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Mather LifeWays researchers, educators, and other professionals who are leaders in creating Ways to Age Well.<sup>SM</sup>

# In the Pursuit of Happiness

## *Moving Beyond Daily Pleasures and Experiences*

*Brought to you by Mather LifeWays Institute on Aging*

You are watching your granddaughter's first soccer game and notice how endearing it is that she keeps looking over to make sure you are watching her. She dribbles towards the goal, kicks, and then scores her first soccer goal! She looks back at you with a smile on her face, seeing you jump up and down with excitement. *At this moment, are you happy?* You've had an exhausting day running errands, but you come home, consumed by the excitement of seeing Spike, your cocker spaniel who is so excited to welcome you home! *Are you happy?*

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Of course you are happy! You are experiencing two highly satisfying experiences: one, seeing your granddaughter score her first goal; and two, being greeted by a "best friend" that can't wait to tell you how much he has missed you today. What if instead, you were asked, "Are you satisfied with your life enough to know that you will leave behind a positive legacy?" or, "If you could change anything about your life, would you?"

## **NEW STUDIES REVEAL THE SCIENCE BEHIND HAPPINESS**

For most people, happiness is defined as pleasurable or satisfying experiences; but, in the field of psychology, new studies behind the "science of happiness" argue that this state of mind is more profound than engaging in daily pleasures and experiences. To experience lasting happiness, positive psychologists suggest we should seek fulfillment (pleasant life); become more engaged (good life); and find meaning and purpose (meaningful life); in our lives.

## **MAKING THE SWITCH TO POSITIVE WAYS OF THINKING**

Some psychologists estimate that more than 90 percent of research on emotions has concentrated on various forms of mental illness such as depression and anxiety. However, during the last few years, more than 3,000 scientific papers have explored the benefits and impacts of happiness. Why? Positive psychologists believe that by studying positive strengths, attitudes, and behaviors, individuals can develop ways to transform their whole being. Once we begin the paradigm shift from negative to positive attitudes and behaviors, it allows us to become more wellness-minded—perhaps enabling us to live longer.

## **ARE WE BORN WITH IT?**

Research conducted by the University of Minnesota's Dr. David Lykken proposed the idea that humans have a pre-determined "happiness set point"—a genetic trait that helps to determine our life satisfaction. This "happiness set point," is essentially a default happiness level that we return to repeatedly after positive and negative events or experiences. When Lykken surveyed 4,000 sets of identical and fraternal twins from 1936–1955, he found that 50 percent of one's life satisfaction comes from our genetic programming, which means that our genes influence our

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personality. Our circumstantial factors (income, marital status, religion, climate, etc.) contribute about 8 percent to our “happiness set point,” while the remaining portion is attributed to our life experiences.

### **MONEY, MARRIAGE, YOUTH, RELIGION— WHAT REALLY MAKES US HAPPY?**

In 1967, psychologist Warner Wilson found that happy people are young, healthy, and married. In the same study, Wilson also emphasized money, education, and religiosity as factors in our happiness. However, later research proves that only half of these claims turned out to be true. So what *circumstances* make us happy? If you’re looking to strike it rich in the lottery to solve life’s problems, there is strong evidence that money does not buy happiness. Research conducted by positive psychologists Ed Diener and Robert Biswas-Diener demonstrated that, once basic needs are met, additional income does little to raise our level of happiness or satisfaction with life.

Conversely, marriage is one of the factors strongly correlated with happiness. Ninety-five percent of the adult population marries at some point, with 40 percent of them saying they are “very happy.” Only 23 percent of unmarried adults describe themselves this way. But, the relationship of marriage and happiness is complicated because it does not answer the question: Does marriage really make us happier, or do happier people have a higher tendency of getting married? Or, perhaps it’s age and the wisdom behind our years that encourages lasting happiness.

According to a 2007 survey by economists David Blanchflower and Andrew Oswald, the path of happiness and age follow a U-shaped curve throughout the course of our lives. Between the ages of 16 and 45, we see the highest probability of depression. After 45, the probability of depression starts to decline. The two authors theorize that those in mid-life experience a greater probability of depression because they realize that they may not have the ability to achieve their childhood dreams anymore. They also speculate that, as we age, we have a greater chance to profit from our own sense of wisdom.

Recent research has indicated that, among individuals who are weekly churchgoers, 85 percent reported being “very satisfied” with life. According to Dr. Michael Nielsen of Georgia Southern University, this is partly attributed to firm value systems, positive spiritual experiences or feelings of transcendence, and the strong social support system within religious communities.

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## **CAN WE REALLY INFLUENCE OUR OWN HAPPINESS?**

With 50 percent of happiness predetermined through our genetic make-up, is it possible to raise our level of happiness? Yes, if you consider that the other half of the formula is based on our personal circumstances and life experiences. As previously reported, a small percentage (8 percent) of our “happiness set point” can be influenced through our strong social bonds with family and friends, marriage, and a connection to community and faith.

Throughout the course of our lives, we can experience both positive and negative events that have a similar impact on our level of happiness. Those experiences allow our happiness to temporarily fluctuate from our “happiness set point,” but we eventually adapt to those changes and return to our normal range. To permanently shift our range to find enduring happiness, we need to become aware of, and concentrate on, experiencing and savoring positive experiences (the pleasant life), becoming more engaged (the good life), and finding a personal path filled with meaning and purpose (the purposeful life).

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*Mather LifeWays is a unique nonprofit organization that enhances the lives of older adults by creating Ways to Age Well.<sup>SM</sup> Learn more about our award-winning research at Mather LifeWays **Institute on Aging**, our **senior living residences**, and our **community initiatives**.*

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