



ROAD SIGNS FOR SUCCESS[®]

Your Weekly Guide on the Road to Maximizing Your Potential • September 3, 2008

By Sondra Whitt

Our Declaration of Independence states, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” But what, exactly, constitutes happiness? How is it achieved? Are some people just naturally happier than others? Can we learn to be happier? What would it take for *you* to become happier?

How do you define happiness? Wikipedia defines happiness as “an emotion associated with feelings ranging from contentment and satisfaction to bliss and intense joy.” It’s also defined as “living a good life,” enjoying a “quality life,” experiencing pleasure, and “flourishing” in life. Martin Seligman, one of the founders of positive psychology and author of *Authentic Happiness*, describes it as a combination of “positive emotions” and “positive activities.” His research shows that the deepest sense of happiness is experienced through a meaningful life, which is attained when we use our “unique strengths and virtues” in a purpose greater than our “own immediate goals.”

The quest for happiness is certainly universal, regardless of race, religion, geography, gender, politics, occupation, or age. We all want to be happy. And we seek it through a variety of avenues — wealth, material goods, volunteer work, health and fitness, relationships, accomplishments, experiences, religion, spirituality, and work. Buddhists teach that “ultimate happiness is only achieved by overcoming craving in all forms,” while Aristotle believed happiness was achieved through being virtuous. Sonja Lyubomirsky says in *The How of Happiness, A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want*, that a goal of finding lasting happiness is neither unrealistic or naïve, we just tend to look for it in the wrong places. “What we *believe* would make a huge difference in our lives actually, according to scientific research, makes only a small difference,” writes Lyubomirsky, “while we overlook the true sources of personal happiness and well-being.” Instead of “finding happiness” Lyubomirsky believes it is in our power to *create it*.

Some scientists think there is an individualized “set point” for happiness and there is nothing we can do about it. Circumstances will cause our happiness to spike up or down but then we’ll go back to that genetically determined set point. Lyubomirsky has found that, although there *is* a genetic set point, it only accounts for 50 percent of our happiness level, while circumstances account for 10 percent, and the remaining 40 percent is determined by our own *intentional* activities, *including our thoughts*. We can *overcome* our genetic programming.

Lyubomirsky found that the happiest participants in her studies were those who devoted a lot of time to nurturing relationships with family and friends, expressed gratitude for all they had, were quick to offer help to others, were optimistic about their futures, savored life’s pleasures and tried to live in the present moment, made physical exercise a regular habit, were deeply committed to lifelong goals and ambitions, and exercised poise and strength as they coped with challenges, stresses, tragedies, and crises. We can increase our happiness by intentionally focusing on the 40 percent that is within our control — what we *do* and how we *think*. “Becoming lastingly happier demands making some permanent changes that require effort and commitment every day of your life,” asserts Lyubomirsky. “Pursuing happiness takes work, but consider that this ‘happiness work’ may be the most rewarding work you’ll ever do.”