

## Happiness

**LOQ 12-12** What is the *feel-good, do-good phenomenon*, and what is the focus of positive psychology research?

People aspire to, and wish one another, health and happiness. And for good reason. Our state of happiness or unhappiness colors everything. Happy people perceive the world as safer. Their eyes are drawn toward emotionally positive information (Raila et al., 2015). They are more confident and decisive, and they cooperate more easily. They rate job applicants more favorably, savor their positive past experiences without dwelling on the negative, and are more socially connected. They live healthier and more energized and satisfied lives (Boehm et al., 2015a; De Neve et al., 2013; Stellar et al., 2015). And they are more generous (Boenigk & Mayr, 2016). The simple conclusion: *Moods matter*. When you are gloomy, life as a whole seems depressing and meaningless—and you think more skeptically and attend more critically to your surroundings. Let your mood brighten and your thinking broadens, becoming more playful and creative (Baas et al., 2008; Forgas, 2008; Fredrickson, 2013).

College and university students' happiness helps predict their future life course. One study showed that the happiest 20-year-olds were later more likely to marry and less likely to divorce (Stutzer & Frey, 2006). In another study, which surveyed thousands of U.S. college students in 1976 and restudied them at age 37, happy students had gone on to earn significantly more money than their less-happy-than-average peers (Diener et al., 2002). When we are happy, our relationships, self-image, and hopes for the future also seem more promising.

Moreover—and this is one of psychology's most consistent findings—happiness doesn't just feel good, it *does* good. In study after study, a mood-boosting experience such as recalling a happy event has made people more likely to give money, pick up someone's dropped papers, volunteer time, and do other good deeds. Psychologists call it the **feel-good, do-good phenomenon** (Salovey, 1990).

The reverse is also true: Doing good also promotes good feeling. One survey of more than 200,000 people in 136 countries found that, nearly everywhere, people report feeling happier after spending money on others rather than on themselves (Aknin et al., 2013; Dunn et al., 2014). Kidney donation leaves donors feeling good (Brethel-Haurwitz & Marsh, 2014). Young children also show more positive emotion when they give, rather than receive, gifts (Aknin et al., 2015). Why does doing good feel so good? One reason is that it strengthens our social relationships (Aknin & Human, 2015; Yamaguchi et al., 2015). Some happiness coaches harness this *do-good, feel-good phenomenon* as they assign people to perform a daily "random act of kindness" and to record the results.

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### RETRIEVAL PRACTICE ANSWER

RP-8 b.

**catharsis** in psychology, the idea that "releasing" aggressive energy (through action or fantasy) relieves aggressive urges.

**feel-good, do-good phenomenon** people's tendency to be helpful when in a good mood.



**Martin E. P. Seligman** “The main purpose of a positive psychology is to measure, understand, and then build the human strengths and the civic virtues.”

 To assess your own well-being and consider ways to improve it, engage online with **Assess Your Strengths: How Satisfied Are You With Your Life, and How Could You Be More Satisfied?**

## Positive Psychology

William James was writing about the importance of happiness (“the secret motive for all [we] do”) as early as 1902. By the 1960s, the *humanistic psychologists* were interested in advancing human fulfillment. In the twenty-first century, under the leadership of American Psychological Association past-president Martin Seligman, **positive psychology** is using scientific methods to study human flourishing. This young subfield includes studies of **subjective well-being**—our feelings of happiness (sometimes defined as a high ratio of positive to negative feelings) or our sense of satisfaction with life.

Taken together, satisfaction with the past, happiness with the present, and optimism about the future define the positive psychology movement’s first pillar: *positive well-being*. Seligman views happiness as a by-product of a pleasant, engaged, and meaningful life.

Positive psychology is about building not just a pleasant life, says Seligman, but also a good life that engages one’s skills, and a meaningful life that points beyond oneself. Thus, the second pillar, *positive character*, focuses on exploring and enhancing creativity, courage, compassion, integrity, self-control, leadership, wisdom, and spirituality.

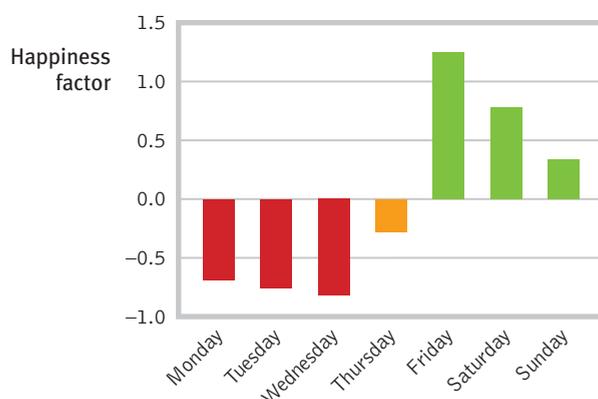
The third pillar, *positive groups, communities, and cultures*, seeks to foster a positive social ecology. This includes healthy families, communal neighborhoods, effective schools, socially responsible media, and civil dialogue.

“Positive psychology,” Seligman and colleagues have said (2005), “is an umbrella term for the study of positive emotions, positive character traits, and enabling institutions.” Its focus differs from psychology’s traditional interests in understanding and alleviating negative states—abuse and anxiety, depression and disease, prejudice and poverty. Indeed, psychology articles published since 1887 on depression have outnumbered those related to happiness by 15 to 1.

In ages past, times of relative peace and prosperity have enabled cultures to turn their attention from repairing weakness and damage to promoting what Seligman (2002) has called “the highest qualities of life.” Prosperous fifth-century Athens nurtured philosophy and democracy. Flourishing fifteenth-century Florence nurtured great art. Victorian England, flush with the bounty of the British Empire, nurtured honor, discipline, and duty. In this millennium, Seligman believes, thriving Western cultures have a parallel opportunity to create, as a “humane, scientific monument,” a more positive psychology, concerned not only with weakness and damage but also with strength and virtue. Thanks to his leadership, and to more than \$200 million in funding, the movement has gained strength, with supporters in 77 countries (IPPA, 2017; Seligman, 2016).

## The Short Life of Emotional Ups and Downs

**LOQ 12-13** How do time, wealth, adaptation, and comparison affect our happiness levels?



status updates. After eliminating exceptional days, such as holidays, he tracked the frequency of positive and negative emotion words by day of the week. The days with the most positive moods? Friday and Saturday (FIGURE 12.13). Similar analyses of questionnaire responses and 59 million Twitter messages found Friday to Sunday the week’s happiest days (Golder & Macy, 2011; Helliwell & Wang, 2015; Young & Lim, 2014). For you, too?

 See the **Video: Naturalistic Observation** for a helpful tutorial animation about this type of research design.

Over the long run, our emotional ups and downs tend to balance out, even over the course of the day. Positive emotion rises over the early to middle part of most days and then drops off (Kahneman et al., 2004;

Watson, 2000). A stressful event—an argument, a sick child, a car problem—can trigger a bad mood. No surprise there. But by the next day, the gloom nearly always lifts (Affleck et al., 1994; Bolger et al., 1989; Stone & Neale, 1984). Our overall judgments of our lives often show lingering effects of good or bad events, but our daily moods typically rebound (Luhmann et al., 2012). If anything, people tend to bounce back from a bad day to a *better-than-usual* good mood the following day.

Worse events—the loss of a spouse or a job—can drag us down for longer periods (Infurna & Luthar, 2016a). But eventually, our bad mood usually ends. A romantic breakup feels devastating, but in time the wound heals. In one study, faculty members up for tenure expected their lives would be deflated by a negative decision. Actually, 5 to 10 years later, their happiness level was about the same as for those who received tenure (Gilbert et al., 1998).

Grief over the loss of a loved one or anxiety after a severe trauma (such as child abuse, rape, or the terrors of war) can linger. But usually, even tragedy is not permanently depressing. People who become blind or paralyzed may not completely recover their previous well-being, but those with an agreeable personality usually recover near-normal levels of day-to-day happiness (Boyce & Wood, 2011; Hall et al., 1999). So do those who count their blessings and remain optimistic in the wake of a school shooting or terrorist bombing (Birkeland et al., 2016; Vieselmeyer et al., 2017). Even if you lose the use of all four limbs, explained psychologist Daniel Kahneman (2005a), “you will gradually start thinking of other things, and the more time you spend thinking of other things the less miserable you are going to be.” Contrary to what many people believe, even most patients “locked-in” a motionless body do not indicate they want to die (Bruno et al., 2008, 2011; Nizzi et al., 2012; Smith & Delargy, 2005).

The surprising reality: *We overestimate the duration of our emotions and underestimate our resiliency and capacity to adapt.* (As one who inherited hearing loss with a trajectory toward that of my mother, who spent the last 13 years of her life completely deaf, I [DM] take heart from these findings.)

## Wealth and Well-Being

Would you be happier if you made more money? In a 2006 Gallup poll, 73 percent of Americans thought they would be. How important is “being very well off financially”? “Very important” or “essential,” say 82 percent of entering U.S. college students (Eagen et al., 2016).

Money does buy happiness, up to a point, especially for people during their midlife working years (Cheung & Lucas, 2015). Moreover, people in rich countries are happier than those in poor countries (Diener & Tay, 2015). Having enough money to buy your way out of hunger, to have a sense of control over your life, and to treat yourself to something special predicts greater happiness (Fischer & Boer, 2011; Ruberton et al., 2016). As Australian data confirm, the power of more money to increase happiness is strongest at low incomes (Cummins, 2006). A \$1000 annual wage increase does a lot more for the average person in Malawi than for the average person in Switzerland. Raising low incomes will increase happiness more than will raising high incomes.

Once we have enough money for comfort and security, piling up more and more matters less and less. Experiencing luxury diminishes our savoring of life’s simpler pleasures (Cooney et al., 2014; Quoidbach et al., 2010). If you ski the Alps once, your neighborhood sledding hill pales. If you ski the Alps every winter, it becomes an ordinary part of life rather than an experience to treasure (Quoidbach et al., 2015).

And consider this: During the last half-century, the average U.S. citizen’s buying power almost tripled—enabling larger homes and twice as many cars per person, not to mention iPads and smart phones. Did it also buy more happiness? As **FIGURE 12.14** shows, Americans have become no happier. In 1957, some 35 percent said they were “very happy,” as did slightly fewer—33 percent—in 2014. Much the same has been true of Europe, Canada, Australia, and Japan, where increasing real incomes have *not* produced increasing happiness (Australian Unity, 2008; Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008; Di Tella & MacCulloch, 2010; Zuzanek, 2013). Ditto China, where living standards have

**positive psychology** the scientific study of human flourishing, with the goals of discovering and promoting strengths and virtues that help individuals and communities to thrive.

**subjective well-being** self-perceived happiness or satisfaction with life. Used along with measures of objective well-being (for example, physical and economic indicators) to evaluate people’s quality of life.

“No happiness lasts for long.”

Seneca, *Agamemnon*, 60 c.e.

“Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.”

Psalms 30:5

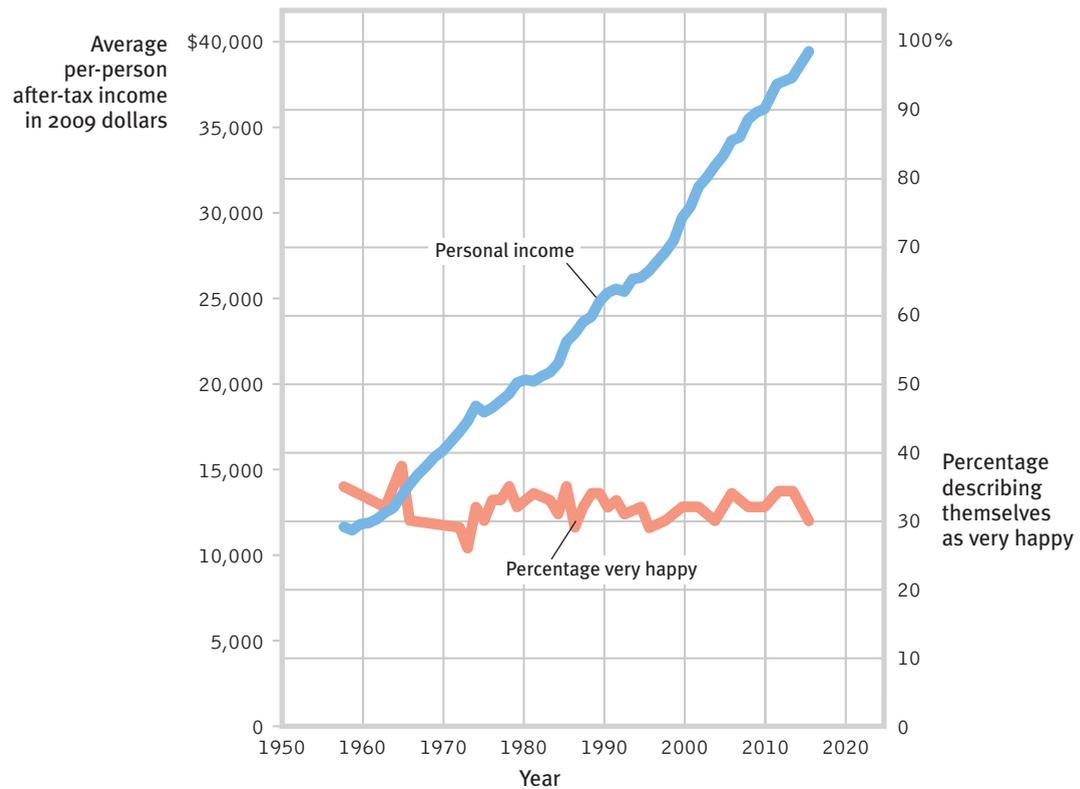
**Human resilience** Seven weeks after her 1994 wedding, Anna Putt of South Midlands, England, shown here with her husband, Des, suffered a brain-stem stroke that left her “locked-in.” For months after, she recalled, “I was paralyzed from the neck down and was unable to communicate. These were VERY frightening times. But with encouragement from family, friends, faith, and medical staff, I tried to keep positive.” In the ensuing three years, she became able to “talk” (by nodding at letters), to steer an electric wheelchair with her head, and to use a computer (with head movements that guide a cursor). Despite her paralysis, she has reported, “I enjoy going out in the fresh air. My motto is ‘Don’t look back, move forward.’ God would not want me to stop trying and I have no intention of doing so. Life is what you make of it!”



Anna Putt in her wheelchair

## ► FIGURE 12.14

**Does money buy happiness?** It surely helps us to avoid certain types of pain. Yet, though average buying power has almost tripled since the 1950s, Americans' reported happiness has remained almost unchanged. (Happiness data from National Opinion Research Center surveys; income data from *Historical Statistics of the United States and Economic Indicators*.)



"But on the positive side, money can't buy happiness—so who cares?"

"Continued pleasures wear off. . . . Pleasure is always contingent upon change and disappears with continuous satisfaction."

Dutch psychologist Nico Frijda (1988)

risen but life satisfaction has not (Davey & Rato, 2012; Easterlin et al., 2012). These findings lob a bombshell at modern materialism: *Economic growth in affluent countries has provided no apparent boost to people's morale or social well-being.*

Ironically, in every culture, those who strive hardest for wealth have tended to live with lower well-being, especially when they seek money to prove themselves, gain power, or show off rather than support their families (Donnelly et al., 2016; Niemiec et al., 2009; Srivastava et al., 2001). Thinking about money causes people to become less attuned to others—less warm and caring (Vohs, 2015). Those who instead strive for intimacy, personal growth, and community contribution experience a higher quality of life (Kasser et al., 2014).

## Two Psychological Phenomena: Adaptation and Comparison

Two psychological principles explain why, for those who are not poor, more money buys little more than temporary happiness and why our emotions seem attached to elastic bands that pull us back from highs or lows. In its own way, each principle suggests that happiness is relative.

**HAPPINESS IS RELATIVE TO OUR OWN EXPERIENCE** The **adaptation-level phenomenon** describes our tendency to judge various stimuli in comparison with our past experiences. As psychologist Harry Helson (1898–1977) explained, we adjust our *neutral* levels—the points at which sounds seem neither loud nor soft, temperatures neither hot nor cold, events neither pleasant nor unpleasant—based on our experience. We then notice and react to variations up or down from these levels. Thus, after an initial surge of pleasure, improvements become our “new normal,” and we then require something even better to give us a boost of happiness.

So, could we ever create a permanent social paradise? Probably not (Campbell, 1975; Di Tella et al., 2010). People who have experienced a recent windfall—from a lottery, an inheritance, or a surging economy—typically feel elated (Diener & Oishi, 2000; Gardner & Oswald, 2007). So would you, if you woke up tomorrow to your utopia—perhaps a world with no bills, no ills, and perfect exam scores. But eventually, you would adapt to this new normal. Before long, you would again sometimes feel gratified (when events exceed your expectations) and sometimes feel deprived (when they fall below).

*The point to remember:* Feelings of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, success and failure are judgments we make based partly on expectations formed by our recent experience (Rutledge et al., 2014). Satisfaction, as Richard Ryan (1999) said, “has a short half-life.” Ditto disappointment, which means that you may bounce back from a setback or from your team’s defeat sooner than you expect.

**HAPPINESS IS RELATIVE TO OTHERS’ SUCCESS** We are always comparing ourselves with others. And whether we feel good or bad depends on who those others are (Lyubomirsky, 2001). We are slow-witted or clumsy only when others are smarter or more agile. When we sense that we are worse off than others with whom we compare ourselves, we experience **relative deprivation**. Satisfaction stems less from our income than from our income rank (Boyce et al., 2010). Better to make \$50,000 when others make \$25,000 than to make \$100,000 when friends, neighbors, and co-workers make \$200,000 (Solnick & Hemenway, 1998, 2009). Likewise, a raise will make you happier if it’s greater than the raise received by others around you (Graham, 2011).

When expectations soar above attainments, we feel disappointed. Thus, the middle- and upper-income people in a given country, who can compare themselves with the relatively poor, tend to have greater life satisfaction than their less fortunate compatriots. Nevertheless, once people reach a moderate income level, further increases buy little more happiness. Why? Because as people climb the ladder of success they mostly compare themselves with local peers who are at or above their current level (Gruder, 1977; Suls & Tesch, 1978; Zell & Alicke, 2010). “Beggars do not envy millionaires, though of course they will envy other beggars who are more successful,” noted British philosopher Bertrand Russell (1930/1985, p. 90). Thus, “Napoleon envied Caesar, Caesar envied Alexander, and Alexander, I daresay, envied Hercules, who never existed. You cannot, therefore, get away from envy by means of success alone, for there will always be in history or legend some person even more successful than you are” (pp. 68–69).

Over the last half-century, inequality in Western countries has increased. For CEOs at America’s largest corporations (the Standard & Poor 500), the CEO-to-worker pay ratio—20 to 1 in 1965—rose to 335 to 1 in 2015 (AFL-CIO, 2016; Kiatpongsan & Norton, 2014). The rising economic tide shown in Figure 12.14 has lifted the yachts more than the rowboats. Increasing inequality has accompanied economic growth. Does it matter? Does this explain why economic growth has not been associated with increased happiness (Oishi & Kesebir, 2015)? *Yes*. Places with great inequality have higher crime rates, obesity, anxiety, and drug use, and lower life expectancy (Burkhauser et al., 2016; Ratcliff, 2013; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Times and places with greater income inequality also tend to be less happy—a result that people’s social comparisons help explain (Cheung & Lucas, 2016; Helliwell et al., 2013; Roth et al., 2016).

Just as comparing ourselves with those who are better off creates envy, so counting our blessings as we compare ourselves with those worse off boosts our contentment. In one study, university women considered others’ deprivation and suffering (Dermer et al., 1979). They viewed vivid depictions of grim city life in 1900. They imagined and then wrote about various personal tragedies, such as being burned and disfigured. Later, the women expressed greater satisfaction with their own lives. Similarly, when mildly depressed people have read about someone who was even more depressed, they felt somewhat better (Gibbons, 1986). “I cried because I had no shoes,” states a Persian saying, “until I met a man who had no feet.”

 For a 6.5-minute examination of historical and modern views of happiness, see the **Video: The Search for Happiness**.

## What Predicts Our Happiness Levels?

### **LOQ 12-14** What predicts happiness, and how can we be happier?

Happy people share many characteristics (TABLE 12.2). But why are some people normally so joyful and others so somber? Here, as in so many other areas, the answer is found in the interplay between nature and nurture.

“I have a ‘fortune cookie maxim’ that I’m very proud of: Nothing in life is quite as important as you think it is while you are thinking about it. So, nothing will ever make you as happy as you think it will.”

Nobel laureate psychologist  
Daniel Kahneman, Gallup interview,  
“What Were They Thinking?” 2005

The effect of comparison with others helps explain why students tend to have a higher academic self-concept if they attend a school where most other students were not exceptionally able (Marsh & Parker, 1984; Rogers & Feller, 2016; Salchegger, 2016). If you were near the top of your graduating class, you might feel inferior or discouraged upon entering a college or university where all students were near the top of their class.

“Comparison is the thief of joy.”

Attributed to Theodore Roosevelt



“Researchers say I’m not happier for being richer, but do you know how much researchers make?”

**adaptation-level phenomenon** our tendency to form judgments (of sounds, of lights, of income) relative to a neutral level defined by our prior experience.

**relative deprivation** the perception that one is worse off relative to those with whom one compares oneself.

**TABLE 12.2**  
**Happiness Is . . .**

Researchers Have Found That Happy People Tend to	However, Happiness Seems Not Much Related to Other Factors, Such as
Have high self-esteem (in individualist countries).	Age.
Be optimistic, outgoing, and agreeable.	Gender (women are more often depressed, but also more often joyful).
Have close, positive, and lasting relationships.	Physical attractiveness.
Have work and leisure that engage their skills.	
Have an active religious faith (especially in more religious cultures).	
Sleep well and exercise.	

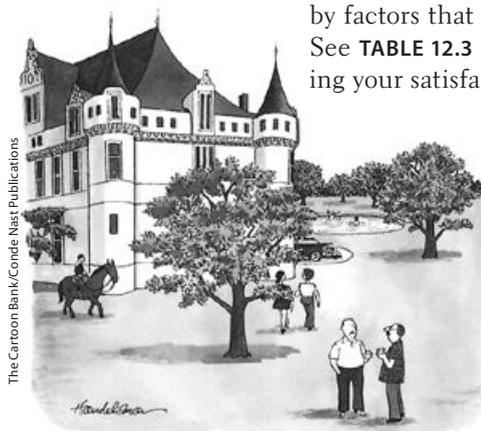
Information from De Neve & Cooper (1998); Diener et al. (2003, 2011); Headey et al. (2010); Lucas et al. (2004); Myers (1993, 2000); Myers & Diener (1995, 1996); Steel et al. (2008). Veenhoven (2014, 2015) offers a database of 13,000+ correlates of happiness at WorldDatabaseofHappiness.eur.nl.

Genes matter. In one analysis of over 55,000 identical and fraternal twins, 36 percent of the differences among people’s happiness ratings was heritable—attributable to genes (Bartels, 2015). Even identical twins raised apart are often similarly happy. Moreover, researchers are now drilling down to identify how specific genes influence our happiness (De Neve et al., 2012; Fredrickson et al., 2013).

But our personal history and our culture matter, too. On the personal level, as we have seen, our emotions tend to balance around a level defined by our experience. On the cultural level, groups vary in the traits they value. Self-esteem and achievement matter more in Western cultures, which value individualism. Social acceptance and harmony matter more in communal cultures such as Japan, which stress family and community (Diener et al., 2003; Fulmer et al., 2010; Uchida & Kitayama, 2009).

Depending on our genes, our outlook, and our recent experiences, our happiness seems to fluctuate around a “happiness set point,” which disposes some people to be ever upbeat and others more negative. Even so, after following thousands of lives over two decades, researchers have determined that our satisfaction with life can change (Lucas & Donnellan, 2007). Happiness rises and falls, and can be influenced by factors that are under our control (Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014; Nes et al., 2010). See **TABLE 12.3** for research-based suggestions for improving your mood and increasing your satisfaction with life.

If we can enhance our happiness on an *individual* level, could we use happiness research to refocus our *national* priorities more on the pursuit of happiness? Many psychologists believe we could. Happy societies are not only prosperous, but also places where people trust one another, feel free, and enjoy close relationships (Helliwell et al., 2013; Oishi & Schimmack, 2010a). Thus, in debates about the minimum wage, economic inequality, tax rates, divorce laws, health care, and city planning, people’s psychological well-being can be a consideration. Many political leaders agree: 43 nations have begun measuring their citizens’ well-being (Diener et al., 2015). Britain’s Annual Population Survey, for example, asks its citizens how satisfied they are with their lives, how worthwhile they judge their lives, and how happy and how anxious they felt yesterday (ONS, 2015).



*“I could cry when I think of the years I wasted accumulating money, only to learn that my cheerful disposition is genetic.”*

TABLE 12.3

## Evidence-Based Suggestions for a Happier Life

- **Take control of your time.** Happy people feel in control of their lives: Set goals and divide them into daily aims. We all tend to overestimate how much we will accomplish in any given day, but the good news is that we generally *underestimate* how much we can accomplish in a year, given just a little daily progress.
- **Act happy.** Research shows that people who are manipulated into a smiling expression feel better. So put on a happy face. Talk *as if* you feel positive self-esteem, are optimistic, and are outgoing. We can often act our way into a happier state of mind.
- **Seek work and leisure that engage your skills.** Happy people often are in a zone called *flow*—absorbed in tasks that challenge but don't overwhelm them. Passive forms of leisure (watching TV) often provide less flow experience than exercising, socializing, or expressing artistic interests.
- **Buy shared experiences rather than things.** Money buys more happiness when spent on experiences, especially on socially shared experiences, that you look forward to, enjoy, remember, and talk about (Caprariello & Reis, 2013; Carter & Gilovich, 2010; Kumar & Gilovich, 2013, 2015). The shared experience of a college education may cost a lot, but, as pundit Art Buchwald said, "The best things in life aren't things."
- **Join the "movement" movement.** Aerobic exercise can relieve mild depression and anxiety as it promotes health and energy. Sound minds reside in sound bodies.
- **Give your body the sleep it wants.** Happy people live active lives yet reserve time for renewing sleep and solitude. Sleep debt results in fatigue, diminished alertness, and gloomy moods. If you sleep now, you'll smile later.
- **Give priority to close relationships.** Compared with unhappy people, happy people engage in less superficial small talk and more meaningful conversations (Mehl et al., 2010). So resolve to nurture your closest relationships by *not* taking your loved ones for granted: Give them the sort of kindness and affirmation you give others. Relationships matter.
- **Focus beyond self.** Reach out to those in need. Perform acts of kindness. Happiness increases helpfulness, but doing good also makes us feel good.
- **Count your blessings and record your gratitude.** Keeping a gratitude journal heightens well-being (Davis et al., 2016). Take time to savor positive experiences and achievements, and to appreciate why they occurred (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2012). Express your gratitude to others.
- **Nurture your spiritual self.** For many people, faith provides a support community, a reason to focus beyond self, and a sense of purpose and hope. That helps explain why people active in faith communities report greater-than-average happiness and often cope well with crises.

Source: Digested from David G. Myers, *The Pursuit of Happiness* (Harper).



RubberBall Selects/Alamy

## RETRIEVAL PRACTICE

- RP-9 Which of the following factors does NOT predict self-reported happiness?
- Age
  - Personality traits
  - Sleep and exercise
  - Active religious faith

## RETRIEVAL PRACTICE ANSWER

RP-9 a. Age does NOT effectively predict happiness levels. Better predictors are personality traits, sleep and exercise, and religious faith.