

How To Be Happy: The Fine Print by Stacey Kennelley

□ Most of us want to be happy and stay that way, and research from positive psychology has shown that making a habit of certain day-to-day activities—like expressing gratitude, exercising, or performing acts of kindness—can help us get there.

□ But few researchers have considered how to identify an activity that’s best suited to your particular personality and lifestyle.

□ Sonja Lyubomirsky, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Riverside, started to explore these questions in her 2007 book, *The How of Happiness*. Now, Lyubomirsky and a graduate student of hers, Kristin Layous, are zeroing in on why some activities may “fit” for some people and not others (summarized in a chapter for a forthcoming book, *The Dark and Light Side of Happiness*).

□ “A lot of different research has found that these activities have positive effects,” she says, “so I think the next step is understanding how they work best and what considerations we need to think about before we mass recommend them to everyone.”

□ Let’s call it “the fine print” of how to be happy, the little details you should consider before undertaking happiness activities.

□ Who gets happy?

□ People are different, and not every positive activity or combination of activities will affect people in the same ways. And so the first step in understanding what happiness practices might suit you is examining your personal traits and circumstances—and then adapting the practices to your lifestyle. Here are some factors to consider, based on research by Layous and Lyubomirsky.

□ ** Motivation and beliefs. In one study, Lyubomirsky posted online two nearly identical requests for study participants. The only difference? One version told participants the study was meant to increase their happiness, while the other simply told them they’d take part in a cognitive exercise. After performing the same happiness-inducing activities, the people who signed up for the happiness study—the group Lyubomirsky saw as more “motivated” to become happier—gained more from the study than those who signed up for the other exercise.

□ “In a way, it’s common sense, but it’s nice to have evidence to support that,” Layous says.

□ Similarly, Layous says whether or not someone believes a happiness-increasing activity will work also comes into play. People who are confident they will become happier after adopting the new practices have reported greater increases in happiness in the end.

□** Effort. Research has also shown that the amount of effort someone puts into increasing their happiness has a large effect on whether or not an activity works. In several studies, researchers found that people who reported that they put a lot of effort into their activities saw the greatest gains in well-being. Other methods are also used to evaluate effort, such as how many characters someone writes in his or her gratitude letters.

□** Social support. Receiving encouragement from others also seems to maximize happiness. In one study, people who read bogus testimonials from peers saying an activity worked saw greater increases in happiness than those who did not.

□** Culture. So far, Layous and Lyubomirsky's analysis suggests that Westerners benefit more from positive activities than other populations, including Asians. One study conducted at UC Riverside found that Anglo-Americans benefitted more from happiness-increasing activities; however, researchers did see a small trend that Asians gained more from activities directed toward benefitting others' happiness, like writing a letter of gratitude, than activities strictly intended to benefit the self.

□** Age. Findings indicate that adults get more out of positive activities than adolescents and college-aged students. That said, the college-age sample may be misleading, says Layous, because many undergrads are required to participate in studies for course credit, not by their own volition. In other words, a disproportionate number of students in these studies may lack the all-important motivation that their older counterparts have.

□** Starting levels of happiness. A person's level of happiness before he or she undertakes one or more happiness-increasing activities also impacts how well an activity works.

□ How the activities might affect people with depression is a particular area of scientific interest, and it's an area Layous and Lyubomirsky are exploring. In one study, Layous and Lyubomirsky found that positive activities were effective for people who were mildly depressed, but not for people who reported already being happy or severely depressed.

□ "Other evidence suggests that people need room for improvement in their happiness levels," says Layous, "so possibly mildly depressed people would benefit more than people who are not depressed at all."

□ The importance of fit

□ In the end, Layous and Lyubomirsky stress the importance of choosing the particular happiness activity that's the best match for your personality and circumstance. That will affect how much you enjoy the activity, reinforcing your motivation and effort to continue.

□ Extroverts, for example, would likely benefit most from positive activities that involve socializing and being surrounded by others, whereas religious people might prefer an activity with a spiritual component.

□ "Not everyone is going to be like, 'Oh yes, let me sit down and write a letter of gratitude,'" says Layous. "For some, that might be appealing because it's a solitary activity—for others, not so much."

□ Supporting this idea, a study by Stephen Schueller, published last year in the Journal of Positive Psychology, found that people assigned to a happiness activity similar to one for which they previously expressed a preference showed significantly greater increases in happiness than people assigned to an activity not based on a prior preference. This, writes Schueller, is “a model for positive psychology exercises similar to Netflix for movies or Amazon for books and other products.”

□ Layous also emphasizes that people should choose a positive activity that aligns with their home life and work schedule.

□ “If they’re a CEO, it’s less likely they’ll do a time-consuming activity,” she says. “For them it might be better to, during their commute, recount things that they’re grateful for.”

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□ What will make you happy?

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□ □ More on Happiness

□ Check out Sonja Lyubomirsky’s top 12 happiness activities.

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□ Watch videos of Lyubomirsky’s GGSC talk on happiness.

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□ There’s more fine print to consider, beyond your personal traits and circumstances. There are practices that will make you happier—but the research finds that they sometimes don’t work. Gratitude journals, for instance, have provided a significant happiness boost in some studies... but not others. According to Layous and Lyubomirsky, here are the practical details that influence whether a practice is effective—ones that apply to almost everyone.

□ ** Duration. Happiness-increasing activities are also most effective for people who engage in them for longer periods of time, research shows. The trick, says Layous, is to make a habit of one or more positive activities without wearing yourself out.

□ ** Dosage. Research has found that frequency and timing impact how well certain happiness-increasing activities work. More isn’t always better: The proper dosage often depends on the activity.

□ In one study, Lyubomirsky and colleagues found that people who practiced several acts of kindness in one day were happier than people who spread their actions out over the week. Conversely, the same researchers found in a different study that participants who counted their blessings in a gratitude journal only once per week for six weeks reported a

greater boost in happiness than those who did so three times per week. And yet another study found that people who more frequently logged into an iPhone application meant to promote positive activities saw bigger gains in happiness than people who logged in less frequently.

□The findings may seem contradictory, but they underscore the importance of choosing activities that feel voluntary and not burdensome, say Layous and Lyubomirsky.

□** Variety. Humans tend to adapt to positive changes as well as negative ones, so it makes sense that trying a variety of happiness strategies can ensure that we don't get numb to their benefits over time.

□When Lyubomirsky and University of Missouri positive psychologist Ken Sheldon tested whether kindness increases happiness, they discovered that individuals who performed different acts of kindness throughout the week showed greater increases in happiness than those who performed the same activity over and over again. Several other studies have found that people who juggle multiple positive activities become happier.

□The challenge, it seems, is to be vigilant against activities that start to feel routine; once they do, it's likely time to switch them up. "Variety is not only the spice of life," write Sheldon and Lyubomirsky in a recent book chapter, "but the spice of happiness as well."

□When it comes down to it, the best way to determine which activity is best for you is to test it out, perhaps even in tandem with others. Layous notes that the happiness strategies developed by positive psychologists were designed to be low-cost, non-stigmatizing, and easy to incorporate into daily life.

□"We don't want people to be challenged, we want the activities to promote positive emotion," Layous says. "If your automatic reaction is, 'Ehh,' then that activity is probably not for you. It's about finding ones where your gut reaction is, 'I could do that.'"