

## *New science shows how to inject real joy into your life*

BY HOLLY J. MORRIS

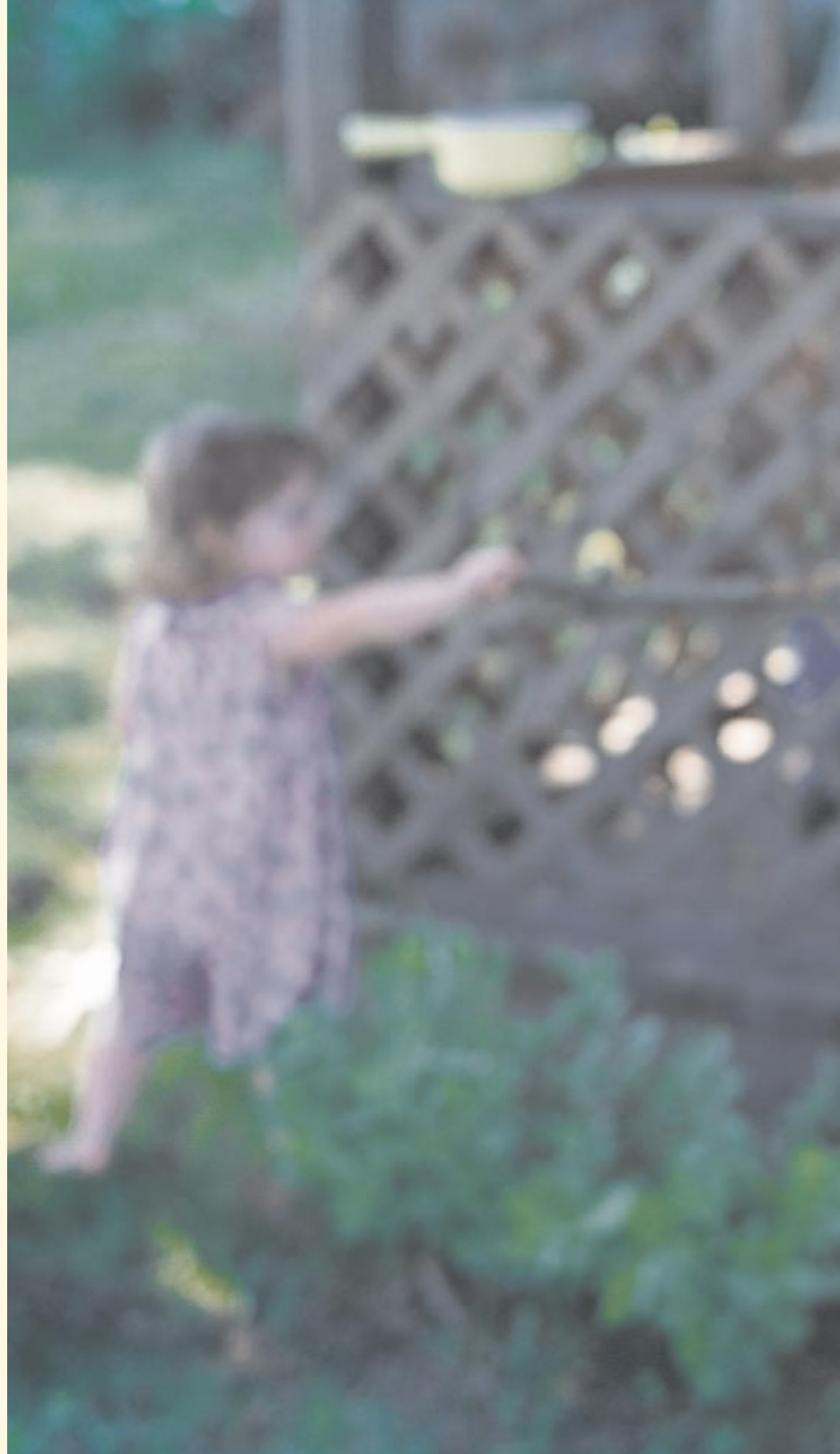
**T**here's an ancient tale of happiness that appears in many cultures, and it goes something like this: Once there was a prince who was terribly unhappy. The king dispatched messengers to find the shirt of a happy man, as his advisers told him that was the only cure. They finally encountered a poor farmer who was supremely content. Alas, the happy man owned no shirt.

Ahhh, happiness. Ineffable, elusive, and seemingly just out of reach. For most of the 20th century, happiness was largely viewed as denial or delusion. Psychologists were busy healing sick minds, not bettering healthy ones. Today, however, a growing body of psychologists is taking the mystery out of happiness and the search for the good life. Three years ago, psychologist Martin Seligman, then president of the American Psychological Association, rallied colleagues to what he dubbed "positive psychology." The movement focuses on humanity's strengths, rather than its weaknesses, and seeks to help people move up in the continuum of happiness and fulfill-

### **CONTENTMENT**

**WHAT IT IS:** Feeling safe and calm.

**WAYS TO GET IT:** A friendly, nonthreatening environment is key. If you're not so lucky, relaxation exercises may mimic the body's response to contentment. **Rebecca Shaw** finds it in marriage to Ray Shaw, and in her two children, Christian, 3, and Sierra, 2—and by not putting up with mean people.



# Happiness



# Explained

PHOTO ILLUSTRATIONS BY KEVIN HORAN FOR *USN&WR*



ment. Now, with millions of dollars in funding and over 60 scientists involved, the movement is showing real results. Far from being the sole product of genes, luck, delusions, or ignorance, happiness can be learned and cultivated, researchers are finding.

Decades of studying depression have helped millions become less sad, but not necessarily more happy—a crucial distinction. When you alleviate depression (no mean task), “the best you can ever get to is zero,” says Seligman, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania. But “when you’ve got a nation in surplus and at peace and not in social turmoil,” he explains, “I think the body politic lies awake at night thinking about ‘How do I go from plus 2 to plus 8 in my life?’”

Indeed, people in peaceful, prosperous nations aren’t necessarily getting any happier. Though census data show that many measures of quality of life have risen since World War II, the number of people who consider themselves happy remains flat. And people are 10 times as likely to suffer depression as those born two generations ago. Researchers have scads of information on what *isn’t* making people happy. For example, once income provides basic needs, it doesn’t correlate to happiness. Nor does intelligence, prestige, or sunny weather. People grow used to new climates, higher salaries, and better cars. Not only does the novelty fade but such changes do nothing to alleviate real problems—like that nagging fear that nobody likes you.

**Happiness helpers.** Scientists also know what works. Strong marriages, family ties, and friendships predict happiness, as do spirituality and self-esteem. Hope is crucial, as is the feeling that life has meaning. Yes, happy people may be more likely to have all these things at the start. But causality, researchers find, goes both ways. Helping people be a little happier can jump-start a process that will lead to stronger relationships, renewed hope, and a general upward spiraling of happiness.

The average person has a head start. Decades of international survey research suggest that most people in developed nations are basically happy. This tendency toward mild cheerfulness may have evolved to keep people moving—glum ancestors would have moped, not mobilized.

Some have more of a head start than others. University studies of twins suggest that about half of one’s potential for happiness is inherited. Researchers think happiness is influenced not by a single “happy gene,” but by inborn predispositions toward qualities that help or hinder happi-



## CHANGE

**WHAT IT IS:** What you need when your goals aren’t satisfying you.

**WAYS TO GET IT:** Figure out why what you’re doing isn’t working. **Allison Waxberg**, a scientist in the cosmetics industry, wanted more creativity in her life. She took art classes, realized she had talent, and now attends Brooklyn’s Pratt Institute.

ness, such as optimism or shyness. And personality doesn’t fluctuate that much over an average life span. People seem to have “happiness set points”—base lines that mood drifts back to after good and bad events.

There’s a lot of wiggle room on either side of that base line, though. Most posi-

tive psychologists refer to a set *range*. “If you’re a more gloomy, pessimistic person, you’re probably never going to be really deliriously happy, but you can get into the high end of your possible range and stay there,” says psychologist Ken Sheldon of the University of Missouri.

Michael Lee, too, believes happiness



can be learned. "You practice it day in and day out," says the 28-year-old marketing director from San Jose, Calif. He has always been pretty happy but has seen his joy grow. A Catholic, he started a faith-sharing group with childhood friends. Under guidance from Jesuit priests, they learned to take time each night to reflect on the positive in their everyday lives—"subtle things like meeting a new person . . . or kids sitting out in the yard playing." In cultivating his appreciation of the routine, and surrounding himself with other happy people, Lee grew happier. Boosting your happiness isn't always easy, though: Moving up within your range can mean

working against your inborn personality traits, learned thinking habits, environment, or all three. But the latter two can change. "If you want to keep your happiness at the higher end of the set range," says Sonja Lyubomirsky, a psychologist at the University of California–Riverside, "you have to commit yourself every day to doing things to make you happy." One way is to find the right goals and pursue them. Sheldon's research suggests that goals reflecting your interests and values can help you attain and maintain new levels of happiness, rather than returning to base line. By setting and achieving a progression of goals, you can boost your

## MOOD MEASUREMENT

### How happy are you? Find out

**O**ne way scientists measure happiness is by simply asking people to evaluate their overall satisfaction with their lives. This scale of life satisfaction was developed by psychologist Ed Diener of the University of Illinois–Urbana-Champaign and is used worldwide to gather data on happiness. The scoring at the bottom shows how you compare with other Americans.

#### Taking the test

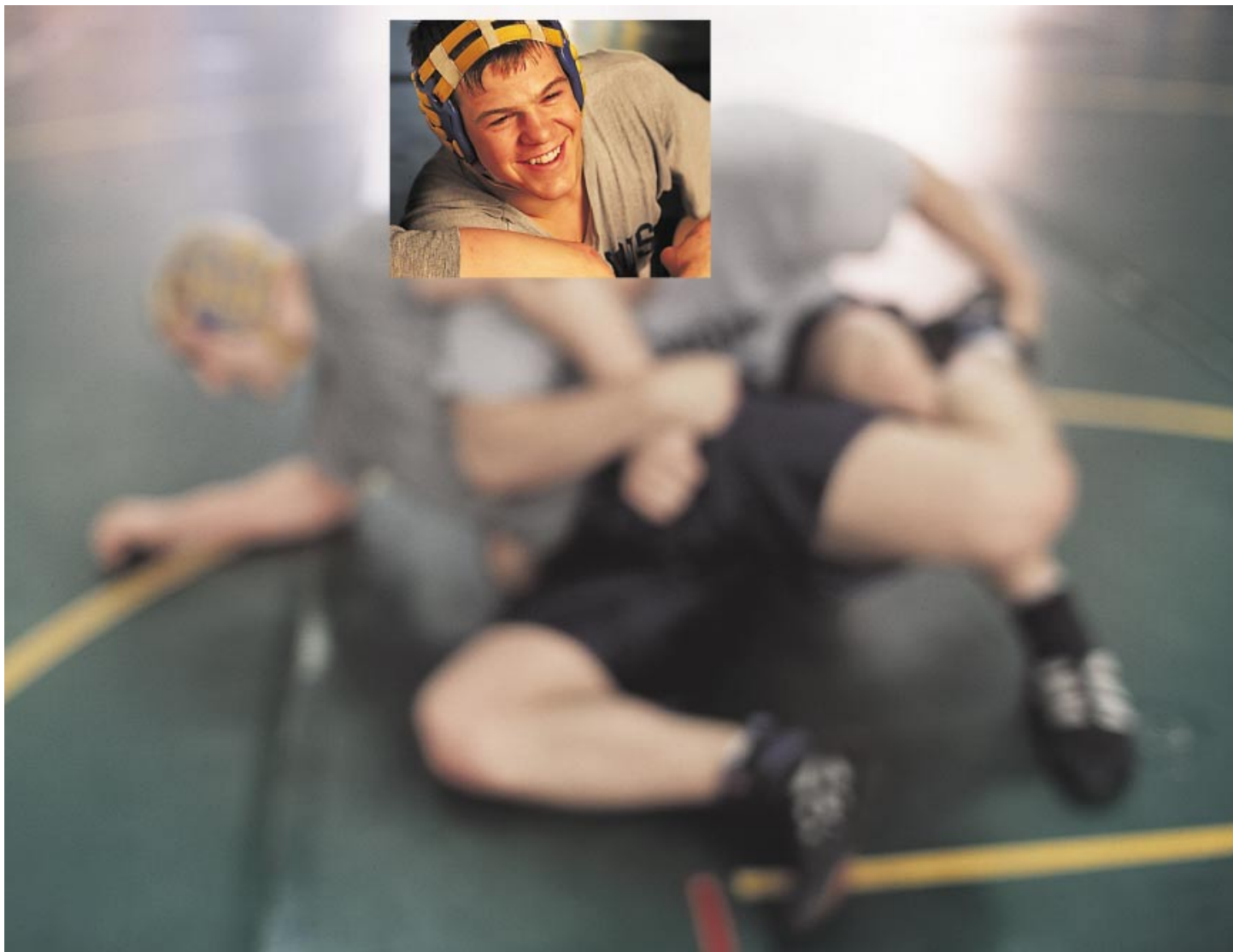
For each of the five items below (A–E), select an answer from the 0-to-6 response scale. Place a number on the line next to each statement, indicating your agreement or disagreement with that statement.

- 6:** Strongly agree
- 5:** Agree
- 4:** Slightly agree
- 3:** Neither agree nor disagree
- 2:** Slightly disagree
- 1:** Disagree
- 0:** Strongly disagree

- A** \_\_\_\_\_ Your life is very close to your ideal.
- B** \_\_\_\_\_ The conditions of your life are excellent.
- C** \_\_\_\_\_ You are completely satisfied with your life.
- D** \_\_\_\_\_ So far you have obtained the important things you want in your life.
- E** \_\_\_\_\_ If you could live your life over, you would change nothing.

#### TOTAL

- 26 to 30:** Extremely satisfied, much above average
- 21 to 25:** Very satisfied, above average
- 15 to 20:** Somewhat satisfied, average for Americans
- 11 to 14:** Slightly dissatisfied, a bit below average
- 6 to 10:** Dissatisfied, clearly below average
- 0 to 5:** Very dissatisfied, much below average



## GAGGLE OF GIGGLES

## Laughter as its own punch line

**P**eals of laughter cut through the persistent early-morning drizzle at Seattle's Green Lake Park. As passers-by gape—and then grin—four men and women titter, giggle, chortle, and guffaw, in what looks like a yoga class gone goofy. Led by energetic Stephanie Roche, they alternate rhythmic chanting and clapping with penguinlike waddling and pretend sneezing—all while howling with laughter. There's no punch line; there's not even a joke. This is a laughing club, one of at least 20 begun in the United States this year. They are held in parks, churches, and often in nursing homes, where the

gentle cheer is especially welcome.

Laughing clubs are an export from India, where they're familiar sights in hundreds of neighborhoods. Invented by physician Madan Kataria in 1995, the clubs don't rely on humor or jokes. Rather, they focus on the act of laughing, which releases stress and promotes deep, healthy breathing. At first, the ha-has and hee-hees can be forced. Eye contact is required, which helps break the ice. But few can resist breaking into spontaneous laughter during the "lion laugh"—stick out your tongue, google your eyes, and use your hands as paws. "Sometimes people have to fake it," says psychologist

Steve Wilson, 60, of Columbus, Ohio, whose World Laughter Tour trains laughter-club leaders. "And then it flips and it just becomes hysterical."

Roche's laughing club started a mere



**Inmates at Bombay's Arthur Road Jail do the "lion laugh" at a laughing club.**



## FLOW

**WHAT IT IS:** The state of intense concentration that occurs during challenging, goal-directed activities.

**WAYS TO GET IT:** Flow can arise from pastimes, like playing sports or music, but also from reading and good conversation. College sophomore **Jason Vincens** finds flow in competitive wrestling.

well-being. Even when you fail, you can better maintain that higher level next time you reach it, though you'll probably top out at the high end of your range.

Allison Waxberg, 30, wasn't miserable and wasn't depressed—but she wasn't especially happy, either. After six years as a skin scientist in the cosmetics industry, she longed for more-creative work. "I grew up drawing, but I always felt like I had to do something like be a doctor or a lawyer or something professional," she says. When people feel they have no choice in the goals they pursue, they're not going to be satisfied. Goals that derive from fear, guilt, or social pressure probably won't make you happier, even if you attain them. "Ask yourself, 'Is this intrinsically interesting and enjoyable?' If it isn't, do I at least believe in it strongly?" says Sheldon. "If I don't, why the hell am I doing it?"

Waxberg tried a series of jobs, including making prosthetic limbs, but had yet to combine her technical and creative sides. Finally, she took some art classes and proved to herself that she had talent. She's now earning an industrial design master's from Brooklyn's Pratt Institute,

where she has won acclaim for her ceramics, and is doing her thesis on skin. She hopes to start a new career as a design consultant this year.

For Waxberg, finding the right goal was key—but first she had to figure out why the old ones weren't working. The trick is to know what kind of goals you have. Diffuse goals, such as "be someone," are next to impossible to achieve. More-concrete goals ("get a job") that relate back to the abstract goal ("be a success") are more satisfying. That also goes for the goal of "being happy." "You'll be happier if you can get involved in things and do well at them, but don't be thinking too much about trying to get happier by doing them," says Sheldon. "It's really kind of Zen in a way."

**Out with the bad.** Another path to greater happiness is cultivating positive emotions. They're good for more than warm fuzzies: Good feelings broaden thinking and banish negative emotions, says Barbara Fredrickson, a psychologist at the University of Michigan. Negative emotions narrow thought, by necessity. Ancestors didn't have time to sift through creative escape options when fears loomed. But positive emotions open new routes for

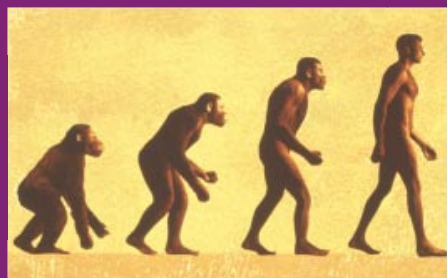
thinking. When researchers induce positive emotions, thinking becomes more expansive and resourceful.

Most people can't feel positive emotions at will. But you can approach events in a way that gets them going, then let momentum take over. Jay Van Houten made a decision to see the positive when faced with a potentially fatal brain tumor. The 54-year-old business manager from Boise, Idaho, listed the benefits, such as "a built-in excuse for not hearing things like 'Please take out the trash,'" as the surgery left him deaf in one ear.

Though laughing at yourself is fleeting, Fredrickson believes such moments have lasting consequences. "Positive emotions and broadened thinking are mutually building on one another, making people even more creative problem-solvers over time, and even better off emotionally," she says. Coping with one problem well—as Van Houten did with humor—may make people more resilient next time trouble comes along. Van Houten says he's much happier now, especially as nothing seems as bad as a potentially fatal brain tumor. After his surgery, he had to relearn balance. "I still drill into the ground if I turn too fast," he says. "You've got to approach

two weeks ago. After she saw a documentary, *The Laughing Club of India*, at a Seattle film festival (it airs August 28 on Cinemax), she became a "certified laughter leader" at one of Wilson's workshops. She patterned her club after the Indian versions, holding it in a neighborhood park three days a week at 7 a.m. Clubs are encouraged to create their own laughs: Wilson can reel off a long list of obscure ones, such as the "airline safety instruction laugh," in which you gesture at exits and don an imaginary oxygen mask. The Seattle group is already customizing. Karen Schneider-Chen, a 49-year-old jail outreach worker, mimics raindrops with fluttering fingers. "We're working on a Seattle rain laugh," she says. —H.J.M., with Bellamy Pailthorpe in Seattle

# THIS WEEK IN *generation gaps.*



**THIS WEEK IN HISTORY™**

**MONDAY AT 8PM/7C**

In 1835, Charles Darwin began formulating his theory of evolution. Plenty of monkey business will follow.



**THE HISTORY CHANNEL**

WHERE THE PAST COMES ALIVE.



it with a certain amount of humor to get you through the day.”

Using humor to feel better works because thinking can't be both narrow and broad. To test this idea, Fredrickson had subjects prepare a speech, then let them off the hook. As they calmed, she showed them video clips that sparked various emotions: a puppy playing with a flower

(joy), ocean waves (contentment), a scene from the 1979 tear-jerker *The Champ* (sadness), and a computer screen-saver (neutral). Those who felt joy and contentment calmed down faster. This doesn't mean you should think about puppies when you're down (though if it helps, go for it), but that when you've done all you can about a

problem, a positive distraction can banish lingering bad feelings.

One of the worst enemies of positive emotions is feeling threatened, says Fredrickson. A safe environment is key. Rebecca Shaw found that happiness just needed a chance to flourish. “The day I met my husband was the day my boyfriend broke up with me, and I was pregnant,”

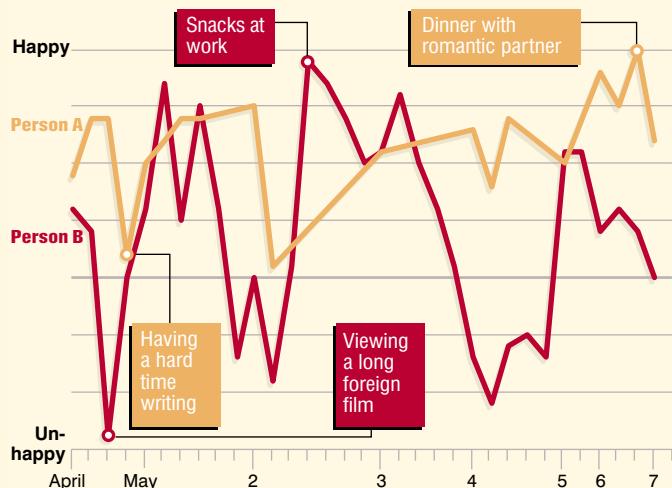
## HIGHS AND LOWS

### Taking one's happy temp



Scientists also measure happiness with “experience sampling,” in which mood is assessed on multiple occasions over time. With Palm devices that beeped at random intervals, two *U.S. News* writers answered questions such as “How pleasant are you feeling?” several times a day for a week.

Researcher Christie Scollon of the University of Illinois analyzed the data. The red and orange lines combine positive and negative emotions to show overall mood. Person A is happier than the average American—she feels more positive than negative emotions. Person B is unhappier than most—and she's moody. She feels a lot of bad along with the good. This illustrates an important notion: Feeling good is more than just not feeling bad. —H.J.M.



## PERSPECTIVE

**WHY GET IT:** It helps people see the good in their lives when things are going badly.

**WAYS TO GET IT:** Comparing one's situation with a worst-case scenario really can make people feel better. After a potentially fatal brain tumor, not much fazes **Jay Van Houten** these days. Here, he volunteers with the mentally and physically disabled.

says the 32-year-old of Ridge, Md. Miserable, lonely, and despairing, she had just moved back in with her parents to get her bearings. Then she ran into an old friend, Ray Shaw. As they spent time together in the following weeks, happiness “stole up” on her. “Suddenly I was just smiling and didn’t even realize it—it was just such a subtle turn,” she says. Now, four years after their marriage, the defense contractor, inventor, and stay-at-home mom doubts she could be happier. “My husband didn’t replace any of the things that were missing,” she says. “He just kind of gave me the sanctuary to go and find them myself.”

Part of seeking positive emotions is being open to them in everyday life. Mindfully approaching sources of good feelings can be more lasting than seeking instant gratification. Distinctions can disappear. “Overeating ice cream and shopping get lumped in with spending time with your family or pursuing an interesting activity,” says Fredrickson. People may choose shortcuts with little meaning over activities with positive consequences. A more nuanced appreciation of good feelings—“experiential wisdom,” Fredrickson calls it—may help people benefit more from positive emotions. So think: Is ice cream really going to make me feel better for longer than the time it takes to eat it?

Some emotions simply aren’t that hard to feel, if you take the time. Take gratitude. Robert Emmons of the University of California–Davis found that people who wrote down five things for which they were grateful in weekly or daily journals were not only more joyful; they were healthier, less stressed, more optimistic, and more likely to help others. You don’t have to write things down to be grateful for them, of course, though it helps to make them concrete. During difficult times, “I just tend to focus on the things I’m grateful for and the parts of life that are good,” says Sean David Griffiths, 38, a project officer at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. And gratitude could help ward off mindless materialism, says Emmons. “When you don’t appreciate stuff is when you get

rid of it and get something else.”

Researchers are also finding more positive emotions than once were thought to exist. Anyone who has witnessed a touching good deed will recognize the heartwarming tingling in the chest that follows. Psychologist Jonathan Haidt of the University of Virginia dubbed this uplifting emotion “elevation,” and finds that it makes people want to be kind. Such emotions break down mental barriers and help people see the world in new ways. Even mild feelings of elevation can change minds. Haidt found that students who watched a documentary about Mother Teresa were more interested in activities like volunteer work. (In contrast, the subjects who watched clips of *America’s Funniest Home Videos* were interested in self-focused activities like watching TV and eating.)

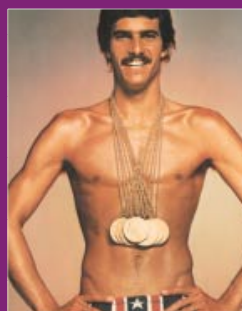
The feeling of hope is one reason spirituality may correlate with well-being. Hope fosters optimism, and faith is, by definition, hope for the future. And the churchgoing form of faith can be a built-in social support network. This is not to say that atheists can’t be happy, but it helps explain why so many do find happiness in faith, and why researchers con-

tinue to find connections between faith, optimism, and physical health.

**Teaching positive.** Nurturing optimism is a key way to help hope and happiness flourish. Optimism predisposes people toward positive emotions, whereas pessimism is a petri dish for depression. Over 20 years ago, Seligman and his colleagues developed a method to teach optimism by helping people recognize and dispute inaccurate thoughts. Called “learned optimism” (and outlined in the book of the same name), they found it could inoculate against depression as well. Teaching optimistic thinking styles to middle schoolers lowered the occurrence of depression as the children aged. Even optimistic children grew happier. “These are sticky skills,” says Karen Reivich, codirector of the Penn Resiliency Project. “Once you start using them, you feel better, and you keep using them.”

The skills of learned optimism are based on findings that pessimists blame themselves for problems, figure they will last forever, and let them invade every corner of their lives. Good events are freak occurrences. Optimists look for outside causes of bad events and assume they will be fleeting—but take credit for good events and bet they’ll keep happening. (Because optimism

# THIS WEEK IN *the record industry.*



**THIS WEEK IN HISTORY™**

**MONDAYS AT 8PM/7C**

In 1972, Mark Spitz won seven gold medals. It’s one way to sell a lot of posters of yourself in a bathing suit.



**THE  
HISTORY  
CHANNEL.**

WHERE THE PAST COMES ALIVE.



tends to act as a self-fulfilling prophecy, they often do.) By learning new ways to explain events, pessimists can become more optimistic and more resilient, leaving them better equipped to appreciate the good and cope with the bad. Today, these skills are taught in Pennsylvania schools by teachers trained through Adaptiv Learning Systems, which also offers a more grown-up version to the corporate world.

One of the most positive states of all is easy enough to come by—if you're willing to concentrate. Dubbed “flow” by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, director of the Quality of Life Research Center in Claremont, Calif., it's the single-minded focus of athletes and artists, scientists and writers, or anyone doing anything that poses a challenge and demands full attention. People in flow are too busy to think about happiness, but afterward they think of the experience as incredibly positive. And it's followed by well-earned contentment.

People find flow in myriad ways—a hobbyist or athlete can tell you that. “The secret to my happiness isn't a secret at all,” says 19-year-old Jason Vincens, a sophomore at the University of Illinois. “I found something I love and I'm doing it.” He has been wrestling competitively since sixth grade. When he wrestles, he doesn't worry about anything else. Afterward, he doesn't have the energy. But you don't have to take up tennis or the violin to find flow: A discussion with good friends can do the trick.

The paradox of flow is that many people have it, but don't appreciate it. Csikszentmihalyi is endlessly puzzled that adults and teenagers feel more creative and excited while working but would rather be doing something else. “I think it's basically a set of assumptions for many people, that work is something that we do simply for our paycheck,” he says. So rather than enjoy it, people tend to rush home and watch TV, which rarely provides much pleasure. It's the same principle that causes people to put off activities they enjoy, but which require effort, such as swimming laps.

**With age, serenity.** Wait around if you must, as some research suggests that people grow happier with age. You don't have the high highs of youth, but neither do you have the low lows. Older people often pursue goals less out of guilt or social pressure and more for their own satisfaction. Also, age often brings wisdom, which adds depth to happiness. You could think of happiness growing out, rather than up.

And yet the stereotype that happy people are shallow persists. “Me being a chronically happy person doesn't mean that I haven't had some real down spells,” says Lars Thorn, 24, who works in marketing in Manchester, Vt. During a diffi-

cult breakup, he told a friend he was feeling terrible. “And she said, ‘Oh, no you're not—you're *Lars!*’” he recalls. “I was perceived as being a cardboard cutout of a person with no real emotion.” But new research suggests happy people may be more realistic than unhappy folks. Psychologist Lisa Aspinwall of the University of Utah finds that optimists are more open to negative information about themselves than pessimists. Positive mood gives them the resources to process bad news. Optimists are also more likely to accept what they cannot change and move on, says Aspinwall. Indeed, she says, they have an intuitive grasp of the Serenity Prayer, which asks for the wisdom to know the difference between what one can and cannot change.

There's no disputing that positive psychology's findings echo the exhortations of ancient wisdom, and let's face it—Oprah. Be grateful and kind and true to yourself. Find meaning in life. Seek silver linings. But then, what did you expect—be mean to children and animals?

So are people just not listening to their grandmothers and gurus? Psychologist Laura King of the University of Missouri has found that people at least *say* they know these things and consistently rate meaning and happiness above money. But in a study with colleague Christie Scollon, she found that people were all for meaning, yet most said they didn't want to work for it. Other evidence echoes her findings: People say one thing but do another. “One of the problems,” says King, “might be that people don't understand that lives of happiness and meaning probably involve some hard work.”

Will people work to learn happiness? Positive psychologists think that if they can tease out the best in people, happiness will follow. To Seligman, happiness is “the emotion that arises when we do something that stems from our strengths and virtues.” And those, anyone can cultivate. “There's no set point for honesty,” he says. The idea that happiness is the sum of what's best in people may sound suspiciously simple, but it's a whole lot easier than finding that happy man's shirt. |

## SPIRITUALITY

**WHAT IT DOES:** People with some form of spiritual belief (not just religion) are often happier and more optimistic.

**WHY IT WORKS:** Possibly because it can promote hope and social support.

**Michael Lee** started Lighthouse, a faith-sharing group. Here, he prays with his wife, **Agatha Chung**, at a meeting.

