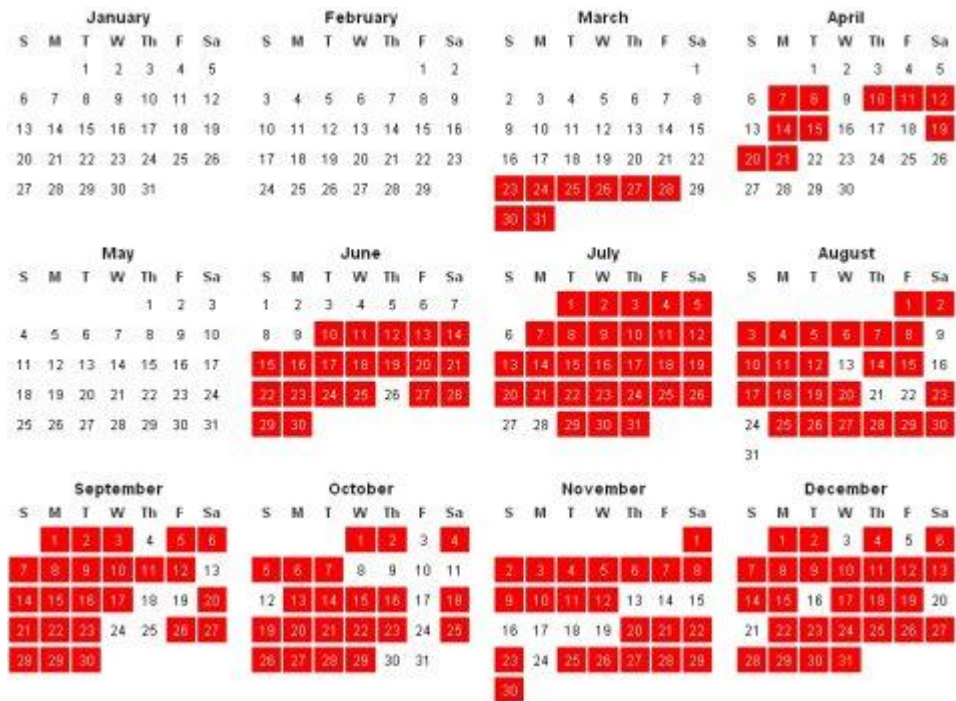
**Meditation:** Lyubomirsky cites substantial research that demonstrates the benefits of meditation and its "positive effects on a person's happiness and positive emotions, on physiology, on stress, cognitive abilities, and physical health..." And she provides a simple, straightforward guide to the process--"How to Meditate in Fewer Than Three Hundred Words." But sitting still does not come easily to me, and meditation has always felt like an unpleasant chore rather than an opportunity for personal growth. I used to practice a yoga routine that ended with a period of meditation, and although I occasionally experience moments of reflective peace, I usually found myself feeling like a kid in detention hall, waiting until the clock set me free.

I fully appreciate the importance of the elements of meditation articulated by Lyubomirsky: *Be nonjudgmental, be nonstriving, be patient, be trusting, be open, and let go.* I recognize many ways in which my ability to embody these values has enhanced my life--and many ways in which my failure to do so continues to hold me back. Finally, I'm well aware that my resistance to the practice only means that I have that much more to gain from it. But I still can't bring myself to actually do it on a regular basis. Let's see how I'm doing with the other elements.

**Physical Activity:** In contrast to my difficulties sitting still, I have no problem getting up and moving around. The graphic at right, from my [Don't Break the Chain](#) account, shows the days I exercised last year marked in red. It's not entirely accurate, because I wasn't using it in

January or February, but once I started keeping track of my workouts, I exercised nearly 2 out of every 3 days (and it would have been closer to 3 out of every 4 if I hadn't let work get the best of me in May.)

I was an active kid and an athlete in high school, but my relatively high level of fitness created a false sense of security in adulthood. I found that I could be inactive for a few months and then suddenly return to regular activity without suffering serious consequences--but this all changed last year. I loved my work at Stanford, but I had allowed it to consume me and had stopped exercising



entirely throughout all of 2007. I had gained weight and was probably in the worst shape of my life. I decided to get active again at the beginning of 2008, but I went too fast and hurt my knee on a long, hard run. My 40-year-old body wasn't cooperating like it had in the past, and if I was going to be active at all, I needed to let my knee heal, ease into a sustainable routine, and maintain it assiduously. I've been able to do that successfully over the last year, and the keys have been:

**1) Variety:** I almost never do the same thing 2 days in a row.

**2) Novelty:** I've worked several brand-new activities into my routine, such as rock-climbing (see above) and swimming. I also try to hike someplace entirely new in the Bay Area each month. (Many thanks to [Jane Huber](#).)

**3) Consistency:** It was shortly after I was able to return to regular activity that I discovered [Don't Break the Chain](#), which turned out to be a surprisingly a powerful motivator to do something, *anything*, on a given day, just to keep filling up that calendar.

**4) Humility:** I'm old--or at least no longer young. And that means that I simply can't do all the things I used to, and I need to listen to my body when it says "No." Sometimes that means no lifting or climbing or swimming when my shoulders hurt, and sometimes it means no running when my knees hurt, and sometimes it just means take the whole damn day off and have a drink.

I've clearly had no problem sticking with this strategy, and it most definitely has had a positive impact on my happiness, but why? As with meditation, Lyubomirsky cites extensive research that documents the benefits of physical activity:

Psychologists believe that several explanations underlie the well-being rewards of exercise. First is the self-esteem/mastery explanation... Taking up a sport or fitness regime makes you feel in control of your body and your health. Seeing yourself get better at something...provides a terrific sense of agency and self-worth. Second is the possibility that physical activity offers potential for flow as well as a positive distraction that turns away worries and ruminations. It essentially serves as a time-out from your stressful day, with positive spillover for hours afterward... Third, physical activity, when performed along with others, can provide opportunities for social contact, thus potentially bolstering social support and reinforcing friendships.

I've certainly benefited from the first two effects of physical activity, and the correlation with flow experiences helps to explain the particular appeal of something like climbing. I tend to exercise alone, so I haven't found it a source of social contact, but given the very people-intensive nature of my work and the fact that "Nurturing Relationships" wasn't identified by Lyubomirsky's diagnostic as a key strategy for me, that hasn't posed a problem.

Lyubomirsky notes that "exercise may well be the most effective instant happiness booster of all activities," and I believe that being physically active has had the largest

impact on my happiness over the past year of any of my intentional "happiness strategies."

***Acting Like A Happy Person:*** Lyubomirsky writes:

Remarkably, pretending that you're happy--smiling, engaged, mimicking energy and enthusiasm--not only can earn you some of the benefits of happiness (returned smiles, strengthened friendships, successes at work and school) but can actually *make* you happier. In poet Marge Piercy's words, "Live as if you liked yourself, and it may happen."

(This quote reminds me of St. Ignatius Loyola: "*Perform the acts of faith, and faith will come.*" A paraphrase of his [Spiritual Exercises](#), which seems to find its way into my writing on a [regular basis](#).)

Why does this work? How can acting happy *make* you happy? Lyubomirsky's explanation focuses primarily on two feedback loops, one internal and one external. Internally, our brains interpret the physical manifestations of happiness--our smile, our posture, our tone of voice--as the emotion itself, and we actually experience the emotion to a greater extent. Externally, our manifestations of happiness are typically mirrored by others, creating a cycle of positive emotions.

Lyubomirsky is careful to note that the impact of these factors is modest, but it's real nonetheless: "[S]miling and laughter--even the insincere 'I don't want to pose for this photo' smile or 'This joke's not that funny' chuckle--gives rise to a mild feeling of well-being."

But despite its modest impact, this strategy seems to me the very essence of the concept that underlies Lyubomirsky's thesis: We don't always **act** a certain way because we **feel** a certain way; at times (and perhaps most of the time), we **feel** a certain way because we're **acting** a certain way.

In applying this strategy, I think there are two important points to keep in mind: First, "acting," by definition, implies a certain degree of conscious effort that can come dangerously close to inauthenticity. How close is too close? At what point do you stop increasing your happiness and start looking like a damn fool? Clearly, there's no bright, shining line distinguishing helpful, intentional behavior from counterproductive naiveté.

And second, "acting happy" doesn't mean "pretending pain and sadness don't exist," in yourself or in others. Candide is not a role model, and we need to make room for the healthy acknowledgment and expression of the pain and sadness we experience.

But despite--or because of--these cautionary notes, I have found it helpful to strive to express and convey my happiness more vividly.

## Practicing Acts of Kindness

According to Lyubomirsky's [diagnostic](#), this is the third-best "happiness strategy" for me. She writes in "The How of Happiness":

From a very early age we are inculcated with the idea that kindness and compassion are important virtues. Of course we are taught to develop and apply these virtues for their own sakes, because by definition, it is the right, good, and ethical thing to do. What scientific research has recently contributed to this age-long principle is evidence that practicing acts of kindness is not only good for the recipient but also good for the doer... [B]eing generous and willing to share makes people happy.

The reasons for this, according to Lyubomirsky, are that performing acts of kindness leads us to see others in a better light, creates a stronger sense of community, diminishes negative feelings of guilt or distress, encourages a sense of appreciation for your own circumstances, causes you to view yourself as "an altruistic and compassionate person," and, perhaps most importantly, "jump-start[s] a cascade of positive social consequences. Helping others leads people to like you, to appreciate you, to offer gratitude."

All this said, Lyubomirsky cautions that kindness must be expressed in some specific ways in order to increase your happiness: "If you do too little, you won't obtain much benefit in happiness. If you do too much, you may end up feeling overburdened, angry or fatigued." She recommends choosing one day a week and on that day "commit one new and special large act of kindness or, alternatively, three to five little ones. I say 'new and special' because...the kindness strategy calls for something extra, something that pulls you out of your routine."

I think of myself as a kind person (who doesn't?), but I also recognize that I tend to express kindness in ways that come easily to me. I feel compassion and empathy and convey encouragement and support readily--that's one reason why I believe I'm an effective coach. But expressing these feelings is, in a sense, part of my "routine." And although my work as a coach is deeply rewarding and allows me to feel a sense of purpose and fulfillment, I suspect that I'll need to find other "new and special" ways of expressing kindness in order for this strategy to have an impact on my happiness.

The success I've already experienced with the strategies noted above encourages me to take this one seriously as well, but I'm not entirely sure what "new and special" acts of kindness will look like in practice. Volunteering? Donations to a worthy cause? (Perhaps the [Random Acts of Kindness Foundation](#) has some suggestions.)

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## Expressing Gratitude

Finally, this is the fourth strategy recommended for me by Lyubomirsky's diagnostic. In "The How of Happiness," she quotes [Robert Emmons'](#) definition of "gratitude":

[A] felt sense of wonder, thankfulness, and appreciation for life.

Lyubomirsky cites extensive research showing a causal link between expressions of gratitude and a sense of well-being, and she notes 8 specific ways in which gratitude increases happiness: Gratitude "promotes the savoring of positive life experiences," "bolsters self-worth and self-esteem," helps us cope with stress more effectively, fosters attitudes of helpfulness and appreciation, "build[s] social bonds," minimizes social comparison, diminishes negative emotions, and, most importantly, "helps us thwart hedonic adaptation" [which allows us to extract greater and longer-lasting feelings of well-being from the positive aspects of our life circumstances].

But just like acts of kindness, expressions of gratitude must be conducted in specific ways to have the greatest impact on our happiness. Lyubomirsky notes that gratitude can be expressed in many forms, but she stresses two key aspects of the practice that maximize happiness: First, "keep the gratitude strategy fresh by *varying* it and not overpracticing it." For example, her research suggests that, for the average person, writing in a "gratitude journal" once a week (rather than daily) is likely to yield the most significant results.

And second, expressing gratitude directly to another person--"by phone, letter, or face-to-face"--is particularly effective--so much so that Lyubomirsky's own research showed that "simply writing a gratitude letter and not sending...it was enough to produce substantial boosts in happiness."

Unlike "new and special" acts of kindness, expressing gratitude is a strategy that comes naturally to me, presumably because I've developed such a deep sense of gratitude in recent years. In 2007, my wife and I lost several family members. Counting colleagues who also lost loved ones and friends, we've been connected to nearly a dozen deaths since that time. In some cases these deaths were expected and even welcome releases from suffering, but most of them were surprising, even shocking. More than anything else, this association with death and the palpable feeling of my own mortality has fostered a deep sense of appreciation for my continued existence.

And I've found myself expressing that gratitude both internally and to others on a regular basis. I don't keep a formal "gratitude journal," but at least every few days I'm compelled to stop and reflect deeply on how thankful I am for something--for my health, my marriage, a beautiful view, even just the bracing first sip of a well-made Martini. But I've also made it a habit to express my thankfulness to others. For example, at the end of the year I wrote thank-you letters to several dozen colleagues at Stanford, expressing my appreciation for their contributions. It was a time-consuming effort, but it felt great, and many of them told me how good my letter made them feel in return.

Second only to physical activity, expressing gratitude has had a tremendous impact on my happiness, and it's been even easier to implement.

## In Conclusion

I've discussed Lyubomirsky's overarching thesis that 40% of our happiness is derived from intentional activities, and I've explored in detail the 4 happiness strategies recommended for me by her [diagnostic](#). I have yet to implement all of them, but I've been practicing several of them for the past year, long before encountering "The How of Happiness," and I'm convinced that Lyubomirsky is right: We can identify activities that will make us happier on a sustainable basis.

If the 4 strategies I've discussed above don't resonate with you, I encourage you to [buy the book](#) and take the diagnostic yourself to determine if any of the other 8 strategies might be a better fit.

Three final points: First, Lyubomirsky is quick to recognize the distinction between unhappiness and clinical depression, and she notes in the book's postscript that "although a program to become happier can positively be attempted by those who are depressed, relief from depression is not what this book promises." The recognition that our intentional activities can have a substantial impact on our happiness in no way implies that those who suffer from depression can simply *will* themselves to well-being and mental health.

Second, although I believe Lyubomirsky's conclusions are generally valid, I don't accept every point she makes in the book. For example, one of the strategies she recommends to help people minimize counterproductive ruminating is the "Stop!" technique, "in which you think, say or even shout to yourself, 'Stop!' or 'No!' when you find yourself resuming overthinking." This is actually **not** recommended by experts in treating anxiety disorders, such as Robert Leahy, author of [The Worry Cure](#), and in some cases this technique can make things worse. Although Lyubomirsky's work as a research scientist allows her to bring a great deal of useful data to bear on "The How of Happiness," there were times when I wanted to hear from a practitioner, such as a clinical psychologist or an executive coach, to get a different perspective.

And third, the work done by Lyubomirsky and her colleagues in the field of "happiness studies" (which we might view as an offshoot of [positive psychology](#)) is rooted in the idea that happiness can be objectively measured--and yet the primary instrument used to assess happiness is known as the [Subjective Happiness Scale](#). I don't believe this invalidates Lyubomirsky's conclusions, but it raises questions for me about the nature of happiness itself, the ways in which our personal experiences of happiness differ, and the extent to which happiness really can be measured. Philosophical questions like that are beyond the scope of this essay, but they're worth thinking about.

Many thanks to Sonja Lyubomirsky for a valuable work of scholarship that I believe deserves a wide audience and makes a lasting contribution to both science and society.

**Original Post:** <http://www.edbatista.com/2009/02/happiness.html>

## 2. Sage Cohen and Peter Drucker on Rapture and Excellence

Where do you focus your energy and attention? Do you struggle to overcome obstacles and tackle problems, or do you ignore them instead, go with what's working, and capitalize on that success?

My friend Sage Cohen recently wrote about training herself to take the latter approach, and it reminded me of one of my favorite pieces of wisdom from Peter Drucker.



First, from Sage's [The Mind Whisperer](#):

In the past, my pattern was to find the one or two things that weren't working in my life and focus obsessively on fixing them. This was a reasonably effective strategy for a time, because I'm a pretty good fixer. But then, thanks to [input from friends], I have stumbled upon a far more revolutionary approach, which is to not engage at all with what's not working; instead, live in rapture with what is working. And in case there's anyone out there who's not yet a believer, I'm here to report from the other side that rapture is a far more enjoyable experience than the have-not frame of mind. I don't know how or why this works, but I have lived through enough repetitions now to know that the not-working stuff simply unwrinkles itself in the background when I refuse to feed it with my upset.

And from Drucker's [Managing Oneself](#):

[W]aste as little effort as possible on improving areas of low competence. Concentration should be on areas of high competence and high skill. It takes far more energy and work to improve from incompetence to mediocrity than it takes to improve from first-rate performance to excellence. And yet most people--especially most teachers and most organizations--concentrate on making an incompetent person into a low mediocrity. The energy and resources--and time--should go instead into making a competent person into a star performer.

I'm struck by the parallel emphasis on harnessing energy and maximizing success by avoiding problems and building on strengths. I know that some obstacles must be overcome and some problems can't be ignored, but far too often we hamstring ourselves by trying "to improve from incompetence to mediocrity" when instead we could "live in rapture with what is working."

Original Post: [http://www.edbatista.com/2007/03/cohen\\_drucker.html](http://www.edbatista.com/2007/03/cohen_drucker.html)

### 3. Let Your Freak Flag Fly: David Rendall on Uniqueness

David Rendell recently published a compelling [Change This](#) essay entitled [The Freak Factor: Discovering Uniqueness by Flaunting Weakness](#):

[T]he three primary lessons of this manifesto.

1. There is nothing wrong with you. (Weaknesses are important clues to your strengths.)
2. You find success when you find the right fit. (You need to match your unique characteristics to situations that reward those qualities.)
3. Your weaknesses make you different. (They make you a freak and it's good to be a freak. )



I'm struck by the parallels between Rendell's imperatives and concepts that are at the core of three texts that are fundamental to my own perspective on personal growth and development:

1. From [Co-Active Coaching](#), by Laura Whitworth, et al:

The primary building block for all co-active coaching is this: Clients have the answers or they can find the answers. From the co-active coach's point of view, nothing is wrong or broken, and there is no need to fix the client.

2. From Peter Drucker's [On Managing Oneself](#):

[M]ost people, especially highly gifted people, do not really know where they belong until they are well past their mid-twenties. By that time, however, they should know the answers to the three questions: What are my strengths? How do I perform? and, What are my values? *And then they can and should decide where they belong. Or rather, they should be able to decide where they do not belong...* [emphasis mine]

3. From Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones' [Why Should Anyone Be Led By You?](#):

[S]howing weakness...is typically a by-product of the authentic leader's overarching goals and passions. Because they really care about the organization, they reveal themselves...

The reason for this inevitable connection between leadership and personal risk is complex. It begins with an understanding that leadership is for a purpose. There is some superordinate desired end state, which energizes the leader who

in turn gives energy to followers. Effective leaders really *care* about this goal. They care enough to reveal their authentic selves.

A common theme I hear running through all of these texts is: Know yourself; accept yourself; be yourself. And the challenge is to do just that *while also* striving to learn, grow, and be more effective. They're not mutually exclusive, but so often in the world of personal development and leadership education we focus on "overcoming deficits" or on "fixing problems," and don't pay enough attention to the importance of helping people know, accept and simply *be* themselves.

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## About Me

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### Professional

I'm an executive coach, a change management consultant, and a [Leadership Coach at Stanford's Graduate School of Business](#). I help individuals find professional fulfillment and develop their leadership and interpersonal skills; I help people work together more effectively as members of a team; and I help companies and nonprofits adapt their management practices and organizational culture to better fit their changing needs.

My work as a coach began after a 15-year career in management, during which I took two years off to earn an MBA at Stanford, and I've helped launch three new organizations. In addition to coaching and change management, I'm particularly interested in the intersection of organizational culture and social technology.

### Personal

I've lived in [San Francisco](#) since 1990; I'm married to Amy Wright, a recovering corporate attorney-turned-law school librarian; and I'm passionate about listening to [music](#) (particularly jazz, but I love punk, blues and bluegrass as well), [hiking throughout the Bay Area](#), and visiting [New Orleans](#) whenever possible.

## What I Do

[services.edbatista.com](http://services.edbatista.com)

Put simply, I help individuals find professional fulfillment; I help people work together more effectively as members of a team; and I help companies and nonprofits adapt their management practices and organizational culture to better fit their changing needs.

My coaching services are aimed at helping people be as fulfilled and as effective as possible in their professional lives. I work with individuals to assist them in unlocking their full potential, meeting new challenges, and developing their skills. People often find an executive coach a helpful resource when they're...

- Starting a new job
- Taking on new responsibilities
- Coping with a changing environment
- Considering a new position or career
- Addressing areas for improvement
- Simply trying to get "unstuck"

I'd be happy to have an initial conversation to discuss your needs and how we might work together. My contact information is above, or you can reach me at [contact.edbatista.com](http://contact.edbatista.com).

