



Sonja Lyubomirsky

Do You Have the Will and Way to Be Happier?

Being happier takes both a will and a proper way: An experimental longitudinal intervention to boost well-being



Principle

Happiness practices like expressing optimism and gratitude work better when you are intentionally trying to cultivate happiness and commit to it.

Quote

“happiness interventions are more than just placebos, but that they are most successful when participants know about, endorse, and commit to the intervention.”

So What - Application

If both the motivation or desire to increase happiness and the specific activities you choose matter, this could influence both our own efforts to become happier and how we go about coaching others, including family members.

We could use a bit of motivation interviewing techniques for ourself and others to discover how much someone actually wants to increase their happiness. How motivated are they? How ready to change are they?

We could also search for research-backed practices rather than assuming any practice we come up with will work. For example, some research shows that gratitude practices work, but become stale if done night after night in the same manner.

The Research Story

Four researchers from University of California, Riverside and University of Missouri did an 8 month study on a happiness intervention and whether it mattered that participants knew the study was about increasing happiness and how much time they spent doing the activities. Previous research shows well-being is 50% genetic, 10% circumstance, and 40% changeable with our thoughts, behaviors, and goals.

They propose that if individuals are motivated (they choose the activity themselves because they want to be happier) and do activities that are shown by research to work, then they'll get the most benefits. They call this having a “will” (wanting to) and a “proper way” (research-backed activity).

They had 197 students participate in an 8-week intervention. They had them choose a cognitive exercise study or a happiness intervention to separate students motivated to improve their happiness.

Students were all told the intention was to increase well-being, were asked to write 15 minutes a week, and were randomly assigned to one of 3 groups. The optimism group wrote about an imagined future ideal self including education, romance, hobbies, family, career, social, health, etc. The gratitude group wrote unsent letters of gratitude to someone. The control group spent listed what they did over the past 7 days.

They were surveyed about their happiness, pleasant and unpleasant moods, and life satisfaction before the study, after the 8 weeks practice, and 6 months later. They measured effort by having judges rate their responses.

They found that the two happiness interventions didn't increase well-being unless participants were motivated to increase happiness (will) and used an effective strategy (proper way).

Participants who wanted to be happier had more gains than people who signed up for cognitive exercises at the end of 8 weeks and 6 months later.

Effort also played a role. Participants who seemed to take the writing seriously were more likely to increase in well-being. However, the effort only mattered with groups doing research-backed activities, not the control.

Why didn't the activities work for people not wanting to improve happiness? Maybe they were already pretty happy, they had no interest in being happier, or they felt forced into a happiness project when they didn't choose it.

Lyubomirsky, S., Dickerhoof, R., Boehm, J. K., & Sheldon, K. M. (2011). Becoming happier takes both a will and a proper way: An experimental longitudinal intervention to boost well-being. *Emotion*, 11(2), 391-402. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022575>

