

The Promise of Intentional Activity

 **Happiness consists in activity. It is a running stream, not a stagnant pool.**
– John Mason Good

Main Idea:
Happiness is a
"running stream,"
not a stagnant
pool.

Many are familiar with the Serenity Prayer, written by German philosopher Reinhold Niebuhr and widely adopted for use in twelve-step programs: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." But how can you know the difference? It should be obvious by now where the secret to happiness does not lie. The fountain of happiness lies not in changing our genetically determined set points, for they are, by definition, resistant to change, influence, or control. We are also unlikely to find lasting happiness by changing our life circumstances. Although we may achieve temporary boosts in well-being by moving to new parts of the country, securing raises, or changing our appearances, such boosts are unlikely to be long-lasting. The primary reason, as I have argued, is that people readily and rapidly adapt to positive circumstantial changes. I would furthermore be remiss if I failed to point out other reasons why circumstantial changes may prove unsuccessful in making us permanently happier: because they can be very costly, often impractical, and sometimes even impossible. Does everyone have the money, resources, or time to change her living situation, her job, her spouse, her physical appearance?

If the secret to happiness does not lie in increasing our set points or in positively impacting the circumstances of our lives, what is left? Is it possible to attain greater happiness and sustain it? To be sure, most of us do become happier at some point during our lives. Indeed, contrary to popular belief, people actually get happier with age. A twenty-two-year study of about two thousand healthy veterans of World War II and the Korean War revealed that life satisfaction increased over the course of these men's lives, peaked at age sixty-five, and didn't start significantly declining until age seventy-five (see p. 64).

This is heartening news. But what precisely can we do to hasten or bolster such increases in happiness? The answer lies in the pie chart theory of happiness. Recall that 50 percent of individual differences in happiness are governed by genes, 10 percent by life circumstances, and the remaining 40 percent by what we do and how we think—that is, our intentional activities and strategies. The secret of course lies in that 40 percent.*** If we observe genuinely happy people, we shall find that they do not just sit around being contented. They make things happen. They pursue new understandings, seek new achievements, and control their thoughts and feelings. In sum, our intentional, effortful activities have a powerful effect on how happy we are, over and above the effects of our set points and the circumstances in which we find ourselves. If an unhappy person wants to experience interest, enthusiasm, contentment, peace, and joy, he or she can make it happen by learning the habits of a happy person.

***But click [here](#) for two slides from Lyubomirsky's 2019 Melbourne talk on revisiting this pie chart.

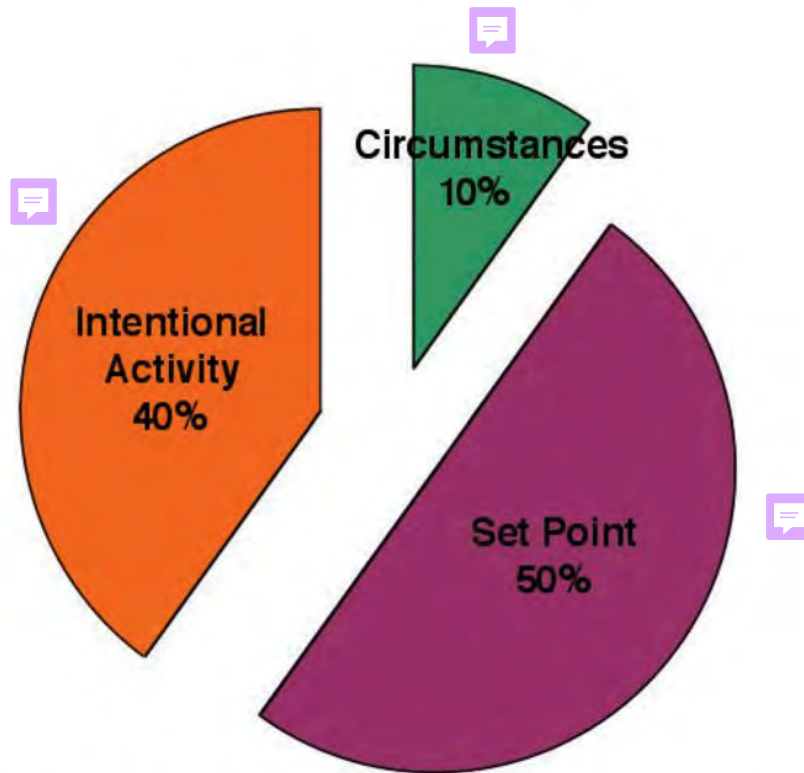


Figure 1. The pie chart aspect of the sustainable happiness model (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

3 REGRETS ABOUT THE PIE CHART:

- Assigning hard numbers (50/10/40) to the three factors influencing happiness • Not clarifying that the three factors are not independent, additive, or non-overlapping • Pie chart widely misinterpreted– for example, percentages wrongly used to describe individuals, not percent variance accounted for

WHAT'S THE BOTTOM LINE?

- There are at least three major influences on happiness: genetics, circumstances, and activities • With the caveats that they are not independent, additive, or non-overlapping; they include measurement error; and their precise contribution is unknown and could change over time • All three factors exert sizable influences on well-being • The pie chart calls for future research to test whether practicing intentional activities can increase happiness