

dispatches from the world of ideas

THE LATEST DISH ON BLISS

Want to get more joy out of life?

Gretchen Rubin did, but not by making radical changes. After reviewing numerous happiness studies and testing every happiness tip, rule, and theory she came across, the married mother of two devised her own simple approach to well-being. She chronicles her yearlong adventure and outlines her 12 “personal commandments” and four “splendid truths” about

happiness in her book, *The Happiness Project* (Harper, 2009).

“One of the things I wanted was to do things like clean my closets, but also find a way to embrace the moments, because it’s hard sometimes to keep track of those kinds of things when you’re in the tumult of everyday life,” Rubin said on the *Today Show*. “I set little resolutions to try to make concrete changes and work

through them month by month. It turns out that if you do all those things you tell yourself you ought to do, you really can be happier.”

Rubin is far from alone in her pursuit of what promotes happiness. More and more studies are probing how we can best boost our spirits through thought and behavior. Longtime happiness researcher Sonja Lyubomirsky, professor of psychology at the University of California-Riverside, contends that with commitment, energy, and vigilant practice, we can control about 40% of our happiness. Here is a look at what some other research has revealed.

A study in *Psychological Science* examined the conversations of 79 male and female college stu-

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dents. Based on interviews with participants, investigators discovered that people who engage in deep, meaningful discussion instead of just small talk are prone to rate themselves as happy.

The work of University of Pennsylvania psychologist Martin Seligman has yielded a “positive psychology” movement that stresses individual strengths and talents. Seligman and company have found that happy people forego “keeping up with the Joneses” and instead pursue their own absorbing interests that leave them little time for worry.

In the *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, researchers reported on “affective forecasting error”—the mistaken belief that future events will have a great impact on our happiness. The study showed that people wrongly predict how they will feel and often cannot remember the erroneous prediction moving forward. The conclusion? Numerous factors affect future happiness rather than single events.

The good news from a study published in *Psychology and Aging* is that as we get older, we generally get happier. Findings revealed that with aging comes emotional stability, greater compassion, and heightened awareness of what is most important in life.

—Julie Jacobs

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