

Well, Are You Happy Now?

To achieve a sunny happiness, first acknowledge that the brain is a cloudy place.

By Jessa Crispin

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At the turn of the 20th century, Harvard University faced a quandary: Where should the new psychology department reside — among the science buildings, or in the new philosophy center, Emerson Hall? The argument was over more than just physical territory: It was about who was more qualified to make statements about human nature — philosophers or scientists. Psychology used to fall in the realm of philosophers, theologians, and the occasional metaphysicians. But with the rise of the theory of evolution, the release of the first comprehensive psychological textbook, and the rock-starification of natural scientists, even the American Psychological Association was holding seminars called “The Affiliation of Psychology: With Philosophy or with the Natural Sciences?”

Is psychology of the brain, or of the soul? Philosophers won Round 1 when Harvard’s psychology department was ultimately housed at Emerson Hall, but they have lost nearly every other round since. These days depression is “a chemical imbalance,” mood is the result of neurotransmitters, we’re told our personality is stitched into our genetic code, and philosophy majors can look forward to a rewarding career in the coffee-serving industry.

It was just a matter of time before the scientists focused their research dollars on the bright side of life, rather than just the mental illnesses and disorders. The science of happiness is a growing area of research. “Positive psychology” therapy is in increasing demand, with seminars like the Gallup Positive Psychology Summit growing in attendance every year. “Optimism” is considered a valid topic of scholarship. We have yet to develop the pharmaceuticals for happiness, but I’m sure our *Brave New World* soma prescriptions are on their way.

Did that sound cynical? Sonja Lyubomirsky, the author of *The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want*, understands that this language can make your skin crawl: “[S]ome people associate happiness-enhancing strategies with people who seem to be too cheery and blissed out to be real,” she writes. But, she would like us to know, “there are many faces of happiness aside from the ubiquitous smiley face and the inspirational poster.”

Scientists have determined that 40 percent of our general happiness is within our control. Half is determined by our genetic baseline for happiness potential, and 10 percent is due to circumstances like income, job situation, relationship status, etc. That leaves 40 percent that we control through our actions and the way we perceive the world. The problem, as researchers see it, is that people generally spend their time focusing on that 10 percent when they try to achieve happiness. They expect the more prestigious job, the younger wife, and the bigger house to fill a void in their lives. But once a person gets that job or woman or house, that becomes their new baseline and they start looking around for the next thing to acquire. What would really make people happy is to focus on that 40 percent that deals more with perception and attitude than money or love.

The first step is to determine just how happy you are right now. If you asked me straight out, “Are you happy?” I would answer, “Yes.” Yes, I am. I enjoy the life I lead, I have a strong support system of friends and colleagues, I feel realistically optimistic about my future, and many days my first action when I wake in the morning is to smile. Apparently that is not good enough, because I failed the two happiness quizzes in *The How of Happiness*. I scored a solid 4.1 points on a 7-point scale, well below the average of 5.7. Surely the average level of happiness is not that much higher than my score; if it were, there would be song and dance numbers out on the Chicago streets every day.

The quizzes measure things like how well you sleep, how much you enjoy being around other people, your decision-making abilities, and your self-image. For some, of course, “I have very warm feelings towards almost everyone” will bring to mind a lobotomized kitten poster and not a happiness ideal. The test reminded me of the standard depression questionnaire: “On a scale of ‘rarely’ to ‘most of the time,’ how often have you felt guilty? Like life was not worth living?” Many of the questions are quite similar, as if happiness and depression were just different sides of the same pathology.

More quizzes follow, this time to determine which happiness strategy is best for you. Many of the strategies are classic self-help material, only now with the added bonus of scientific documentation: exercise, random acts of kindness, expressing gratitude, meditation, forgiving those who have trespassed against us. The theme is focusing on the good in your life, strengthening your social bonds, and getting satisfaction from what you already have. The anecdotes and research that Lyubomirsky uses are mostly of people who probably should be happy — women who were so happy to get married, only to find that they're just as unhappy now as they were when they were single; or men who can never seem to enjoy themselves because they're too busy working toward that next promotion and next accolade. By reprioritizing, Lyubomirsky shows how people can learn happiness, and how that can help them think more clearly and work more creatively towards what will truly benefit them.

If it sounds much too simple, it's because it really is, despite what Lyubomirsky says. *The How of Happiness* is not a book for fuck-ups. It's not for the girl whose first sexual encounter was against her will, or the boy whose parents put their cigarettes out on his arms, or the woman who can look through a room full of 100 single, attractive people and be inexplicably drawn only to the one abusive alcoholic. Many of these strategies can alleviate some of the pain of the damaged — the social strategies, for example, can help a depressed person break out of the defensive shell they may find themselves in. However, much of what Lyubomirsky advocates is cognitive behavioral therapy, which is quite hot right now. But while studies show it gives people some control over their pain, they also make clear that it is mostly a coping strategy and not a cure.

Lyubomirsky is very wedded to the idea that happiness, depression, and the whole psychological and emotional world of people are issues of the brain, full stop. In the final section of the book, "If You Are Depressed," she wholeheartedly advocates anti-depressants, ignoring the mass of arguments against them (that their effectiveness rate is only slightly above that of the placebo rate, that they increase suicide risk, that they are overprescribed, etc.). She even rejects psychoanalysis altogether, saying it has only been proven useful for those who are only mildly depressed. The only type of therapy she advocates is "positive psychotherapy," where positive thinking replaces the tradition of confronting your demons.

The depression chapter is not the only Band-Aid suggested when a tourniquet might be required. One of the happiness strategies Lyubomirsky outlines is based on Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's theory of "flow": that certain activities can take a person out of their awareness of time and space. You're so focused on what you're doing that you don't notice that the sun has gone down or the noise outside. Lyubomirsky warps this idea somewhat, arguing that anything can cause a person to flow, even their jobs as janitors. "They saw themselves as part of a larger, integrated whole, not just mopping floors and emptying trash cans but serving as part of a system that improved people's lives... It's worth considering how your own job could benefit from a new perspective." It's also worth considering that if you dread going to work every day, maybe you should be in a different field. It's an off moment, and slightly condescending coming from someone who says she constantly flows in her work as a professor of psychology.

Lyubomirsky quotes William James at several points in *The How of Happiness* and calls him the "father of psychology." It's true — James was one of the first to comprehensively present the notion that our emotional lives had roots in our physiology. But when Harvard was discussing who could claim psychology as part of their domain, he was arguing that no one approach, whether that be science or philosophy or theology, can be used to fully understand the inner workings of human beings. It takes a comprehensive knowledge, and a lifetime of study across all disciplines, to grasp at the truth. I can't help but see *The How of Happiness* as a little shallow. The ground Lyubomirsky covers is part of my happy little world, but she's wrong when she declares it the one answer. I take my happiness with a little soul. • 28 January 2009