



# THE HAPPINESS Checklist

*The secret to a resilient, energetic and effective life.*

**Lynn Johnson, PhD**



# The Happiness Checklist:

## The secret to a resilient, energetic and effective life.

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## Chapter One: The Key to Success

*“It is not what we do once, with every ounce of splendid dedication that counts, so much as what we do every day, whether we feel like it or not.”*

*– Alvin R. Dyer*

**S**ome people believe in a fixed view of their abilities. Some believe in a growth view. Which are you?

How much would you agree with this statement: “People’s intelligence is basically fixed, and there is little someone can do to change it.” Imagine a 1 to 7 scale, with 1 = completely disagree, 4 = I neither agree nor disagree, and 7 = I completely agree. If you are below 4, then you are more in the fixed mindset; if you are above 4, you are more of the growth mindset.

Now the reason I open with that idea is because as I was thinking about this book, I was reminded of some research done by professor Carol Dweck and her students at Columbia University. Students there are the cream of the crop; they have gotten excellent grades all their lives, or they wouldn’t have been admitted. They have always been the smartest student in the class. All have excellent work habits.

But their attitudes vary. Some believe they are there because they are simply smart, and while they work hard, they have a fixed view of underlying ability and talent. They think success is simply a measure of one’s innate talents. Others think that lots of people have the capacity to learn and do well, and success is a matter of hard work. For them, a growth mindset guides them to believe that success is 99% perspiration a

These students have to take Freshman Chemistry. For the first time in their lives, these high performance student are surrounded by people every bit as accomplished and smart as they are. So for the majority, they will be, for the very first time in their lives, average.

Psychologists administered a test to categorize people as fixed or growth in their mindset. There are five major tests during Freshman Chemistry. The students who were fixed in their mindset, who think that talent is everything, were shocked at their first test results. They were understandably dismayed that they were in the average range. But more importantly, their fixed attitudes let them down. They tended to give up, and each test showed a deterioration. They got worse through the semester!

But the growth orientation was helpful. The students with that growth mindset were also dismayed by their average performance. How could they not be? They were always the Smartest Person In The Room. But Growth mindset people see failure as instructive, and giving guidance. So their scores improved with each test. You see, they saw the “failure” as actually being helpful, teaching them what they would have to do to master the class. Setback for a fixed mindset mean

failure, it means that you lack a vital component that is innate. On the other hand, setback for a growth mindset means useful feedback, guidance and direction.

In this book, I am going to show you some exciting research. What if you could be happier, more resilient, more successful, and even more healthy by incorporating some simple habits into your life? What if you could live longer, earn more money, and have happier relationships with family and friends, with those very same habits?

What if these habits I am talking about were not very hard, didn't take a lot of time, and were even pleasant? Would you be interested? Of course you would.

But to take advantage of these habits, the first thing you will have to do is to decide that abilities are mostly about practice and effort. You ought to consider that what I just said contradicts nearly everything that is taught in school. There you are tested and tested and compared in that testing with other children. We have found that the very act of testing promotes a fixed mindset. Schools may give lip service to a growth view, but the very process shifts students toward a view that some kids are just smarter and more talented than others.

I recall that over twenty years ago, I attended a talk by the Swedish Olympic Committee's sports psychologist. I was surprised – and inspired – to hear him say that they had found early talent in athletics played no predictive role. The Olympic Committee had tried to identify young people who would honor Sweden, and the only thing that mattered was the young person's work ethic. Those who were willing to put in much, much more practice were the ones who became champions. Talent didn't really count for anything.

So, search your heart, search your attitudes. Try this experiment. Instead of thinking that success is about talent, that happiness is due to uncontrollable factors, imagine that it is mostly about habits you do, every day, whether you feel like it or not.

## Chapter Two: What Good Is Happiness?

*“Hope moves us. It is not the past that controls us so much as our image of our future. We constantly adjust ourselves to what we think is coming.”*

*– Lynn Johnson*

**D**eborah Danner and her students studied an order of nuns in the Milwaukee area. The School Sisters of Notre Dame run parochial schools. They are very public spirited women, all giving their bodies to science. Through those autopsies, much has been learned about the nature of many deadly diseases. Since all these women eat the same food, do the same work, and receive the same health care, we learn a lot about genetic factors. Danner and her students learned that all the nuns had to write essays before they were admitted to the order, and she scored those essays for personality factors that could account for longevity.

What they learned is that women who wrote cheerful and positive essays when they were young girls outlived women whose essays had been more serious. The top twenty-five percent of cheerful essays predicted you would have a 90% chance of living to 85, and a 54% chance of living to 94. Women with more serious essays died much earlier. A woman whose essay put her in the bottom 25% on cheerfulness had only a 34% chance of living to 85, and just an 11% chance of making it to 94!

Dr Eric Giltay studied 999 Dutch men and women, following them from age 65 for twenty years. At the beginning of the study, none had symptoms of heart disease, but over the next twenty years, some had heart attacks, and some did not. While the usual factors were present – eating too much red meat and saturated fats, using tobacco and avoiding activity and exercise, the most important and powerful predictor was whether these men and women were pessimists or optimists. In fact, the men in the top third of optimism were half as likely to have a heart attack as men in the bottom third. Women were likewise helped by optimism, but not quite as much as men.

Here are the four questions Giltay used to measure optimism. Why don't you rate yourself on these questions, to see where you stand?

Rate these questions on a three point scale: Agree, Neutral or uncertain, and Disagree.

1. I expect much from life.
2. My days seem to be passing slowly.
3. I do not look forward to what lies ahead for me in the years to come.
4. I am still full of plans.

On items 1 and 4, you give yourself 2 points if you agree, 1 point if you are neutral or uncertain, and 0 if you disagree.

But on 2 and 3, reverse that. Give yourself 0 if you agree, 1 if you are neutral, and 2 if you disagree.

If you are 8, you are in the top third of optimism, and below that score you ought to be working harder on hope if you are to live out your life as long as you'd like.

What about earning money? In a large review of man studies, Sonja Luubomirsky, Laura King and Ed Diener found that people high in happiness earned significantly more than those on the low end. People like doing business with cheerful people. People promote cheerful people. The happy folks get better assignments.

They also found that happy people are better citizens, more likely to donate money, time, even blood to good causes. Ed Diener and his student, Michaela Chan reported that happy people, those in the top third or the top fourth of happiness, live an average of ten years longer. Marty Seligman found that happy people were much better at sales. Optimists were able to outsell average salespeople 21% the first year in their job, and 57% in their second year.

In every area of life, people high in happiness are more successful. There are even studies showing that happy people have fewer divorces and more stable marriages! That has to be one of the most obvious finding in the history of science, but there you are.

From time to time there are articles on the danger of being too happy. When I read those studies, the dangers come from people who are pathologically happy, people who have a condition psychologists call mania. These folks show poorer judgement, more impulsivity, and even have shorter lives. But they are genetically driven, and there is no evidence whatsoever that people in the normal range are in any danger.

So I can wholeheartedly recommend you raise your happiness. If you are in the normal range, or if you are lower, raising your happiness will deliver rich advantages.

## Chapter Three: Play Well the Cards You are Dealt.

*“A vivid imagination compels the whole body to obey.”*  
– Aristotle

Sonja Lyubomirsky calculates that about half of your happiness is genetic. If you have grown up in a family with more than one child, you know that is true. Each child seems to arrive in the world with a certain habitual emotional level. Around 45% to 50% of happiness is influenced by genes.

If you were to survey high school students, they would overlook that genetic portion and say that happiness comes from circumstances. There is some truth to that. If you are born and raised in Russia, you tend to be less happy, but if you are born in a Western Democracy, you will tend to be more cheerful. Similarly, if you are poor you are lower than if you are middle class.

But this effect is surprisingly small. Lyubomirsky says about 10% is from circumstances. Other studies say around 15%. I saw one study that attributed 18% of happiness to circumstances. So there is some truth to what our high school students say. Circumstances can influence your happiness. But it is much less than what you'd suspect.

This is one of the reasons why people who suddenly inherit or win a lot of money don't stay happy. Oh, they are happier, much happier . . . for a few months. Within about nine months, and nearly always less than a year, they are back to their habitual levels of happiness.

Owning nice material possessions makes people happier . . . again, for a short time. Usually you will habituate, get used to nice possessions in a few weeks or so. Remember the new car you bought? How long did it make you truly happier?

What can we control? What will lastingly give us more happiness? A large chunk of happiness comes from how we look at the world, how we think about the world, and this is quite changeable. In this chapter we'll look at the 35% to 45% that is quite under our own control. And the good news is that new research on genetics has shown that, surprisingly enough, some of our genetics can be influenced by our choices, such as what we eat, how we behave (such as whether we exercise or not), and even what we believe! Gene expression means that the environment influences how the genes are turned on or off. So it is likely that in the next few years we will find many genes that are influenced by practices of happiness. A virtuous cycle would be that when we practice habits of happiness, our genetic expression supports those habits. We remake ourselves with our own mind and will.

We now know that even the brain itself is constantly shaped and changed by the mind. You are not your brain, you are a miracle that happens to currently live inside a body. But you have great power over that body. If you learn to play a musical instrument, certain parts of your brain

literally grow, because your will, your spirit if you will, directed the brain to grow.

Another way to think about this is that happiness is a skill that can be developed. Just as if you were to study a foreign language or a musical instrument, if you practiced every day, soon you'd be able to speak and understand; soon you'd be playing beautiful music. The more you practice, the better you would be.

What things can we do that raise our happiness? The next chapters detail several. So let's move forward!



## Chapter Four: The Attitude of Gratitude

*“You say grace before meals. All right. But I say grace before the concert and the opera, and grace before the play and pantomime, and grace before I open a book, and grace before sketching, painting, swimming, fencing, boxing, walking, playing, dancing and grace before I dip the pen in the ink.”*

— G.K. Chesterton

How do people become genuinely happy? Psychologists now know much more about that. In the past few years, we have learned that gratitude is one skill that will increase your happiness.

People who keep a *gratitude and appreciation diary* generally see a very dramatic rise in their happiness within a few weeks. The idea is simple. Just write down each day 3 - 5 things about that day that you appreciate, and hope to see continue.

As I have asked my clients to do this, I notice something interesting. It is not as hard as some clients think. We all can find unique things each day to feel good about. From a change in the weather to an unusually polite driver, good does happen. As you write about those things, you will begin to see the world differently. It will seem to you that there is more good in the world than you had noticed.

I have found that some people’s gratitude is always about things outside of themselves. They seem to be blind to what is good about themselves. If they do something that would generally make one feel appreciative about oneself, they will discount it. “Oh, anyone would have done it,” they will say. There is a deep-seated aversion to appreciating themselves. They have “pathological humility” we might say.

If you find that you are like that, you hate to say anything good about yourself, you may find that a gratitude diary is not as helpful at raising your spirits as it should be. So you might want to reflect on the possibility that self-criticism is an overrated habit. Certainly most people would not be so critical of others as they are of themselves. Would you be as tough on your closest friend as you are on yourself? You instinctively know it would be quite rude. How about applying some consideration, even some compassion to yourself? Write about the things *you* did that you appreciate!

I think we can even be grateful for our trials and difficulties. Lately I am asking people to write down something that day that irritated or bothered them. It doesn’t have to be a huge tragedy. Those don’t happen all that often, thankfully. No, I simply ask them to write down some small item that did irk them.

Now *reframe* that event. What I mean is, the event is what it is, but the meaning we attribute to it is like a frame we put around a picture. The picture is the same, but the impact it has on us is

changed by the frame as well as by the picture itself. When we *reframe* an event, we look for something that is actually positive about the negative event.

So I want you to write an answer . . . or two or three . . . to this question: “And how is that also good?”

Bear in mind that there are few unmixed blessings or tragedies in this world. Winning the lottery doesn't solve problems, it merely changes them. So also with bad events. John Walsh suffered the worst imaginable experience: his child was kidnaped and murdered. I cannot think of a worse thing. But it turned out to also be a blessing. He started a TV series, “America's Most Wanted.” His show has caused literally hundreds of vicious criminals to be apprehended. So if he can make something good come from that catastrophe, surely we can find some hidden blessing lurking in every painful event. Paradoxically, we can actually learn to be grateful for our unpleasant and painful experiences as well as the pleasant ones.

Now the death of Adam Walsh is still a tragedy. To this day, my heart goes out to John Walsh. When we reframe a negative event, it doesn't take away the sting, the loss or pain. Instead, it redeems that pain. So now it is a tragedy *and* a blessing. Adam Walsh's death has caused many vicious criminals to be caught much sooner. How many deaths, how many murders did that tragic death prevent?

Now when you reframe a negative event, I am not expecting something so huge, so dramatic. I am thinking you ought to practice reframing more minor events, such as “Someone parked in my spot at work, and I had to park in the outlying lot and walk an extra block!” There we can easily say, “Yes it is annoying, but the extra walk gave me a chance to enjoy the day. I got a bit of exercise. I said ‘Hello’ to several people. So it was a blessing in disguise.”

Try this diary exercise for a month. For a couple of weeks, try to do the diary every day. Some people find that they can shift to once or twice a week, and they continue to benefit.

Measure your progress with these exercises. At the beginning, rate how happy you are typically on a 0 - 10 scale, with 0 = despondent, 5 = neutral, and 10 equals joyful. After a month, re-rate your happiness level. If you find that you have increased, that is a good sign that you can and should continue this exercise.

Now this is not an easy one, not that the diary itself is hard, but that creating any new habit is a challenge. So I want to introduce a simple technique for making the new habit more often. That is the “if - then affirmation.” Try it out before you even go on to the next chapter. Write down now a time when you could write an entry in your gratitude diary. Now write the if-then statement. “If it is 9:00 PM, I jot down several things that day that I feel grateful for.” Or, “If I wake up in the morning, I quickly jot down several positive things from the day before.”

Research has shown that writing if-then statement will just about triple your success at creating a

new habit. If you do it now, before the next chapter, you are much more likely to be successful.

## Chapter Five: Build on Your Strengths

*“Always analyze your successes. Greatest learning comes from repeating success. Failure teaches you not to touch the hot stove, but success teaches you to touch the sky.”*

– Lynn Johnson

We are more interested in problems than solutions. Anyone who has seen a slowdown on the freeway while drivers gawk at the accident knows that. But the research on increasing happiness tells us something unexpected: People are happiest when they tolerate and accept their own weaknesses and instead develop their strengths.

Imagine a business executive who is not well organized but is creative. She is best off not to become more organized – you can hire people to do that for you – but rather to increase her creativity. Not only will she be more successful, but she will also feel a deeper sense of connection, satisfaction, and joy in her daily work. It is almost as if each of us is given a basket of gifts, certain talents and strengths, and the more we develop them the more we feel we are being true to who we are.

Instead we too often look at the baskets of other people, envying their gifts and wishing we could be different. As Shakespeare says,

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,  
I all alone beweep my outcast state,  
And trouble deaf Heaven with my bootless cries,  
And look upon myself, and curse my fate,  
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,  
Featur'd like him, like him with friends possess'd,  
Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope,  
With what I most enjoy contented least:

I leave it up to you to study the rest of that poem. With all respect to the Immortal Bard, I think his solution to this envy of others problem (“Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope”) is not satisfactory. He claims all we need is love, and I find that people who have love can still envy. The Beatles said, “All you need is love,” but when they said that, they were very successful and widely admired. Sometimes you need more. So I say, love is good, but it is not all there is.

Anyway, being loved by someone else is often simply a matter of luck. While you are in charge of whether you offer love to others, you are not in charge of whether they love you. It is none of your business what others think of you. So there is limited value in thinking that being loved will make you happy.

No, I think we have a better way. That way is to find what you are called to, what you are put on earth to accomplish. We need to discover what we are good at, and how we can help others with our talents and gifts. We need to discover our strengths.

Sometimes when we are discouraged, we think “But I don’t have any strengths.” Well, that is not true. Every single person on this planet has a reason for existing and the necessary gifts to accomplish that reason. Let’s look at one approach to categorizing strengths.

Chris Peterson and Marty Seligman have created a system of strengths based on studying what every major culture in the world values and appreciates. They found they could sort them into six major groups, and twenty-four individual strengths. These strengths both benefit the person who has them and society in general. You can go to Seligman’s website ([www.authentic happiness.org](http://www.authentic happiness.org)) and take a survey that measures which strengths are your “signature” or key ones, or you can just look at these and estimate which three or four are most like you. This test is called the VIA, rhymes with “see ya” or Values in Action. The great thing about this is that it is entirely free. I don’t know how long they will leave it as a free site, so it wouldn’t hurt to go there right away and take that test.

Here is the list of the official twenty-four universal strengths.

#### KNOWLEDGE STRENGTHS

1. Creativity
2. Curiosity
3. Love of learning
4. Wisdom / perspective
5. Open-mindedness

#### COURAGE STRENGTHS

6. Bravery
7. Persistence
8. Integrity
9. Vitality

#### HUMANITY STRENGTHS

10. Give & receive love
11. Kindness
12. Social intelligence

## JUSTICE STRENGTHS

13. Citizenship
14. Fairness
15. Leadership

## TEMPERANCE STRENGTHS

16. Forgiveness / mercy
17. Modesty / humility
18. Prudence
19. Self-regulation

## TRANSCENDENCE / SPIRITUAL STRENGTHS

20. Appreciation of excellence and beauty
21. Gratitude
22. Hope
23. Humor
24. Spirituality

If you take the VIA test, you will be given a list of your strengths. We call the top five, your Signature Strengths.

People who will use their strengths in new ways, in new settings, who use their strengths more than they have, become significantly happier in a fairly short time. Within a few weeks they are feeling much happier. So it is with you. When you tackle a problem, look to your Signature Strengths and pick one to use on that problem. Your solution will generally be much stronger and of higher quality.

## Chapter 6: Savor the Moment

*“I wondered how it was possible to walk for an hour through the woods and see nothing of note. I who cannot see find hundreds of things: the delicate symmetry of a leaf, the smooth skin of a silver birch, the rough, shaggy bark of a pine. I who am blind can give one hint to those who see: use your eyes as if tomorrow you will have been stricken blind. Hear the music of voices, the songs of a bird, the mighty strains of an orchestra as if you would be stricken deaf tomorrow. Touch each object as if tomorrow your tactile sense would fail. Smell the perfume of flowers, taste with relish each morsel, as if tomorrow you could never taste or smell again. Make the most of every sense. Glory in all the facets and pleasures and beauty which the world reveals to you.”*

– Helen Keller

Zest makes life better. Zestful people simply enjoy things more than people low in zestfulness, so when we talk about increasing our habitual level of happiness (what some call the “happiness set point”) then increasing our ability to feel zestful helps. It is true that zestfulness is almost certainly an innate, inherited trait. But in the past few years, we have discovered that many of these traits are quite changeable. We can increase zest if we wish to.

How do we do it? What about enjoying the things around us? The skill of Savoring can increase our zest, since by paying attention to the pleasant things in our lives, we develop a greater sense of excitement about having that happen again. We enjoy and we eagerly anticipate.

Think of wine tasters. You have seen them sniffing the wine as they swirl it around in the glass, then swishing it around in their mouth. They are trying to sense every aspect of the wine. Their attention is totally focused on the moment, on how they can tune in to every molecule of taste. They are *savoring* the wine.

A Buddhist teacher, Thich Naht Hahn, encourages his students to concentrate fully as they chew their food, chewing slowly and thoroughly. He helps them enjoy the food more thoroughly, and says they end up eating and needing less because they extract all the goodness from the food they eat. A simple glass of milk and a piece of bread seems like a feast to Hahn, as he savors his food.

A friend of mine, Dave, saw a gray Audi A4 in front of a neighbor’s house. He said immediately, “Now they have two Audis of the same color.” When asked how he knew, he said, “The wheels of the car in their driveway are a different style; that one is a different year than the one they bought last fall.” Dave was right. They liked the first Audi so much, they bought a second one. Other than the wheels, the two cars are identical. Dave is a car connoisseur; he savors automobiles.

Psychologists studying happiness are finding that *savoring* is a key to raising levels of happiness and zest. I suggest that you try this experiment. Choose a simple pleasure that you might enjoy, like walking the dog, or sitting outside on a pleasant afternoon. As you experience that pleasure, focus your attention

on the experience. What are the sights? Sounds? Physical sensations? What kinds of inner feelings - gratitude, wonder, appreciation, amusement - do you notice in yourself? Spend some time at that. Take at least twenty minutes to eat, for example. Walk through a park for twenty minutes. Set aside the time and focus on the sights, sounds, tastes, touch, and smell of the experience. As Helen Keller said in the quote at the beginning of this chapter, “make the most of every sense.”

If you savor one experience each day, you will soon develop a nice habit. You will find that there are many small things each day you appreciate and value. You might notice that your zest and enjoyment of life is increasing. Our savoring helps us feel more positive and enthusiastic about life, which reminds us to savor. The more we practice this virtuous cycle, the stronger the habit becomes.

Now select some part of your day where you could savor for twenty minutes. Write some if-then statements to prime your mind to remember to do that savoring. Try this for a week and see how you feel.



## Chapter Seven: Nurture Hope and Practice Optimism

*“Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, today is a gift of God, which is why we call it the present.”*

— *Bil Keane*

A patient was working on becoming more optimistic. One day she came in and I asked her what she'd been doing. “At the golf course,” she replied, “practicing holes in one.”

“Wow,” I said, “how many did you get?”

“Oh, none today.”

Would you like to help yourself and your family or your work team become immune to discouragement and depression? University of Pennsylvania researcher Martin Seligman has shown that optimism tells us how well people bounce back from defeats and disappointments. The optimistic person may be hit by a bad event, but will come back and spends only a brief time feeling depressed. The more pessimistic person spends much more time in depression. A bad event sets the pessimistic person back so far that sometimes their productivity drops and they become ineffective. They withdraw from friends, stop doing enjoyable things. They are depressed.

Seligman found that he could measure optimism (using the ASQ, the Attributional Styles Questionnaire). He measured three things, *Personal*, *Permanent*, and *Pervasive* ways of thinking about good and bad events. He found some remarkable differences.

Resilient people tend to explain bad events in three ways:

1. The bad event is *temporary*, it is not permanent.
2. It is *localized*, not pervasive. It will not affect much of my life.
3. It is *impersonal* or caused by random events or outside forces. I didn't cause it.

Thus when a bad event does occur, it is viewed as not lasting long, not affecting much of my life, and as just something that happens, not caused by me. The person tends to bounce back fairly quickly from the bad event and is soon back on track.

But people who are at risk for discouragement, depression, and defeat (the pessimistic thinkers) will view a bad event in exactly the opposite way:

1. The bad event is *permanent*, it will affect me for a long, long time.
2. It is *pervasive*, it affects all parts of my life and ruins pretty much everything I do.
3. It is *personally caused*, that is, I am to blame, I am a bad person because I made it happen.

Oddly enough, pessimistic people think that *good events* are temporary, localized, and impersonal, where as optimistic people think the good events are permanent, pervasive, and personally caused. We found to our surprised that good mental health doesn't necessarily mean people are consistent! In fact, it

turns out that a certain amount of inconsistency is good for you!

People who are pessimistic can be good at many jobs, but sales and other jobs where there is some rejection is not something they should do. In jobs where there are some failures and rejections as part of the picture, the pessimistic, vulnerable person will become discouraged. But the resilient, optimistic person will be able to shake off the defeat quickly and get back to finding prospects. Optimistic people are much better at sports; pessimistic people do better in law school than the optimists!

*Can People Change?* Yes, without a doubt. People can learn to think in resilient ways, and if they practice those ways of thinking, they get much better at it. Thinking habits are skills, and like all skills, anyone can get better. And while some people may be naturally more talented at something, all can learn.

Research found that with as little as 12 weeks of training, children in primary grades reduced their incidents of depression by half. If an untreated group would be expected to have 10 depressed children in the next year, the treated group only had five. While not perfect, that brief training yielded very powerful results.

Adults similarly have improved by about the same amount with fairly brief training programs of ten to fifteen hours. Positive tools help you work better. Use the tools of optimism to improve all parts of your life.

Seligman recommends the A-B-C-D diary. A = The Actual Event, either good or bad. Describe an event each day. B = Belief, what you think about that. C = Consequence, how that Belief makes you feel. In this step you analyze. If a Good event seems relatively permanent, you are likely to feel hopeful, optimistic about the future, and if a Bad event seems Temporary, likewise you are optimistic.

If a Good event seems Pervasive, meaning its influence will spread through your life and lift your spirits in other areas, then you are optimistic. If a Bad event is Local, meaning you aren't going to let it influence other parts of your life, you are also optimistic.

Finally, it is better to think of good events as being cause by you, but bad events as being somewhat random. In other words, ignore the bad events, don't take too much blame for them, but examine the good events and figure out what you did right.

Marty Seligman has a fine book called *Learned Optimism* that tells you much more about this. It is an old book copyright 1991, but it holds up very well. Perhaps you can find a copy in your local library. It is certainly worth reading.

Another tool that Sonja Lyubomirsky has found to raise optimism is a future diary. In this assignment, once a week or so you write a diary entry dated some time in the future. Writing in the present tense, you might say, "In the past five years, I have accomplished these things. I have done this, learned that, been to these places and done these things." Write about how others reacted to what you did. Write

about how your life is different because of what you have accomplished. If a miracle happened, and five years from now your life is just as you'd want it to be, how would you know? How would other people know? What would they see / hear that tells them your life is exactly as it ought to be?

Now write about how you overcame problems and difficulties in achieving those goals. Write about the setbacks and how you kept going. Research shows that people who expect goals to be hard to accomplish and make specific plans to keep going through setbacks, are much more successful at achieving their goals than people who ignore potential problems.

With either the A-B-C-D diary or with the Future Diary, keep working at this for about three months. You will need regular practice to shift the way you think about these factors. If you will put in three months of diligent practice, you'll own Optimism for the rest of your life.

## Chapter Eight: Build Relationships

*“Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.”*

— Martin Luther King Jr.

As Happiness Guru Ed Diener has said, “There are no happy hermits.” Happy people are connected, and when you nurture your connections, you build your own happiness. Cultivate the habit, if it isn’t already strong in you, of reaching out to others, inviting others into your life, and broaden your relationships. Make new friends, and reach out to old friends you haven’t talked to recently. Find ways to make them feel positive and special.

In this chapter we will discuss two simple habits that help build closeness, friendship and connection with others. These will help both your intimate relationships and your casual friendships.

**ASSERTIVE AND CONSTRUCTIVE RESPONDING:** Studies on happy relationships, both romantic and workplace, found an interesting and important pattern. Most people handle negative news all right. How we react to good news will predict how healthy the relationship is. People can respond either *assertively* or *passively*. They can respond *constructively* or *critically*.

Let’s say a husband comes home from work and announces he has received a nice promotion.

An assertive and constructive response would be something with both empathy and encouragement. “What great news! That is so exciting. Now tell me all about it. How did it happen?” The partner asks questions, expands the meaning, ferrets out the details.

Assertive and critical? The partner might say, “Now don’t get a big head about this. After all, you don’t want to get all caught up in yourself!”

Passive and constructive? “Oh, that’s nice, honey.”

Passive and critical? With this pattern, the partner changes the topic, focuses on herself/himself and deflects. “Yeah, well at my work, my boss told me he couldn’t run the department without me.”

The only pattern associated with very happy marriages was the assertive and constructive pattern. Obviously, the critical or negative responses are always bad, and passive is always bad. If you notice yourself responding that way, you may want to rethink your habit.

Try some if-then statements, so as to tune your ears to hear positive news from other people.

**THREE TO ONE POSITIVE TO NEGATIVE:** The second area of building on your relationships is to practice the 3 to 1 positive to negative ratio.

What is the secret behind individuals who are resilient and bounce back from setbacks quickly? What about marriages that seem to sail through the storms of life, with both persons happy and content? What is the secret of business teams that excel and exceed expectations?

As it turns out, there is a common denominator. It is the Positive to Negative ratio.

Deeply wired into our brains is an automatic judging process, distinguishing positive / negative. Every baby knows the difference between pain and pleasure, sweet and sour, harsh and gentle. As adults it's the same. Rich, we are told, is better than poor, and happy is good while sad is bad. Healthy is good, sickness is bad. Our brains are designed to make those judgements.

We now know that anything negative has a large impact on our brain. Negative is a message of "stop, danger, watch out!" Negative disorganizes our efforts. It helps us know when something is not working. Negative shifts physical energy away from maintenance and immunity toward fight or flight.

Positive tells us, "you are OK, keep up the good work, things are going well." It tells us to create, invent, and discover, because it is safe to explore. Positive shifts physical energy to immunity, learning, and growing.

In a study we mentioned earlier, Erik Giltay in the Netherlands found that men between the ages of 65 and 84 are at a greater or lesser risk of heart attack based only on how optimistic they are. Men who were in the top third of optimism had about half the number of heart attacks over a fifteen year period than men who were at the bottom third.

In another study, people recovering from a heart attack were asked from time to time to write down what they were thinking. Those diaries were scored for positive and negative feelings. Those who had a 1:1 ratio of positive to negative thoughts and feelings were far more likely to have other heart attacks and/or die than those who had a 4:1 or 5:1 ratio of positive to negative.

**Positive helps marriage:** John Gottman has studied marriages and finds something similar. Gottman asked married couples to come to his lab and have conversations. When the positive-to-negative ratios were about 4:1 or 5:1, those marriages succeeded. But when the ratios were around 1:1, the marriages were very likely to end in divorce. He correctly predicts divorce or success 94% of the time, based on that number.

**Positive means profit:** In Brazil, Marcial Losada studied business teams that were either languishing or flourishing. What he discovered was remarkably similar. Teams have to face and deal with problems, but the flourishing teams had a positive:negative ratio of 5.6 to 1. Teams that were only partially productive had a ratio of 1.8 to 1. And the languishing teams, where little productive work was getting done, had a ratio of .4 to 1! Losada found that all he needed to do to shift a languishing team into a productive range is to coach them to make sure to say three positive things for each complaint or correction.

Why would this be? I think perhaps it is because life is a challenge, and to meet that challenge, we must

believe that we can succeed. When our thinking and feeling has a mostly positive ratio, our communication will reflect that, and both we and the people around us succeed. When we are mostly positive, we don't give up, we keep trying to find pathways to success.

Certainly we must deal with problems. Sometimes we do that through negativity, responding with fear or anger. This can be dangerous and create an attitude oriented toward problems and not toward solutions. We have to bear in mind that negativity takes it toll on us, and we have to balance negative events out. Since we now know that negative events "weigh more" so to speak (they have a more drastic impact on us), we have to put several positive events on the scale for balance. If it were a bank balance, the average negative is \$100 withdrawal, and the average positive is about \$25 deposit. It turns out that you move from languishing to flourishing when the positive ratio is just above 2.9:1. Around 5:1 or 6:1 seems to be optimal, and above that, there is probably too much positivity, it becomes unrealistic, and the health of the individual or group declines. Losada computed that by 11:1, the whole system falls apart. Keeping your positive to negative ratio about 3:1 is a great challenge.

Practice raising your positive to negative ratio in two areas: when you talk to others, and when you talk to yourself. Both will help you connect with others and be happier around them.

In summary, when you enhance and build your relationships with others, by being tuned into positive news and being assertive and constructive, and by maintaining the vital three-to-one positive to negative ratio, you will be happier yourself because you are making others happier.

## Chapter Nine: Search Within: Practice Meditation

*“When I meditate, I invite the peace that surpasses understanding into my life. Only then can I teach peace to others.”*

*– Lynn Johnson*

There are so many studies on how meditation improves and helps us, it is amazing that we don't all practice it. In this chapter, we will briefly focus on meditation that builds compassion for others, so that we are both practicing the quiet mind and the loving and forgiving mind.

Compassion brings happiness. What do I mean? Compassion is defined as a feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for another who is stricken by misfortune, accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate the suffering. There are two pieces:

1. I look at you and imagine how you must feel as you suffer. I vicariously experience your suffering, using my own experience and imagination.
2. I wish that I could relieve the suffering.

So how could this ability to sense the suffering in another contribute to happiness? Why should we want to develop this? Simply that the way humans are made, people who are higher in compassion are much higher in happiness. Richard Davidson, professor of psychology at the University of Wisconsin, has found that when people develop their compassion, their happiness does rise remarkably. First, the very decision to feel sympathy for another seems to raise joy within us. Davidson found that the happiness centers of the brain showed greater activity, and the experimental subjects reported they felt happier, when they meditated on compassion. Second, when we help others, our own happiness level raises dramatically. Harvard business professor Michael Norton finds that getting more money doesn't make people happy. But if they regularly give some of their money to others who are in need, those same people become much happier.

Mother Nature has made us this way. We feel best when we are connected to others, even to those who are suffering. When we reach out, when we lift others up, there is an immediate payoff, a rise in our own sense of connection and joy. When we are higher in compassion, we are more of who we really are. It is like coming home. We are where we belong.

**What then must we do?** We can train our brains to feel compassion. When we see something that upsets us, that makes us irritated or angry, we can ask, “How is that like me?” Imagine someone speeding in traffic, weaving in and out and creating danger. We are annoyed. Very natural. But when you realize that you are annoyed, try to nurture compassion. “How is that like me?” Maybe there has been a time you sped along, trying to get somewhere quickly. Maybe there has been a time you were reckless. Most of us have done it. Recall how it felt to suffer from that sense of pressure. Look at the person who irritates you and try to imagine how they must be suffering, just as you yourself have suffered. Allow yourself to feel sorry that the person does suffer.

Davidson found that asking students to spend five or ten minutes simply thinking about the word “compassion” and what it meant was a very helpful exercise. Keep your attention on something and you become more of that. If you think about greed (i.e., getting rich), you will become more greedy, but not more happy. But when you think about compassion, you develop the ability to feel sympathy and love for others.

Second, regularly reach out. Help others. As the Harvard study found, give some money to those who are in need. Researcher Sonja Lyubomirsky found that setting aside a day when you try to do several helpful acts of service raised people’s happiness level in a striking and lasting manner. Watch for opportunities, and grab them when they come. On specific days, determine within yourself to watch out for ways you can help. Volunteer a day a week, going to a hospital or a school to help children in pain or need. Pick up trash along a walking trail. If you look for it, you will find many opportunities. And I guarantee it will raise your happiness level.

Think, reflect, write about compassion. Practice it with those who “don’t deserve it.” Then turn it into something specific, something concrete. Do something. You will feel joy.

Along with this, I often recommend people practice Autogenic Training, a very simple and easily learned method of compassion.

The autogenic training exercises below can help you recover from anxiety, stress, and tension. Persons who practice autogenic training twice a day fall asleep better and sleep more deeply. They think more clearly and are less prone to anxiety or depression. People who meditate each day for fifteen to twenty minutes, once or twice a day, age more slowly. They are less likely to become ill.

Repeat every phrase, silently, in your mind, three times. Say the phrase in a quiet, thoughtful way. Pause after and notice how you feel. Focus on your feelings for two or three breaths. Practice each set of exercises until you are quite comfortable with them.

Set 1:

I feel quite quiet. . . I am easily relaxed. . .

My right arm feels heavy and relaxed. . . My left arm feels heavy and relaxed. . . My arms feel heavy and relaxed and relaxed . . .

My right leg feels heavy and relaxed. . . My left leg feels heavy and relaxed. . . My arms and legs feel heavy and relaxed and relaxed. . . My hips and stomach are quiet and relaxed . . . My shoulders are heavy and relaxed and relaxed . . . My breathing is calm and regular . . . My face is smooth and quiet . . . I am beginning to feel quite relaxed. . .

Set 2:

My right hand is warm. . . My left hand is warm. . . Warmth flows into my hands. . . My hands are warm. . . My right foot is warm. . . My left foot is warm. . . My hands and feet are warm. . . Warmth flows into my hands and feet . . . My eyes are comfortably warm and peaceful . . . My forehead is cool and my eyes are warm . . . I am warm and peaceful . . .



Set 3:

I am beginning to feel quite relaxed. . . I am learning to feel calm and confident . . . I talk about what I appreciate and I feel confident . . . I appreciate myself and others . . . My life has many blessings I recognize and appreciate . . . I am beginning to see my own blessings . . . I appreciate more and more . . .

Set 4:

My breathing is calm and regular. . . My heartbeat is calm and regular. . . I am at peace. . . Sounds and sights around contribute to peace. . . Peace goes with me though out the day . . . There is nothing to bother and nothing to disturb. . .

Ten minutes or so of this a day will give you some great advantages of peace and quiet confidence.

You can modify this for the particular conditions. If I am practicing meditation in the lobby of a busy hotel, I can suggest to myself, “The sounds of people walking by remind me to relax . . . the music overhead reminds me of peace . . . people talking remind me of inner quiet . . . all sounds around me draw me into quiet relaxation . . .” When I do a few minutes of this, the sounds seems to disappear and I can work on the arms heavy / legs heavy; hands warm / feet warm skills.

## Chapter Ten: The Happiness Checklist

*“Here is my challenge: Be the hope for the world. Be the peace in the world. Be the love of the world. This is your challenge and mine. You are put here to do something great. Get going on that.”*

– Lynn Johnson

Practice three of these each day, any three. It will help you to put this list up somewhere you can see it and be reminded.

- Gratitude for small simple tender mercies and gifts.
- Each day, expand some personal strength. You were given these strengths of make the world beautiful. Use one each day.
- Stop and savor. Notice the miracle of a flower, the gift of food, a sunrise or sunset. Fill up your senses with the moment.
- Chose to see the future with hope. The good persists, the bad disappears like a forgotten dream.
- Reach out to new friends and cultivate old friends. Practice building others when they are happy, practice three to one positive-to-negative.
- Meditate. Cultivate compassion and love for all people. Go about doing good.

All right, now you have several good practices. There are more, and I have mentioned them in more detail in my book, **Enjoy Life: Healing with Happiness**. Go to <http://enjoylifebook.com> where you can download an ebook or order the paperback version. As a registered owner of this report, you are entitled to other reports you will find on that site, reports and downloads to support and help in your journey.

May you always have joy and peace. May your pain be champaign, may your troubles teach you patience, love, and vision. May your eyes always elevate to the far horizon. May you see inspiring visions and may you share them, May you transform the world.

Warmly,

Lynn

<http://drlynnjohnson.com>

p.s.: If you haven't already, I invite you to subscribe to my newsletter, where you will receive tips on flourishing and living a happy and energizing life. Join me!