

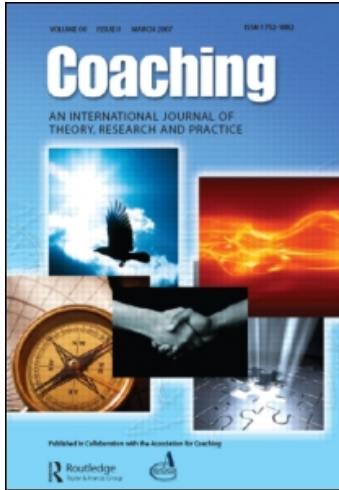
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The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach To Getting The Life You Want

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Book reviews

The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach To Getting The Life You Want, by S. Lyubomirsky, London and New York, Penguin Press, 2008, 384 pp., \$25.95 (hardback), ISBN 978-1594201486

Happiness might seem like a topic that could be a little wide of the remit for most coaches – but if you think so, you would be missing a trick. Compelling evidence is now emerging from the world of scientific research about how happiness can be a key driver – and not just an outcome – of better work performance, enhanced teamworking, improved relationships, greater longevity, and healthier lifestyles: issues that are squarely at the heart of many coaching assignments for executive, life, career and health coaches alike. The self-help literature abounds with books on how to be happy, but almost none of them are based on anything grounded in scientific evidence. This absence of evidence can bring a challenge from clients who want to know that they are getting from their coach something more than they could get from their neighbour over the garden fence – and this is where the call for evidence-based practice comes from.

Sonja Lyubomirsky's *The How of Happiness* squarely answers this challenge in three important ways. First, unlike almost any other book on how to be happy, this one is based on scientifically tested analyses of that very question. Second, unlike other authors who often just review other people's work and put their own interpretation on it, Lyubomirsky is a leading happiness researcher in her own right. Third, it provides revolutionary insights into the nature of happiness – and most importantly of all, the implications that has for us being able genuinely and sustainably to increase our levels of happiness – and it is this that makes it a compelling read for coaches in particular.

For many years – and until very recently – it was assumed that happiness couldn't be changed. This assumption was based on two powerful arguments. First, because happiness was considered to be largely determined by our genetic inheritance, so what we got from our parents in terms of our happiness endowment was pretty much what we were stuck with. Second, because even if we did manage to change our happiness – or life events did – and whether that change was up or down, we would always revert to pretty much the level that we were at before. This is what psychologists referred to as the 'hedonic treadmill' or hedonic adaptation. Given these reasons, there simply wasn't any reason why sensible, well-intending people would try to do anything to increase their happiness in a sustainable way. And psychologists followed suit, largely ignoring the whole question of happiness, let alone what could be done to increase happiness.

Lyubomirsky and colleagues, however, had a different view. Starting out with reviewing what they could from the existing research literature, they quickly realised that almost nothing had been done to test scientifically if it was possible to increase one's happiness. There was also virtually zero research that had really got to the bottom of the question of what determined one's happiness. Through painstaking

work, Lyubomirsky and colleagues arrived at their great insight – and the one that is at the heart of this book: that 40% of our happiness is the result of our intentional behaviours. That's right – fully 40% of our happiness is very much within our own control. Accounting for what's left, fully 50% is influenced by our genes (supporting the idea that our genetic inheritance was an important component of happiness), but, perhaps surprisingly, only 10% is determined by life circumstances at any given time. This 40% realization was a major breakthrough, and prompted Lyubomirsky and others to start looking at what could be done to increase happiness, sustainably, by focusing on one's intentional behaviours.

As a result of this research programme, with studies involving thousands of participants, Lyubomirsky has identified over a dozen activities that have been scientifically proven to increase happiness. These activities, including their research underpinnings, theoretical basis, and most importantly practical application, are meticulously detailed throughout the book. Very helpfully for the practising coach, Lyubomirsky also makes links between different activities that may be enjoyed by the same person, providing a cross-referencing appendix with further suggestions for people to follow up according to what has already proven effective for them.

This idea of 'proven effective for them' is a central thesis of the book, recognizing that there is no 'one size fits all' prescription for happiness increase interventions. Instead, Lyubomirsky has established that person-activity fit is crucial for success, with that fit potentially being related to the sources of your unhappiness (if you or your client are unhappy), your strengths, and your life circumstances. Further, increasing one's happiness requires effort and it should be made a habit, but that habit should include a diverse array of techniques, otherwise – yes you guessed it – hedonic adaptation can set in.

If the idea of helping your clients to be happier sounds all too 'soft and fluffy' for your work as a coach, bear in mind what is now starting to be discovered about happiness. It isn't just about feeling good, with that feeling good being a marker of positive things happening in your life (although it is). Beyond this, as Lyubomirsky's books shows, study after study is now demonstrating that happiness actually predicts many other good things that we may wish for: longer lives; better health; enhanced work performance; and closer relationships to name but a few. All of this is contained in this information-packed volume for your ease of reference, and for ease of referral to any sceptical clients!

For use in the coaching session, the book also includes easy to use diagnostics around happiness and depression, as well as person-activity fit, meaning that as a coach you have tools at your finger tips that you can use in the coaching session, should you wish to do so. With extensive notes detailing the hundreds of research studies on which it is based, Lyubomirsky strikes a crucial balance between being readable but also eminently evidence-based, and indeed more evidence-based than any other happiness book I have ever read, another feature distinguishing this volume from its many competitors.

If happiness is important to you, whether your own, your clients' or your children's, then read this book. It could just change lives, yours' and your coaching clients', by providing you with another lens through which to view that most important but most dismissed aspect of the human condition: our happiness.

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