

The How of Happiness: A New Approach to Getting the Life You Want

by Sonja Lyubomirsky

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Reviewed by

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While common reading book selections typically involve a plot and characters that tell a story or present a piece of wisdom to students, this text, as a common read selection, provides an interesting and important topic of learning for college students. In *The How of Happiness: A New Approach to Getting the Life You Want*, author Sonja Lyubomirsky describes happiness-increasing strategies based on fit assessments at various points in the reading. With this approach, the audience is able to tailor the text for optimal personal benefit.

Regardless of age, personal history, or other identifying factors, people want to be happy. People expect to be happy for lasting periods of time when they purchase a new car, get married, get a promotion, or receive a pay increase at work. The truth is that happiness from material objects and life events only lasts a short time. Yes, happiness can be gained by these life events or objects, but it does not last long term. Lyubomirsky begins by explaining that humans search for happiness incorrectly and insufficiently. She posits that 50 percent of a person's happiness is based on genetic happiness set points and 10 percent is based on current life circumstances. What is the remaining 40 percent based on? *The How of Happiness* includes several inventories and assessments which help the reader identify current happiness levels and four happiness-increasing strategies that best fit the reader. When the four strategies are identified and explored, the reader is provided with several activities within each strategy to help increase happiness levels long term.

Summary

The How of Happiness is designed to allow the reader to tailor the reading and happiness-increasing strategies based on personal fit. Within each section, the author emphasizes several happiness-increasing strategies and activities for the reader to choose from. As a conclusion for each strategy section, the author provides additional strategy suggestions that may also be beneficial to the reader. Throughout the book, Lyubomirsky describes the benefits of happiness. She also examines the habits of happy and unhappy people. She explores the backgrounds,

life experiences, and current situations of both happy and unhappy participants to provide context. In addition, the author presents information on the participants in an attempt to prove that anyone has the ability to be happy.

Part 1 describes the multiple channels and strategies for finding lasting happiness. Chapter 1 questions one's ability to become happier. The author outlines what people typically believe creates happiness, the program description for lasting happiness, positive psychology, and why increasing and maintaining happiness levels is rewarding. Lyubomirsky explains that the remaining 40 percent of our happiness level is in our control and is based solely on daily thoughts and actions. She also argues that seeking happiness is rewarding work for individuals, comparing the process to an exercise or diet regimen.

Chapter 2 begins with stories of individuals who have found happiness despite negative childhoods and life experiences. The chapter also includes stories of unhappy individuals, despite fairly happy childhoods and few traumatic life events. The comparison between the happy and unhappy participants provides interesting insight into how happiness is possible. The subjective happiness scale in this chapter is a quick assessment to determine the reader's current level of happiness compared to the average person. A depression scale is also presented in this chapter, and based on the results, the author encourages the reader to either continue with the program or read the postscript on depression. Lyubomirsky continues the sections by discussing and dissolving several common happiness myths. Chapter 2 concludes with a definition and description of the happiness set point. In Chapter 3, a person and activity fit assessment is presented that assists the reader to identify four happiness-increasing strategies based on interests, values, needs, and appropriate fit.

In Part 2, a happiness questionnaire is administered, and the reader is encouraged to complete the questionnaire several times in the future following the initial assessment. Chapter 4 outlines the happiness-increasing strategies and related activities for practicing gratitude and positive thinking. This chapter reviews the first four strategies, including expressing gratitude, cultivating optimism, and overthinking and social comparison. Throughout the discussion of each strategy, the reader has a few activities within each strategy to choose from. For example, as an activity for practicing gratitude, the author suggests that the reader writes in a gratitude journal and describes the activity in detail.

Chapter 5 focuses on investing in social connections, and the strategies include practicing acts of kindness and nurturing social relationships. Chapter 6 describes strategies and activities for managing stress, hardships, and trauma. The happiness activities in this chapter are developing strategies for coping and learning to forgive. Chapter 7 encourages the reader to live in the present and focuses on increasing flow experiences and savoring the joys of life. Chapter 8 solely describes commitment to personal goals, how to set goals, and how setting goals can bring happiness. Chapter 9 outlines happiness-increasing strategies that focus on taking care of the body and soul, including practicing religion and spirituality and taking care of one's body through meditation, physical activity, and daily actions. Throughout Part 2, Lyubomirsky suggests additional strategies based on

the strategies determined as the four best fits for the reader. This allows the reader to attempt various activities and strategies, adapt any of the activities to personal needs, and determine what works best for the individual.

Part 3 illustrates how to maintain lasting happiness in life. Chapter 10 demonstrates the five methods for sustainable happiness. The author describes how positive emotion, timing and variety, social support, motivation, effort, commitment, and habit create lasting happiness. The author concludes the text with a reminder that happiness is in the hands of the individual who seeks happiness and that the reader has the power to develop and grow long-term changes in happiness levels.

Critical Review

The author is open, honest, and relatable in her writing. Providing her opinion and personal experiences allows the reader to relate and make personal connections with the author and the reading. *The How of Happiness* provides happiness-increasing strategies based on scientific evidence and research. If selected as a common reading program book, *The How of Happiness* would be an excellent tool for college students, as well as faculty and staff.

Campus Connections

The How of Happiness would be an appropriate fit for a first-year reading program at a Christian affiliated institution. The author provides examples of morals and values upheld by traditional Christian principles. However, the author also connects examples to other religions and perspectives and, therefore, would not limit the text to one religious group. Regardless of religion, *The How of Happiness* can connect students to one another through shared experiences and critical discussion.

Concerns

As a note to those selecting common reading program books, this book has a religious tone at times, but provides insight from several religious perspectives as well as discussions of morals and philosophy. In addition, programming based on the text may be challenging, but it is not impossible.

Ways to Incorporate the Book into Academic Courses

The How of Happiness is a book selection that could be incorporated into different courses and various disciplines. This reading selection would be an impactful and positive addition to a first-year psychology or human science course due to the information and studies regarding psychology. The author utilizes statistics and results from science and psychology studies on human subjects,

including happy participants, unhappy participants, different types of twin siblings, and average participants. There are several psychology studies discussed in the text. An interesting way to incorporate this text in a psychology class for first-year students would be to direct the students to explore various other studies regarding happiness levels or conducting happiness studies as a class project.

Discussion and Programming Opportunities

There are several potential discussion and programming opportunities if the text is selected for a common reading program. An example of such a program would be a residence hall or learning community where students may take the happiness-increasing strategies fit assessment. The leaders of the program would explain the various activities within each strategy and encourage the attendees to attempt a selection of happiness-increasing activities.

Another discussion opportunity would be to have students select one to two of the activities listed within the book, try them for a certain period of time, and follow up with a discussion on the results of completing the activities.

Programming with this book may be a challenge, but incorporating a theme of creating happiness or exploring happiness-increasing strategies would be impactful on college campuses. Depending on institutional funding, guest speakers could be brought in to discuss the topic of finding happiness as an inspirational program for students.

Conclusion

The How of Happiness challenges readers to take responsibility for personal happiness. This reading selection is an empowering tool for both incoming college freshman and any person seeking lasting happiness. Throughout the text, Lyubomirsky provides relevant inspirational quotations and thought-provoking questions and ideas. When the reader completes the assessments and follows the text based on assessment results, the book becomes a personal guide to creating and maintaining happiness. This book is an effortless and fairly quick read, making it easy for general students to comprehend and connect to. The author provides statistics and the results of various studies involving college students, but the study findings are relatable and relevant to any age. This reading selection is recommended for a common reading book for first-year students, transfer students, non-traditional students, and also for faculty and staff as a means of personal and professional development.