

Can We Change?⁸

New research by psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky and her colleagues shows that our overall happiness level is determined by our genes, circumstances, and intentional activity. “Happy genes” account for about half of our happiness (50%). “Circumstances”—the conditions of one’s childhood and present circumstances like being married, well-paid, religious, and healthy—cover a mere 10%. The most interesting category is the 40% that refers to “intentional activity”—our activities and outlook. That’s what we *do*, such as exercising and spending time with friends; how we *think*, such as cultivating gratitude or kindness; and how *engaged* we are in our interests and values.

This means that, in contrast with what a lot of us believe, winning the lottery (circumstances) isn’t going to make you happy for life. You’ll probably return to your old happiness set point (determined by genes and the rest of your circumstances) *unless* you use the money to do what you like, like learning to play the mandolin or volunteering at your church, temple, or mosque (intentional activity). If you want to feel measurably happier, you should invest in intentional activity—how you spend your time and how

you think—rather than simply acquiring a particular object or life circumstance like a BMW or a new spouse. If you do acquire a BMW or a new spouse, learn to savor those things for a long time to elevate your happiness level. Cultivating intentional activity is an antidote to the hedonic treadmill described in Chapter 1.