**“A Formula for Happiness”**

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HAPPINESS has traditionally been considered an elusive thing. To some, even trying to achieve it is an exercise in futility. It has been said that “happiness is as a butterfly which, when pursued, is always beyond our grasp, but which if you will sit down quietly, may alight upon you.”

Social scientists have caught the butterfly. After 40 years of research, they attribute happiness to three major sources: genes, events and values. Armed with this knowledge and [a few simple rules](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sDH4mzsQP0w&feature=youtu.be), we can improve our lives and the lives of those around us. We can even construct a system that fulfills our founders’ promises and empowers all Americans to pursue happiness.

Psychologists and economists have studied happiness for decades. They begin simply enough — by asking people how happy they are.

The richest data available to social scientists is the University of Chicago’s General Social Survey, a survey of Americans conducted since 1972. This widely used resource is considered the scholarly gold standard for understanding social phenomena. The numbers on happiness from the survey are surprisingly consistent. Every other year for four decades, roughly a third of Americans have said they’re “very happy,” and about half report being “pretty happy.” Only about 10 to 15 percent typically say they’re “not too happy.” Psychologists have used sophisticated techniques to verify these responses, and such survey results [have](http://books.google.com/books?id=3toRUh4L12EC&lpg=PA61&ots=mFdqWaA76X&dq=Reports%20of%20subjective%20well-being%3A%20Judgmental%20processes%20and%20their%20methodological%20implications&lr&pg=PA61) [proved](http://www.econ.ucla.edu/workshops/papers/Applied/krueger_schkade_1-17-07.pdf)[accurate](http://psycnet.apa.org/journals/psp/60/6/927/).

Beneath these averages are some demographic differences. For many years, researchers found that women were happier than men, although recent studies contend that the gap has narrowed or may even have been reversed. Political junkies might be interested to learn that conservative women are particularly blissful: about 40 percent say they are very happy. That makes them slightly happier than conservative men and significantly happier than liberal women. The unhappiest of all are liberal men; only about a fifth consider themselves very happy.

But even demographically identical people vary in their happiness. What explains this?

The first answer involves our genes. [Researchers at the University of Minnesota](http://www.psych.umn.edu/psylabs/happness/happy.htm) have tracked identical twins who were separated as infants and raised by separate families. As genetic carbon copies brought up in different environments, these twins are a social scientist’s dream, helping us disentangle nature from nurture. These researchers found that we inherit a surprising proportion of our happiness at any given moment — around 48 percent. (Since I discovered this, I’ve been blaming my parents for my bad moods.)

If about half of our happiness is hard-wired in our genes, what about the other half? It’s tempting to assume that one-time events — like getting a dream job or an Ivy League acceptance letter — will permanently bring the happiness we seek. And studies suggest that isolated events do control a big fraction of our happiness — up to 40 percent at any given time.

But while one-off events do govern a fair amount of our happiness, each event’s impact proves remarkably short-lived. People assume that major changes like moving to California or getting a big raise will make them permanently better off. They won’t. Huge goals may take years of hard work to meet, and the striving itself may be worthwhile, but the happiness they create dissipates after just a few months.

So don’t bet your well-being on big one-off events. The big brass ring is not the secret to lasting happiness.

To review: About half of happiness is genetically determined. Up to an additional 40 percent comes from the things that have occurred in our recent past — but that won’t last very long.

That leaves just about 12 percent. That might not sound like much, but the good news is that we can bring that 12 percent under our control. It turns out that choosing to pursue [four basic values](http://www.aei.org/files/2009/03/11/Murray-Happiness.pdf) of faith, family, community and work is the surest path to happiness, given that a certain percentage is genetic and not under our control in any way.

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