Happy individuals are more likely than their less happy peers to have fulfilling marriages and relationships, high incomes, superior work performance, community involvement, robust health, and a long life.

—Lyubomirsky, Diener, and King (2005)

What does it mean to be happy? Is it possible to increase one’s level of happiness? Is it even important to be happy? These are questions taken up by researchers in the area of subjective well-being, who have tended to link subjective well-being with scores on three variables: happiness, satisfaction with life, and neuroticism. When researchers ask people about their happiness, the focus is on their emotional state: how they feel about their world and themselves. Questions about persons’ satisfaction with life address a more global judgment about the “rightness” of their lives; they need to weigh their outcome in life against alternative outcomes and assess whether they’re satisfied with the result. In addition, a third factor—low neuroticism—is added to form the basic triad of subjective well-being.¹ Although a sharp distinction between emotional and cognitive measures has been called into question (Crooker & Near, 1998), most studies nevertheless have shown that these three areas should be considered as separate facets of subjective well-being and must be measured as such (Diener & Lucas, 1999). Therefore, high subjective well-being is found when people report they are feeling happy, are satisfied with life, and are experiencing a low level of neuroticism. Research on subjective well-being became the first systematic study of happiness to focus on large groups of people and to use the statistical procedures and methodology of contemporary science.

MEASUREMENT OF SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

Among the main obstacles that held back research on happiness was how to measure it. The solution in subjective well-being research was to use a straightforward approach, with

¹ Neuroticism is a fairly general term that refers to chronic problems with anxiety, worry, mild depression, and low self-esteem. It is an older term that is still used for research purposes in psychology but is no longer used as a diagnostic label. David Watson and Lee Anna Clark (1984) have proposed a more general trait, negative affectivity, that is a combination of trait anxiety, neuroticism, general maladjustment, and other tendencies to experience distress and discomfort across many situations.
researchers allowing participants themselves to define terms of happiness. In this way, the true judge of how happy someone was would be “whoever lives inside a person’s skin” (Myers & Diener, 1995, p. 11). Therefore, researchers would simply ask participants, “Are you happy?” or “How happy are you?” Researchers reasoned that because evaluations of happiness are subjective phenomena, they should be measured with subjective reports. Somewhat unexpectedly, this solution seemed to work well (Diener, 1994; Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2009). That is, early investigations of subjective well-being found that people who reported higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction also tended to behave as if they were indeed happier and more satisfied; in addition, others perceived these people as being happier and more satisfied. Therefore, researchers found it empirically acceptable simply to ask people about their perceived happiness and life satisfaction.

**Self-Report Measures of Subjective Well-Being**

Several measurement instruments were devised for this research endeavor. The actual measurement scale might assess self-perceptions of happiness (e.g., Fordyce, 1988). It might ask people to compare themselves with others (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999), respond to a question such as “In most ways my life is ideal” (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), or provide a series of cartoon faces that vary from big smiles to deep frowns and ask people which one fits how they feel (Andrews & Withey, 1976).

Research on how to measure well-being has expanded rapidly since the founding of positive psychology. In 2016, a review of 99 self-report measures of well-being was published by Linton, Dieppe, and Medina-Lara. Several international organizations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have published guidelines on how to measure well-being (OECD, 2013). Figures 3.1 and 3.2 give examples of scales used to measure well-being.

Although the specific questions posed varied slightly, they were all based on two assumptions. First, all assumed that the amount of happiness or satisfaction that a person experiences can be meaningfully translated into a numerical scale. In this way, if one scored a 6 on a test of happiness before getting married and an 8 on the same test subsequent to getting married, then it was scientifically justifiable to say that his or her happiness had increased after marriage. The second assumption was that if two people both scored an 8 on the same test, then they both had approximately the same level of happiness. For example, if one person was super-rich and lived on the French Riviera and the other was a New York City taxi driver, but both scored an 8 on the same test of happiness, then they were about equally happy. Surprisingly to some investigators, studies have tended to support the validity of these two assumptions (Diener, 1984).

**Stability of Subjective Well-Being**

The other question is whether scores on measures of subjective well-being represented stable aspects or were temporary reactions to ongoing events, that is, mere fluctuations in mood. Fortunately for researchers, the scientific evidence has supported the notion that one’s average level of happiness and life satisfaction are both relatively stable (Costa, McCrae, & Zonderman, 1987; Diener, 1994; McCrae, 2011). Indeed, studies have found that self-ratings of subjective well-being are relatively stable over many years (Diener & Lucas, 1999). Positive personality traits have been found to be stable for up
FIGURE 3.1  ■ The Satisfaction With Life Scale

The Satisfaction with Life Scale

DIRECTIONS: Below are five statement with which you may agree or disagree. Using the 1–7 scale below, indicate your agreement with each item by placing the appropriate number in the line preceding that item. Please be open and honest in your responding.

1 = Strongly Disagree
2 = Disagree
3 = Slightly Disagree
4 = Neither Agree or Disagree
5 = Slightly Agree
6 = Agree
7 = Strongly Agree

1. In most ways my life is close to my ideal.
2. The conditions of my life are excellent.
3. I am satisfied with life.
4. So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.
5. If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.

Source: The Satisfaction With Life Scale [Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985]. Courtesy of Ed Diener, PhD.

to 30 years (Costa et al., 1987). In a clever study related to the stability of happiness, Harker and Keltner (2001) found that positive emotion in high school was significantly related to well-being 30 years later. That is, investigators asked women to bring in their high school yearbooks and the researchers then measured the intensity of their smiles in the yearbook photos. A genuinely felt smile is called a “Duchenne” smile, and it involves one’s entire face including the muscles around the eyes. Harker and Keltner found that the intensity of women’s smiles in high school yearbook photos was significantly related to well-being and quality of marital relationships 30 years later.

Although self-reports of subjective well-being appear stable over time, it is nevertheless possible that this finding exists only because the social environments were stable because nothing traumatic or intensely stressful happened to the “happy” people. Yet this hypothesis does not seem to be accurate. Why? Because people are relatively stable in self-reporting their subjective well-being despite highly negative events that may have occurred in their lives (Diener & Larsen, 1984; Lucas, 2008).

These measurement strategies did not completely solve all the issues. Some studies still find people may complete the questionnaires in a way that makes them “look good,” which is a type of response bias called desirability bias (Heintzelman, Trent, & King, 2015). Self-reports of happiness do not show a perfect match with other indicators of well-being. Life events, moods, and other daily fluctuations definitely impact how people evaluate their
subjective well-being on a daily basis (Diener et al., 2009). A validation study by Ponocny, Weismayer, Stross, and Dressler (2016) found that scores from self-report measures are artificially high when compared with the extent of real difficulties in people’s lives. Ed Diener (2009b), one of the leading researchers in this field, has proposed that studies of well-being should include multiple indicators in order to help solve some of these problems. Nevertheless, self-report measures of well-being are still the most widely used assessment tool in most studies of happiness and life satisfaction.

**FIGURE 3.2 The Subjective Happiness Scale**

**Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS)**

For each of the following statements and/or questions, please circle the point on the scale that you feel is most appropriate in describing you.

1. In general, I consider myself:

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<td>not a very happy person</td>
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2. Compared to most of my peers, I consider myself:

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<td>less happy</td>
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3. Some people are generally very happy. They enjoy life regardless of what is going on, getting the most out of everything. To what extent does this characterization describe you?

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4. Some people are generally not very happy. Although they are not depressed, they never seem as happy as they might be. To what extent does this characterization describe you?

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*Source:* The Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). Courtesy of Sonja Lyubomirsky, PhD.

*Note:* Item #4 is reverse coded.
Why Is Happiness Important?

When researchers began measuring subjective well-being, what did they find? A quick glance at various social indices might lead one to conclude that happiness is a rare commodity. After all, the mass media depict a society with high rates of divorce and drug problems, and sales of pop psychology books designed to fix a plethora of human miseries are on the rise. However, instead of affirming this apparently bleak situation, studies in many Western industrialized nations found that most people reported “above average” (i.e., 6–8 on a 10-point scale) levels of happiness and satisfaction with their lives. Anthony Greenwald invented the term beneffectance to describe how most people view themselves, that is, as beneficial and effective (see Wright, 2017, p. 83).

Diener analyzed subjective well-being reports from over 1 million people in 45 nations and found that the average global self-report of subjective well-being was 6.75 on a 10-point scale (see Myers & Diener, 1995). The Gallup-Sharecare Well-Being Index (see https://wellbeingindex.sharecare.com) tracks daily reports of subjective well-being in the United States and around the world. In December 2017, the Well-Being Index in the United States was 6.1 out of a possible 10. However, the index reported that well-being in the United States had dropped in 2017 for the first time in 3 years. Nonetheless, this index is still above an average score of 5 out of 10. A disturbing trend is that levels of worry in the United States are above 2016 levels with 31.7% of respondents saying they worry “a lot of the day.” From an optimistic viewpoint, this could be interpreted to indicate that slightly less than a third of the population reports significant worry.

Though many people report their well-being as “above average,” almost all investigators believe there is room for improvement. Indeed, research has supported the notion that a little more happiness might be a good thing for most people’s lives. In an impressive review of over 225 research papers on subjective well-being, Sonja Lyubomirsky, Ed Diener, and Laura King (2005) found that people who reported feeling happier and more satisfied with life tended to be successful in a wide range of life domains. Compared to people who reported they were only moderately happy or not so happy, people who said they were happy and experienced more positive emotions had better marriages, experienced more fulfilling friendships and social relationships, were healthier, more involved in their communities, had better coping skills, and were more satisfied with their jobs and tended to have higher incomes. In addition, feeling positive emotion may help students to learn more effectively (Parish & Parish, 2005), may reduce racial bias (Johnson & Fredrickson, 2005), and may help people process visual information more accurately (Anderson, 2009). In other words, higher subjective well-being is related to a large array of elements that most people associate with having a better life. Of course, the issue of causality is important: Are people’s lives functioning well because they’re happy, or are they happy because their lives are functioning well? Lyubomirsky, King, and Diener found interesting evidence that suggests being happier came first and was partially responsible for the other positive outcomes in life.

The scientific consensus seems to be that being happier can help people lead more satisfying lives for themselves, the people around them, and their communities (Boehm, Ruberton, & Lyubomirsky, 2018). The next question might be is it possible to be too happy? Apparently, the answer is yes. Diener and Seligman (2002) studied “very happy” undergraduates—those measuring in the upper 10% of happiness scores. These students did seem to be functioning well in many social areas. Although experiencing many
positive emotions, they did not report many ecstatic emotions and said they felt negative emotions as well. In other words, they were happy but not deliriously so, and they were not happy all the time. Later, Ed Diener and colleagues reported that people who scored a 10 on a 10-point scale of happiness were actually worse off than those who scored an 8 or 9 (Oishi, Diener, & Lucas, 2007). Those who scored less than 10 were more successful than the super-happy in several areas including income, educational achievement, and political participation. The researchers concluded that if someone scores a 7 or 8 on happiness, that may be enough for daily well-being, and the pursuit of complete and perfect happiness may be counterproductive.

**Top-Down and Bottom-Up Theories**

In general, there are two ways to approach the question of how to calculate our well-being. The first approach advocates that we create an overall measure of our current well-being by examining how satisfied we are with domains of life and then combine the various satisfactions into a totality of current well-being. That is, we might assess the quality of our marriage or friendships, how satisfying our job is, yearly income, as well as several other areas of life, and thereby create a summary statement of our overall “satisfaction.” This perspective is known as the **bottom-up theory** (see Michalos, 1985; Schimmack, 2008).

According to the other approach, our subjective well-being is derived from overall evaluations that reflect how we evaluate and interpret our experiences. From this perspective, we bring our tendencies toward positive interpretations to situations we encounter in life. This approach is known as the **top-down theory**. Often this approach has been measured by looking at personality traits, attitudes, and cognitions, that is, what goes on “inside” the person.

Note that if the bottom-up perspective is correct, then interventions should focus on changing the environments and situations that one experiences—such as providing better jobs, safer neighborhoods, and higher after-tax income, to enumerate a few options. For example, the **life balance model** of well-being proposed by Sirgy and Lee (2018) assumes that life satisfaction is a function of “equally moderate-to-high levels of satisfaction in important life domains” (p. 1). But if the top-down model is correct, then interventions to increase happiness should focus on changing people’s attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, or personality traits.

In support of the bottom-up theory, research shows that poverty is associated with lower levels of subjective well-being and that certain negative life events can have a lasting impact on happiness (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2009). That is, external circumstances do matter. The top-down theory is supported by studies that find certain attitudes, self-perceptions, and personality traits are highly correlated with subjective well-being (Diener & Lucas, 1999).

At this point, you may be wondering which approach people actually use to calculate subjective well-being. Earlier studies favored the top-down approach by a wide margin; some researchers estimated that 52% of well-being was due to top-down processes and only 23% was due to bottom-up factors (Diener & Larson, 1984). More recently, investigators have tended to argue that bottom-up predictors may be more important (e.g., Lucas, 2008). Schimmack (2008) presented evidence that both top-down and bottom-up evaluations are important but used in different situations and times in life. Research by Headey, Veenhoven, and Wearing (1991) found that satisfaction with work, leisure,
and standard of living is due to top-down processes, whereas satisfaction with marriage encompasses both bottom-up and top-down factors. However, they also reported that their study found an “unexpected degree of support for top-down theory” (p. 8; see Boehm et al., 2018).

We next turn to the important predictors of subjective well-being. We classify these as top-down and bottom-up predictors as a way to organize the discussion. However, note that the division between these two types of predictors is fluid at times and often depends on how constructs are defined and/or measured.

**TOP-DOWN PREDICTORS OF SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING**

Investigations have found several variables that are reliably associated with happiness and satisfaction with life. Chapter 2 provided an introduction to the research on genetic contributions, basic needs, and the pursuit of goals. In this section, we turn to research on personality traits and other factors that predict who is happier or more satisfied with life (see Diener et al., 2009).

**Cognition: Is the Glass Half Full or Half Empty?**

Cognitive theories of subjective well-being argue that the causes of high subjective well-being are not necessarily due to external events in our lives but rather to how we interpret those events. This notion is actually an old one that has been given new life in contemporary psychology. For example, Shakespeare’s Hamlet alluded to it when he declared, “There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.”

Theorists who support the cognitive model would also contend that people who are happier and more satisfied with life choose to view the world and their own future in positive ways. That is, happiness is a belief system founded on assumptions, expectations, or interpretations of reality (Robinson & Kirkeby, 2005). One’s freely chosen interpretations of reality are termed **construals** (Funder, 1997). Consistent patterns of positive interpretation create relatively stable ways of relating to the world. These, in turn, create personality descriptions such as “cheerful” or “optimistic.” People who report being happier consistently take a positive perspective when evaluating themselves, other people, and the world around them.

Years of research support the conception that how we feel is often determined by how we think about and interpret the events of our lives. In support of this idea, research indicates that happier people initially encode events in more positive ways (Seidlitz & Diener, 1993). That is, having a positive mood seems to lead us to interpret events in positive ways—which then become encoded as positive memories. Thus, when asked to recall various events, happier people recount positive memories. In this regard, many people’s recollections appear to be positively biased, a situation that, in part, produces their “above average” score on happiness (Walker, Skowronski, & Thompson, 2003). The tendency to interpret events in positive ways also results in a larger boost in positivity when happy people experience pleasant events.

Sonja Lyubomirsky (2001) proposed a **construal theory of happiness** that regards happiness as a function of how people construe and interpret their experiences of the world (Boehm et al., 2018). Similarly, Diener and Lucas (2000) formulated what they called
evaluation theory, positing that well-being is determined by how we evaluate the constant flow of incoming information. How we do so depends on our mood and temperament, the comparison standard we use to measure progress, our life situations, and our culture.

Central to the process is an assessment of how well our major goals are being fulfilled and how likely they will be to be met in the future. Those who are good constructive thinkers, or who are more flexible and adaptable in their thinking, report higher well-being and less neuroticism (Harris & Lightsey, 2005). In addition, being in a positive mood may prompt biases in attention and information processing such that we favor positive information, and therefore, we “see” positive events all around us (Robinson & Compton, 2008). In contrast, unhappy people focus on the negativities they see. For example, think of a crowded airport waiting area. According to the view we have just presented, happier people will pleasantly see smiling couples and doting parents, whereas unhappy people will observe mainly the tense and impatient.

**Self-Esteem**

As might be expected, the first trait identified as important for both happiness and life satisfaction is positive self-esteem. Campbell (1981) found that self-esteem was the most important predictor of subjective well-being. A more recent review affirmed that high self-esteem does lead to increased happiness (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). Indeed, it is difficult to imagine anyone with chronically low self-esteem who feels happy or satisfied with life. High self-esteem seems to be composed of at least four components: 1) feeling that one is accepted by others, 2) being the recipient of positive evaluations from others, 3) believing that one compares favorably to other people or to one’s ideal self, and 4) believing that one can initiate effective action in the world (Hewitt, 2009). In addition, happier people may construct their self-concepts in more abstract terms (for example, “I am a cheerful person”) rather than using concrete terms that define the self by specific behaviors, such as “I feel happy when I watch my favorite TV show” (Updegraff & Suh, 2007).

Although happiness and positive self-esteem are highly correlated, self-esteem is a rather tricky predictor of well-being. That is, self-esteem is related more to optimism and achievement whereas happiness appears related more to positive social relationships and extraversion (Furr, 2005; Lyubomirsky, Tkach, & DiMatteo, 2006). Also, positive self-esteem may be more useful for defending against negative emotions than for promoting happiness (Robinson & Compton, 2008). An analysis by Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, and Vohs (2003) found that self-esteem was related to enhanced pleasant feelings and initiative, but it was related to few other positive outcomes in life such as school or career success. It is also important to note that emphasis on self-esteem is strongly related to cultural contexts. That is, high self-esteem is valued far more in the United States than in many other countries around the world (Hewitt, 2018). In collectivist nations such as China, where autonomy and self-assertion are secondary to family unity and social cohesion, self-esteem is a less important predictor of well-being (Diener & Suh, 2000). The precise relationship between conceptualizations of the self and subjective well-being is explored in Chapter 11.
Optimism and Hope

Generally, people who are more optimistic about the future and more hopeful are happier and enjoy greater life satisfaction than others (Mens, Scheier, & Carver, 2018; Rand & Cheavens, 2009; Seligman, 2011). As compared with pessimists, optimists engage in more effective coping behavior, have better physical health, and experience better relationships with other people (Carver, Scheier, & Sagerstrom, 2010). Optimists also possess greater self-confidence and perseverance when faced with challenges (Carver, Scheier, Miller, & Fulford, 2009). Researchers suggest that a key element in optimism is the presence of positive expectancies; therefore, the impact of optimism on well-being is especially apparent when optimists encounter difficulties or challenges in life (Mens et al., 2018). Expectations for positive outcomes in the future not only enhance mood but also foster better coping strategies concerning stress. That is, when faced with stress and challenges, optimists tend to use problem-focused coping, realistic acceptance of their situation, humor, and positive reframing (Carver et al., 2009). For example, an optimist who loses her job might say, “This will spur me to get a better, more satisfying position” instead of sinking into depressive self-pity.

Optimism has been conceptualized in two major ways (Peterson, 2000). First, it can be viewed as dispositional optimism, or the global expectation that events will turn out well in the future (Scheier & Carver, 1985, 1987). Second, optimism has been defined as an explanatory style, or a way in which people interpret the causes of past events (Peterson & Steen, 2002) in their lives. That is, if they believe that their past failures are due to transient causes, then the future may seem bright because the causes for failure are no longer applicable. However, if they believe that their past failures are due to permanent causes, then the future may seem gloomy. Seligman (1998) proposed that people could learn to be more optimistic by paying attention to how they explain life events to themselves. He has referred to this process as learned optimism. But are optimists just looking at the world through rose-colored glasses because they can’t stand the harsh light of reality?

Lisa Aspinwall (Aspinwall & Brunhart, 2000) argued that this hypothesis is incorrect and that optimists may be the true realists. She found that optimists were more willing than pessimists to receive negative feedback about their performance, to absorb bad news about their health, and to raise difficult issues in their personal relationships. Sandra Schneider (2001) advanced a similar case for realistic optimism, which is optimistic thinking that does not distort reality. Realistic optimism is an honest recognition that there may be opportunities for positive growth or learning experiences in even the most challenging situations. However, research has also firmly established that some people hold optimistic beliefs that are unrealistic and even dangerous (Weinstein, 1980).

Hope is closely related to optimism. The most widely used definition of hope comes from C. R. Snyder (Snyder, Rand, & Sigmon, 2002). As we saw in Chapter 2, Snyder’s definition of hope has two components: 1) “pathways,” or the ability to find ways to reach one’s goals, and 2) “agency,” or motivation to reach these goals. For Snyder, hope is “the belief that one can find pathways to desired goals and the belief that one can muster the motivation to use those pathways” (Rand & Cheavens, 2009, p. 324). From this perspective, hope is an optimistic belief that desired goals can be attained. It seems that the agency portion of hope may be a better predictor of life satisfaction than the pathways portion (Bailey, Eng, Frisch, & Snyder, 2007).
Hope therapy is based on the premise that hope drives the emotions that define well-being (Lopez, Floyd, Ulven, & Synder, 2000; Rand & Cheavens, 2009). Hope therapy attempts to help people conceptualize clearer goals, conceive numerous paths to them, and summon the energy and commitment to reach those goals. Do you wish to be more content, feel more pleasant emotions, be more fully engaged in life, or give more love to those you care about? You should also have some notion of how much happier you wish to be and consider what your “good enough” level of happiness will be. Hope training tells us to focus on more concrete and immediate goals that will lead to greater happiness (e.g., express your gratefulness to someone you love). Hope training can also prevent people from falling victim to the false hope syndrome (Polivy & Peter, 2000). This occurs when people believe that behavioral change is easy and the results will be obvious in a short period of time. Such overconfidence can breed false hope, which will eventually undermine one’s efforts to change when unrealistic expectations are not quickly fulfilled. A recent meta-analysis of interventions to increase optimism concluded that optimism can be raised and the impact can enhance both mental and physical health (Malouff & Schutte, 2017).

**Sense of Control and Self-Efficacy**

A sense of having personal control refers to the belief that a person has the capacity to obtain desired outcomes and to avoid undesirable ones. Having a sense of control also helps a person maintain emotional stability and negotiate difficulties in life (Thompson, 2018). Some researchers speculate that a need for control is the central motive that drives every other motive in life (Thompson, 2018) and that it is an innate need (Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, a high sense of control may be more important to well-being in Western than Asian cultures (Suh & Choi, 2018).

In the past, this particular predictor has usually been measured as locus of control (Rotter, 1966). A person with a strong **internal locus of control** tends to attribute outcomes to self-directed efforts. An **external locus of control** is the belief that outcomes in one’s life are due to factors outside of the person’s immediate control. Last, a belief in **chance** is essentially a belief that no one is in charge of outcomes. During the past 40 years, there has been a huge amount of psychological research on locus of control, and in general, high internal locus of control is linked to a variety of positive outcomes throughout the life span (Lefcourt, 1981).

Many researchers now see this factor as a sense of personal control (Peterson, 1999; Thompson, 2018). A sense of **personal control** “encourages emotional, motivational, behavioral, and physiological vigor in the face of demands” (Peterson & Stunkard, 1989, p. 290). This newer, expanded vision of personal control encompasses locus of control theory, as well as other concepts such as intrinsic motivation and empowerment (Peterson, 1999).

It is disconcerting to note that external locus of control scores for American college students have risen significantly since the 1960s. Today’s college students “increasingly believe their lives are controlled by outside forces rather than their own efforts” (Twenge, Zhang, & Im, 2004, p. 308). The authors of the large meta-analysis on locus of control stated that the implications were almost uniformly negative. We hope that positive psychology can play a useful role in reversing this dismaying trend.

**Self-efficacy** is a concept with strong associations to control and hope. It involves the belief that one has the “capabilities to produce desired effects by their own actions” (Bandura, 1997, p. vii, quoted in Maddux & Kleiman, 2018). Obviously, self-efficacy is similar to the sense of control, hope, and optimism. Like these other constructs, it is related
to higher well-being throughout the life span (Vecchio, Gerbino, Pastorelli, Giannetta, & Caprara, 2007). Self-efficacy is usually measured in relationship to specific outcomes. For example, separate measures exist for academic, social, and health self-efficacy, as well as for many others. Generally, specific measures of self-efficacy do better at predicting positive outcomes than do global measures.

A Sense of Meaning in Life

Having a sense of meaning and purpose in life is also an important predictor of higher subjective well-being (Park, 2011; Steger, 2009). Moreover, the sense of meaning is an important component of well-being at all stages of life (Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, 2009). Evidence suggests that the relationship may be reciprocal, insofar as having a greater sense of meaning in life increases well-being, and feeling more positive emotions induces people to feel that their lives are meaningful (King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006). In subjective well-being studies, a sense of meaning in life has often been assessed with measures of religiosity (see Myers, 2000). However, a sense of meaning and purpose in life need not be tied to religious beliefs (Compton, 2000; Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008). For instance, research found that when people were actively engaged in pursuing a variety of goals that were personally meaningful, their well-being increased (Oishi, Diener, Suh, & Lucas, 1999).

It is important to note that the impact of meaning on well-being seems to depend on whether one has reached a comfortable sense of meaning or is still searching. That is, feeling secure about one’s current sense of meaning in life is associated with higher subjective well-being. However, searching for meaning is not related to higher levels of well-being and may even be related to lower well-being (Steger et al., 2008). Nevertheless, searching for meaning seems to be associated with greater openness and absorption in experiences, as well as more curiosity about the world. Having the curiosity and drive to search for a significant sense of meaning may be the key element. A study of curiosity found that its exploration component (Kashdan, Rose, & Fincham, 2004) was more related to well-being than the absorption component (Gallagher & Lopez, 2007). Chapter 10 continues the discussion of a sense of meaning in life.

Decision-Making and Self-Reflection

The cognitive processes used by people who report being happy extend to decision-making. Studies have shown that happier people tend to report more satisfaction with all of their options when making decisions. In this way, they tend to remain satisfied with whatever choice they eventually make. Interestingly, happier people also tend to accept a choice that is “good enough” rather than feeling the need to maximize their decisions (Boehm et al., 2018). Happier people are “satisficers” rather than “maximizers.” Happier people also tend to engage in excessive self-reflection less than unhappy people; that is, they ruminate (fixate repetitively on negative thoughts or memories) less. This finding is important because excessive rumination has been associated with depression. Last, happier people prefer to experience a pleasant event quickly after an unpleasant event. In this way, they buffer the impact of the negative event.

Self-reflection can also involve simply allowing thoughts to wander or to daydream. A study on mind wandering found that people were less happy when their minds were wandering and they were thinking randomly about matters unrelated to what they were doing (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010). The tendency to allow one’s mind to wander randomly...
from topic to topic is more prevalent among younger people than for those over the age of 60 (Frank, Nara, Zavagnin, & Kane, 2015). On the other hand, allowing one’s mind to wander may help creativity (Baird et al., 2012). It seems that whether mind wandering is helpful may depend on our age, the context, and the thought content, as well as other factors (Smallwood & Andrews-Hanna, 2013).

Comments on the Cognitive Predictors

Epictetus, a Greek-born sage of the 1st century CE, declared that “men are disturbed not by things, but by the view which they take of them.” It is clear that all cognitive predictors of happiness and life satisfaction involve beliefs, interpretations of events, or expectations. It is also clear that these judgments and expectations need not be entirely accurate to increase happiness or life satisfaction. Indeed, some provocative research has suggested that happiness is often related to inaccurate perceptions of reality—a phenomenon known as having positive illusions (Taylor & Brown, 1988).

Studies show that positive illusions about self, optimism, and control are related to higher self-reported well-being. As you might expect, some scientists strongly object to the notion that we should all wear rose-colored glasses and deliberately avoid seeing the world accurately (e.g., Colvin & Block, 1994). In fact, a well-known paper by Shedler, Mayman, and Manis (1993) demonstrated that some people who score high on well-being scales are actually suffering from an illusion of mental health. Their high scores on self-report scales are due to defensive reactions that deny their negative emotions; they are “defensive deniers.” Nevertheless, at least a small bias for positivity is clearly associated with feeling happier and more satisfied with life. Baumeister (1989) suggested that there may be an “optimal margin for illusions.” That is, we can afford to lose some objectivity if it means gaining a bit more optimism about a future that we cannot totally predict anyway. However, it is also true that better mental health is associated with accurate perceptions of self and others (Compton, 1992; Jahoda, 1958; Shedler, Mayman, & Manis, 1993). In short, the advantageousness of positive illusions depends on the context and one’s goals for well-being.

If our sense of subjective well-being is intimately tied to the judgments we make about ourselves, then what criteria do we use? Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon (1986) suggested that social and cultural standards of behavior provide us with both a context for comparisons and the actual standards we use to make judgments; the results determine our feelings of value and self-worth. This concept is described as that involving social comparison processes. Of course, these comparisons can be made in many ways, one of which is to set an absolute internal standard for what we should be like and then gauge how close we are to it. Research on the difference between our actual self (i.e., attributes we currently possess) and our ideal self (i.e., attributes we think we should possess) has used this approach. Studies have found that less discrepancy between our actual self and ideal self is related to a more positive self-esteem and higher sense of well-being (Morretti & Higgins, 1990). However, a perfect agreement between actual and ideal self indicates defensiveness; therefore, a moderately strong relationship indicates greater well-being (Katz & Zigler, 1967).

A second way to evaluate our well-being is to compare ourselves with other people. In such a comparison, we ask ourselves whether other people seem happier, more satisfied, more talented, or more successful than we are. But exactly which people? That is, we can reference those whom we regard as similar to ourselves (i.e., lateral social comparisons), those
we regard as better on some dimension (i.e., \textit{upward social comparisons}), or those we view as less fortunate (i.e., \textit{downward social comparisons}).

Earlier studies found that happier people often use downward social comparisons (see Fujita, 2008; Lyubomirsky & Ross, 1997). For instance, if someone asks you to evaluate how satisfied you are with your life, research indicates that you will probably look around and compare yourself with other people. If you choose persons whom you believe are getting more out of life than you are, then you will feel less satisfied with your own life. But if you recognize that others have more difficult lives than you—if you feel grateful for what you have even if it isn’t all that you hoped for—then you’ll tend to feel more satisfied with your life.

However, happy people don’t always use downward comparisons. Rather, they seem able to select the types of comparisons that will help maintain their happiness and positive social relationships. In a way, they use social comparison processes to their advantage. Happier people are also less impacted by social comparisons with others that turn out negative (Lyubomirsky, Tucker, & Kasri, 2001). One of the ways happy people do this is by not expecting the best possible life at all times. Rather, happier people tend to expect a “good enough” life, and therefore, social comparisons that result in feeling their life is good enough are acceptable. Finally, more recent research has altered the way social comparisons may be related to well-being. These studies suggest that although happier people use social comparisons wisely, they tend to do so infrequently. Recent studies suggest that happier people use social comparison processes relatively less often than other people (Boehm et al., 2018). In fact, they may be more invulnerable to social comparisons. This is important because the tendency to make frequent comparisons to others is associated with negative emotions such as anger or sadness (Fujita, 2008).

Additionally, high subjective well-being created through social comparisons can be built by egocentrism (Goetz, Ehret, Jullien, & Hall, 2006). Under these circumstances, comparison processes will eventually lead to problems. In the 4th century BCE, the Greek philosopher Demosthenes declared, “Nothing is so easy as to deceive one’s self; for what we wish, we readily believe.”

\textbf{Positive Relationships With Other People}

Among the strongest and most important predictors of subjective well-being is the presence of positive social relationships (Boehm et al., 2018; Diener & Lucas, 1999; Myers, 2000). The need for social interaction may be innate to our species. It may also be that a significant relationship between high subjective well-being and satisfaction with family and friends is found universally in cross-cultural studies of well-being (Diener et al., 2003). The perception that one is embedded in supportive social relationships has been related to higher self-esteem, successful coping, better physical health, and fewer psychological problems. It is interesting to note that the impact of other predictors of subjective well-being is increased if people have good social support (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1992). That is, when individuals feel they have social support, there are enhanced effects on subjective well-being from positive self-esteem, optimism, and perceived control. Positive social support helps to create a “rising tide” that increases the effects of all the other predictors.

Intimate social relationships appear to provide even greater enhancements of subjective well-being. For example, several studies have found that intimacy—defined as relationships with spouse and family and “high quality” friendships—is the strongest predictor of life satisfaction (e.g., Cummins, 1996). As you might guess, companionship and self-validation
are two of the strongest components of quality relationships (Demir & Weitekamp, 2006). Having people around us who validate and support us can have a powerful effect on how we feel. Diener and Seligman (2002) studied the happiest 10% of college students and saw that one factor really stood out: They enjoyed a highly fulfilling social life. Parlee (1979) found that having an intimate talk was the most frequently reported friendship experience for women (listed by 90% of women).

Despite popular assumptions about American men and their supposed avoidance of emotional intimacy, having an intimate talk was the second most frequently reported friendship experience for men (listed by 80% of men). An MTV and Associated Press poll of 13- to 24-year-old Americans asked, “What makes you happy?” The most frequently reported answer was spending time with family, followed by spending time with friends, and almost 75% stated that spending time with their parents made them happy.

One might wonder whether people seek companionship when they’re happy or when they’re sad. One study found that people most wanted companionship when they were happy (see Middlebrook, 1980). That is, feeling happy increases social contact. Because positive social contact also seems to increase well-being, the relationship between subjective well-being and positive social relationships appears reciprocal: Associating with people we care about and who care for us increases our well-being, and when we increase our sense of well-being, others wish to be closer to us. If emotional intimacy is important to subjective well-being, then you would expect that marriage is important as well; indeed, this appears to be the case. However, further discussion on the relationships between well-being and marriage is addressed in Chapter 5.

An interesting series of studies looked at our expectations for social interactions and how those expectations may hinder our need to connect with other people. In one experiment, Nicholas Epley and Julianna Schroeder (2014) asked commuters on trains and buses to deliberately make contact with a stranger near them. To the surprise of most participants, they found the social connection to be enjoyable. It appears that many people expect that others do not wish to be bothered by a stranger; they believe in a “mistaken preference for solitude.” However, often those expectations are incorrect because people need social interactions and often respond favorably. In another experiment, the researchers found that being the recipient of social connection was just as enjoyable as being the instigator of connection: Social connection can be contagious.

**Personality Traits**

The association of personality traits with well-being has been a consistent theme in research over many years. One of the reasons is that personality traits have been studied for many years, so there is a large research base to work with. Another reason for the popularity of personality traits is that many studies over the years have found associations between traits and genetics (see Zhang & Tsingan, 2014). If significant relationships can be found between genetically influenced traits and well-being, then the results of research will appear to be grounded in something relatively stable rather than transitory. Studies cited in the previous chapter on the heritability of well-being provide an example of this type of research. In addition, because some personality traits are remarkably stable over the years, results may be important concerning the issue of the stability of well-being. What follows is a brief summary of research on well-known traits associated with well-being.
Extraversion

Extraverted persons are interested in things outside themselves, such as the physical and social environment (English & English, 1958). In contrast, introverts are interested more in their own thoughts and feelings and less interested in social situations. Many studies have found extraversion to be a leading predictor of subjective well-being (Diener & Lucas, 1999). Some have found correlations as high as .80 between extraversion and self-reported happiness (Fujita, 1991). In addition, extraversion has been shown to predict levels of happiness for up to 30 years in the future (Costa & McCrae, 1984). Looking at stability over a 40-year interval, Gale, Booth, Möttus, Kuh, and Deary (2013) found that extraversion had a direct, positive impact on well-being. A study by Harris, Brett, Johnson, and Deary (2016) found that over a 63-year period a trait they labeled “stability of moods” was significantly stable; the trait of conscientiousness also showed stability.

A variety of studies have examined exactly how extraversion impacts well-being. Initially, investigators believed it was the sociability component of extraversion that was most decisive (Bradburn, 1969). For example, studies found that one’s number of friends was related to his or her well-being such that the more friends a person had, the higher one’s well-being (Okun, Stock, Haring, & Witter, 1984). Therefore, psychologists believed that extraverts had greater opportunities for positive relations with other people and for obtaining positive feedback about themselves. However, recent studies found that although extraverts do engage in some types of social activities more than introverts, not much difference existed between the two in this domain, and the greater sociability of extraverts did not account for their greater happiness. Reaching a similar conclusion, Harris, English, Harms, Gross, and Jackson (2017) found that college students who were extraverted did, in fact, have better social experiences, but these experiences were not the only reason they had higher well-being. In addition, extraverts were happier than introverts whether living alone or with others or engaged in social or nonsocial occupations (Diener, Larsen, & Emmons, 1984).

Extraversion may be associated with higher self-reported happiness because being extraverted is often a better “fit” with contemporary life, which is often highly social. This seems especially true for American culture, which tends to reward behaviors displayed by extraverts (Helgoe, 2010). In contrast, imagine a person who chooses to live as a contemplative monk in a remote mountain monastery; he or she is a better personality “fit” in that introverted setting. In her book Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking, Susan Cain (2013) makes the same point and reviews several advantages to being an introvert. Hopefully, this is good news for psychology students, many of whom are introverts.

Some researchers have suggested that the tendency of extraverts to report higher levels of happiness stems from their greater sensitivity to positive rewards or stronger reactions to pleasant events (Larsen & Ketelaar, 1991; Rusting & Larsen, 1998). Indeed, a positive relationship between extraversion and greater sensitivity to rewards was even found in cross-cultural studies (Lucas, Diener, Grob, Suh, & Shao, 2000; Zhang & Tisingan, 2014). However, other reviews of research have not supported this hypothesis (see Lucas, 2008). It may also be that the impact of extraversion depends on other factors. In a study of Chinese university students, Li, Lan, and Ju (2015) found that among students with high self-esteem, greater extraversion was related to higher well-being. But when self-esteem was low, then extraversion was less
important to well-being regardless of extraversion scores. In addition, extraversion was a more significant predictor of well-being among male than female students.

Today, most researchers believe that the tendency of extraverts to report more happiness is due to one particular facet of extraversion: They tend to have a “cheerful” disposition (Schimmack, Oishi, Furr, & Funder, 2004). That is, they have a general tendency to experience more positive emotions, to laugh more than others, to joke more frequently, and to experience more positive emotions. Extraverts may also be more skilled at regulating their moods than introverts (Hervás & López-Gómez, 2016). Interestingly, however, this study also found that extraverts and introverts were equally skillful at repairing a negative mood. A cautionary note, however: Although extraversion correlates with long-term positive affectivity, it does not correlate with long-term negative affectivity (Schimmack, 2008). In brief, extraverts may be disposed to cheerfulness, but they may not be better than introverts at combatting negative emotions like anger or sadness.

Are introverts necessarily doomed to depression and ennui? Not at all. For example, Larsen and Kasimatis (1990) found that though extraverts rated themselves as feeling happier than did introverts during the week, both types reported levels of happiness that were above the neutral point and both types reported they were “happy.” In their study, Hills and Argyle (2001) found happy introverts as well as unhappy extraverts. They also found that happy introverts and happy extraverts tended to create their well-being in similar ways: a situation implying that activity may be more important than personality type. Other studies have found that introverts are less social because they desire solitude. For introverts, the pursuit of happiness may not be their top priority in life but, rather, searching for meaning instead. Also, introverts may prefer more neutral emotional states such as contentment to more arousing emotions such as happiness. It is fascinating to note that there may be differences in brain structures such that introverts do not need as much stimulation as extraverts to maintain an optimal level of physiological arousal (Helgoe, 2010).

**Agreeableness and Conscientiousness**

Two other personality traits have been reliably associated with higher subjective well-being. Along with extraversion and neuroticism, these two are also among the Big Five personality traits that seem to comprise the basic five dimensions of personality (see Costa & McCrae, 1986). Agreeableness refers to being honest, trustworthy, modest, compliant (as opposed to oppositional), tender-minded, and altruistic. People high in conscientiousness tend to be orderly, self-disciplined, achievement striving, deliberate, dutiful, and competent. It would seem that persons high on both agreeableness and conscientiousness would be able to navigate social and vocational situations far more successfully than those low on both traits. For example, a study by Duckworth, Weir, Tsukayama, and Kwok (2012) found that conscientiousness predicted objective indicators of success, such as income and wealth, as well as multiple indicators of well-being. However, other factors related to individual differences were often more important to success than conscientiousness. As with many variables in positive psychology, it is possible to be too conscientious. When it becomes extreme, it borders on obsessive-compulsiveness and can be detrimental to well-being (Carter, Guan, Maples, Williamson, & Miller, 2015). Finally, the predictors mentioned here do not exhaust the list of predictors found in the research. For example, a recent study found that well-being was predicted by high enthusiasm, low withdrawal
(or higher engagement), industriousness, compassion, and intellectual curiosity (Sun, Kaufman, & Smillie, 2017). The research goes on!

**Neuroticism**

At the start of this chapter, we mentioned that the third pillar of high subjective well-being is low neuroticism. Indeed, some researchers have argued that among the most effective ways to increase happiness and life satisfaction is to focus on eliminating neuroticism (Larsen & Prizmic, 2008). One facet of neuroticism is the most crucial for subjective well-being: depression (Schimmack et al., 2004). Although low levels of anxiety, anger, or self-consciousness are important for mental health, the greatest impact on life satisfaction comes from the absence of depression.

**Comments on Personality Traits and Well-Being**

Research on personality traits and well-being has consistently shown that personality impacts both positive and negative emotionality. This research might be interpreted as providing support for genetic or biological theories of well-being. Before one comes to that conclusion, however, it is important to note that recent studies suggest a more complex view of how personality impacts well-being. First, several studies have found age effects such that traits have a different impact on well-being at different ages (Tauber, Wahl, & Schröder, 2016). Other research finds that traits interact with life events (Hentscher, Eid, & Kutscher, 2016). Therefore, well-being is not simply the result of possessing certain traits, even basic traits like extraversion; rather, well-being results from an interaction between one’s traits and the life events he or she encounters over time. The impact of traits on well-being may also depend on how well basic needs are met (Howell, Ksendzova, Nestingen, Yerahian, & Iyer, 2017) and on one’s gender (Li et al., 2015). Last, it may be that traits and well-being reciprocally influence each other, so that traits impact well-being and well-being impacts the expression of traits (Soto & Tackett, 2015). In summary, research increasingly suggests that the impact of traits on well-being (or vice versa) is more complex than originally believed.

**BOTTOM-UP PREDICTORS OF SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING**

Bottom-up factors stem from evaluations of various life domains such as income and marital status. We examine demographic factors such as income, gender, and race as well. Let’s begin with one of the dominant notions about what makes people happy.

**Money, Income, and Wealth**

Are people with more money happier than those with less? The assumption that money will bring happiness and satisfaction is one of the most persistent messages of many societies (see Myers, 2000). Cross-cultural studies are consistent in finding a significant relationship between income and subjective well-being in various countries (Biswas-Diener, 2008). Studies have found that the gross domestic product (GDP) of countries is positively correlated with average life satisfaction in those countries at about .50 (Diener, Diener, & Diener, 1995). Studies within countries have also found that higher income is associated with greater self-reported happiness (Diener et al., 2003). A longitudinal analysis spanning...
33 years in the United States found that being in the lower quarter of the income distribution reduced the odds of being happy by about 26%, whereas being in the upper quarter increased the odds by about 13% (Yang, 2008). Note, however, that being poor decreased the odds more than being wealthier increased the odds. Similarly, a study that examined happiness reported by people included on the *Forbes* annual list of wealthiest Americans found them somewhat happier than others (Diener, Horowitz, & Emmons, 1985). Studies have also found that being in debt and having less borrowing potential tend to decrease well-being (Pereira & Coelho, 2013; Tay, Barz, Parrigon, & Kuykendall, 2017). Such research seems to suggest that the aspects of 1) living in a wealthier country and 2) having more money within it tend to increase happiness.

Money does matter to happiness, in both expected and unexpected ways. As you might expect, possessing disposable income can provide a buffer against stress, offer access to better health care, and result in less chronic worry about daily necessities. Indeed, the *livability theory* of well-being suggests that access to the social and economic benefits found in wealthier countries might account for differences in well-being among countries (Veenhoven, 1999). In fact, differences in life satisfaction among countries have been associated with the ability of societies to meet the basic needs of citizens (Tay & Diener, 2011). Interestingly, Diener and Biswas-Diener (2002) suggested that money may not cause happiness; it may be the other way around (also see Lyubomirsky, Diener, et al., 2005). They suggested that being happier can facilitate higher income partially because the personality factors associated with high subjective well-being would certainly be assets in the workplace. In general, the results of large-scale studies are rather clear: Having more money is associated with higher subjective well-being. When the finer details are examined, however, this general conclusion becomes more complicated.

First, all studies tend to agree that the relationship between income and subjective well-being is curvilinear (Biswas-Diener, 2008). This means that the importance of income to happiness is greatest at lower income levels and becomes less important at higher income levels. Essentially, money matters more if you have little of it, but money matters less when you have more of it. This phenomenon is known as *diminishing marginal utility*, which says that happiness increases more quickly as income goes up only for those who have less income to begin with (Ma & Zhang, 2014). Once a certain point of income is reached, then happiness changes little and aspects essential to life satisfaction become more important. A recent study attempted to calculate the precise “tipping point” below which money is important to well-being and above which point money is less important. In examining individual income, Daniel Kahneman and Angus Deaton (2010) asserted that it was around $85,375 (in 2017 U.S. dollars). Beyond that point, additional income did little to improve happiness but continued to raise life satisfaction.

A more recent study also looked at “satiation points” or the amount of income needed before well-being no longer raises with income. This study used data from a sample of over 1.7 million people worldwide gathered as part of the Gallup World Poll (Jebb, Tay, Diener, & Oishi, 2018). They found that satiation occurs globally at around $95,000 (USD) for life satisfaction and $60,000 to $75,000 for emotional well-being or happiness. It would seem that income loses its effect on happiness sooner than it does on life satisfaction. However, the researchers also found substantial differences across countries in terms of these effects. In fact, they found this pattern for all regions of the world. In addition, they found that income matters more for well-being in wealthier countries. For example, the satiation point...
for life satisfaction in Australia and New Zealand was $125,000 and was $50,000 for positive affect, whereas in Eastern Europe and the Balkans the levels were $45,000 and $35,000, respectively. Although they found no gender differences, they did find that satiation levels rose with education level.

It is also clear that a positive relationship between GDP and subjective well-being does not apply to every country. For instance, the 2018 World Happiness Report ranked the following countries 1st through 5th in terms of the highest GDP per capita: United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Luxembourg, Singapore, and Kuwait. Their rankings for happiness were 20th, 32nd, 17th, 34th, and 46th, respectively. The United States ranked 10th for per capita GDP and 18th for happiness. Another cross-cultural example comes from a study conducted in the slums of Calcutta, India, that found positive levels of life satisfaction among those who lived in extreme poverty, although the satisfaction levels were still lower than those of more prosperous groups in India (Biswas-Diener & Diener, 2001). In addition, in this study the homeless street people of Calcutta reported higher satisfaction than their counterparts in the United States. A study by Ng and Diener (2014) found that materialistic satisfaction had a stronger impact on well-being in poorer countries, whereas satisfying one’s needs for autonomy, respect, and sociability had a stronger impact in affluent countries.

Several other investigations cast further doubt on the existence of a simple relationship between income and well-being. Studies conducted in the United States indicate that levels of happiness have not risen dramatically from 1946 to the present—a lengthy period in which personal income has risen substantially (see Figure 3.3).

Some reports indicate that happiness ratings in the United States have actually decreased (see Blanchflower & Oswald, 2017; Lane, 2000). Cross-cultural studies have found that happiness levels in Switzerland and Norway have been unchanged since 1946. Another study found that increased salary levels over a 10-year period did not lead to increased self-reported happiness (Diener et al., 1993). Studies done of lottery winners have shown that most people return to their prewinning level of happiness relatively quickly (Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978). In addition, people who choose a “voluntary simplicity” or “environmentally friendly” lifestyle often achieve a high level of subjective well-being despite their low income (Brown & Kasser, 2005; Jacob & Brinkerhoff, 1999). Last, some studies suggest that the higher subjective well-being of people in the highest income brackets may be the result of snob appeal. That is, researchers in Britain and Wales found that having more income enhanced happiness only if the extra income increased their social status (Boyce, Brown, & Moore, 2010). Other studies also suggest that income impacts well-being through social comparison processes so that well-being is increased only if one’s income is larger compared to the people used for comparison purposes (Yu & Chen, 2016).

Some studies even suggest that money may be hazardous to well-being, for among the most consistent findings about money is that rising income usually spurs materialistic aspirations (Diner & Biswas-Diener, 2002). How so? Because a rise in personal income usually translates into greater expectations about what one needs to be happy. This type of situation has been dubbed by researchers as the hedonic treadmill, in which one keeps setting higher and higher goals in hopes of finally becoming “really happy” (Brickman & Campbell, 1971). For example, Schor (1998, as cited in Diener & Biswas-Diener, 1999) reported a survey done in 1995 of people who earned more than $100,000 per year (this is $152,638...
in 2017 U.S. dollars. Incredibly, 27% of those surveyed stated they could not afford everything they “really need,” and 19% said they spent all their income on “basic necessities”! Similarly, people who report “financial success” as their core value tend to report lower overall adjustment ratings and more behavior disorders (Kasser & Ryan, 1993). The evidence is clear that people who place a high value on money for personal happiness are less satisfied with their lives than others (Kasser, 2016). Investigators have also found that materialistic behavior seems to be partially stimulated by feelings of insecurity and anxieties about one’s mortality (Arndt, Solomon, Kasser, & Sheldon, 2004; Kasser & Sheldon, 2000). In fact, R. Wang, Liu, Jiang, and Song (2017) found that materialism impairs a person ability to satisfy needs important to well-being, and Soto and Luhmann (2012) found that income predicted well-being more strongly for neurotic individuals than for their more emotionally stable peers. Some research has found that as income rises so do expectations. Therefore, on a daily basis higher income is related to more anger, tension, hostility, and anxiety (see Landsford, 2018). The hedonic treadmill may also push people to persistently monitor their level of happiness, and such constant self-attention actually impairs the ability to achieve greater well-being (Ford & Mauss, 2014).

Other studies have found that the act of gazing at relatively small amounts of money while engaged in unrelated tasks resulted in people’s enjoying these tasks less; that is, their capacity to enjoy life’s little pleasures was undermined (Quiodbach et al., 2014). Viewing money may also cause people to become more solitary and less willing to help others or donate funds to social causes (Vohls, Mead, & Goode, 2008). Consistent with such findings, surveys have consistently shown that wealthier people contribute a smaller percentage of their income to charity than do others (see Flores, 2010; Lyubomirsky, 2010). In a similar way, the act of gazing at luxury goods, such as expensive watches or shoes, can lead to increased self-interest as compared with interest in others (Chua & Zou, 2009). In addition, researchers have found that when people worked toward goals involving wealth, fame, or
beauty, their well-being actually decreased (Niemiec, Ryan, & Deci 2009). Finally, a study by Kushlev, Dunn, and Lucas (2015) found that income decreased daily sadness but exerted little impact on daily happiness.

**How Money Can Increase Subjective Well-Being**

We hope you are not too confused at this point. So far, we have seen that money or income is both important to subjective well-being and potentially harmful as well. Therefore, we now turn to studies that focus on how money can enhance well-being. First, the evidence is that happiness may come from what people do with the money they have; specifically, some researchers have distinguished between spending money on “material purchases” (that is, material goods) versus spending money on “experiential purchases” (that is, experiences shared with family and friends, such as a family vacation, or to help fulfill personal goals). As you might suspect, spending money on experiential purchases was more associated with personal happiness than spending on material purchases (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). That is, money may be associated with happiness if we use it to foster relationships with family and friends, enhance our competence in a skill or hobby, gain autonomy (Niemiec et al., 2009), or practice “inconspicuous consumption” rather than “conspicuous consumption” (Frank, 2007).

Using money to help fulfill psychological needs, such as learning new skills and gaining respect or autonomy, can increase positive emotions (Diener et al., 2009). This means that money increases happiness if spent on activities that enhance personal growth or provide new learning experiences, such as learning to play guitar, or even if we spend it on small pleasures such as a massage or a nice dinner. A later study found an age difference in the effects of “ordinary” experiences that are common and experienced frequently versus “extraordinary” experiences that are uncommon and infrequent. Young people gained more well-being from extraordinary experiences, whereas older people gained more from ordinary ones (Bhattacharjee & Möllinger, 2013). Elizabeth Dunn and colleagues (Dunn, Akin, & Norton, 2008) found that when people spent money on others or donated to charities, this type of spending indeed increased personal happiness. Another study found that priming people to think about having more time for social connections tended to increase happiness, but priming them to think about money did not (Mogilner, 2010).

In an intriguing article, researchers in Britain asserted that “friends are worth more than a new Ferrari” (see Powdthavee & Wilkinson, 2010). They attempted to calculate how much certain factors are worth to happiness (the figures given here are in approximate 2017 U.S. dollars): excellent health (about $2,277,000), marriage (about $823,000), and regularly talking to neighbors (about $209,000). Continuing with this same theme, other researchers noted that successfully completing psychotherapy is at least 32 times more cost-effective in raising happiness than merely gaining more income (Boyce & Wood, 2011). David Blanchflower and Andrew Oswald (2004) used similar calculations and discovered that increasing the frequency of sexual intercourse from once a month to once a week increased happiness as much as a $57,000 boost in salary (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004; Oliviero, 2005). It may be that the challenge of the hedonic treadmill can be overcome by using wealth in ways that reflect our core values or that stimulate factors known to be related to greater well-being. Or as Rabbi Hyman Schachtel cogently said, “happiness is not having what you want but wanting what you have.” Indeed, a study partially confirmed the rabbi’s statement by finding that wanting what you have was a predictor of happiness,
although having what you want was also important (Larsen & McKibban, 2008). Mohanty (2014) concluded that a positive attitude was more important to well-being than income. In summary, research findings on well-being and income parallel many of those in positive psychology, in that the initial reports of simple causal relationships turn out to be premature and somewhat naive. The real causes of well-being are more complex and nuanced. Thus, Ma and Zhang (2014) stated, “There is certainly a causal relationship between happiness and income, but it is almost impossible to quantify it accurately” (p. 718). Similarly, Blanchflower and Oswald (2017), two of the leading researchers on this topic, concluded that “there are just too many factors—beyond sheer money—that go to make up a happy human being; income is not a sufficient statistic for happiness” (p. 8, italics added).

Gender: Are Men or Women Happier?

Once again, the answer to this question is a little complicated, for studies have found all possible answers to this fascinating question (see Nolen-Hoeksema & Rusting, 1999). Miron Zuckerman, Chen Li, and Ed Diener (2017) summarized research on this topic by stating that “the literature on gender differences in SWB [subjective well-being] does not convey a coherent picture” (p. 329). When studies attempt to answer the question “Who is happier, men or women?” the answers vary by the country that people inhabit, the psychological measurements used for well-being, and other factors. Among the more interesting factors has been the year in which the study was done. In an earlier analysis designed to resolve the inconsistency of findings, Wood, Rhodes, and Welan (1989) concluded that women generally report slightly higher levels of happiness than men—and most analyses published prior to 1980 would have agreed. However, several more recent analyses present a different picture.

A recent compilation of studies covering 33 years in the United States, Europe, and other parts of the world found that women’s average happiness has fallen steadily since 1972. Women were happier than men before about 1985 and were equal to men in happiness around 1989, but they now report lower happiness than men (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2009). More specifically, studies have found that men’s happiness has changed little over the years, but women’s happiness has shown a steady decline since about 1972 (see Zuckerman et al., 2017). This association was found regardless of such factors as marital status, number of children, chronological age, or income level. This decrease in women’s self-reported happiness was indicated in the United States and all 12 European countries examined with the exception of Germany. Additional data taken from around the world indicated similar trends in 125 of 147 countries. Although this same study found that life satisfaction scores have decreased in recent years for both men and women, the declining well-being ratings for women nevertheless were dramatic and significant. However, other research found that women are happier than men before about age 48, but then the relationship switches; that is, men are happier than women after midlife (Plagnol & Easterlin, 2008; Yang, 2008).

The issue of happiness and gender becomes even more complicated. For example, women report they experience and express all emotions—pleasant and unpleasant—more frequently and more intensely than men. Also, women report a greater capacity for joy (Fujita, Diener, & Sandvik, 1991). On the other hand, although women report more emotionality than men, studies also find no gender differences in the frequency, intensity, or impact of emotions (Simon, 2014). That is, the old stereotype of women being “more emotional” than men is not supported by the research.
However, there appear to be clear differences in how women and men express and cope with emotions. Women tend to use expressive coping styles and seek emotional support more than men, whereas men use an inexpressive coping style that requires suppression of emotions or the release of aggression. Some studies suggest that because women talk more than men about emotional issues, both genders are happier if they have a sister (see Devlin, 2009a). However, Deborah Tannen (2010), well known for her research on men’s and women’s communication styles, suggests that this increased well-being derives little from mere talking but, rather, from sharing information in a friendly, comfortable, and important relationship. In her view, the particular topic or even the emotional depth of the conversation is secondary. Indeed, research has found no differences between women and men in their amount of social support, but there are differences in how the support is provided (Almquist, Östberg, Rostila, Edling, & Rudgren, 2014; Simon, 2014).

Women and men also appear to calculate their well-being differently. Women generally enhance their well-being through positive self-esteem, greater harmony and closeness in their relationships, passive leisure, and religion; whereas men primarily use positive self-esteem, active leisure, and greater mental control (Reid, 2004; Simon, 2014; Tkach & Lyubomirsky, 2006).

When researchers attempted to account for gender differences in well-being, they found some fascinating cross-cultural trends related to social and cultural conditions. Researchers have found that women score higher on well-being than men in countries that are more traditional, less urbanized, and less technologically and economically developed (Meisenberg & Woodley, 2015; Zuckerman et al., 2017). This seems to imply that the gender equality that accompanies economic and technological development is bad for women’s well-being! Shockingly, this initially appeared to be true. A recent cross-cultural study by Zuckerman et al. (2017) found that as societal conditions improved for women, there was a drop in women’s well-being when compared to men, although well-being for men also decreased.

What could account for this relationship? Most studies have found that the problem for women in modern societies is the different socialization patterns applied to women and men (Simon, 2014). Several studies have found that women who live in modern societies experience more diverse types of stress than men (Simon, 2014). Of course, women are usually the recipients of sexual harassment and other forms of sexism; however, studies have also found a greater sense of resilience in women when dealing with sexually objectifying treatments (Szymanski & Feltman, 2014). Also, the multitasking demands on many women result in less time for activities that could increase well-being (Sweet & Kanaroglou, 2016).

Nevertheless, there is some good news. First, efforts aimed at increasing gender equality often increase social capital or beneficial positive social relationships in the community and help build community well-being (Merriam, 2016). Second, the Zuckerman et al. (2017) study referenced above had some good news for gender equality. Although women’s well-being initially fell when societies moved from traditional to modern social and economic conditions, the most recent research suggests that as societal conditions continue to evolve women gain an advantage over men in their well-being. That is, the initial drop in women’s well-being when compared to men eventually turns into an advantage for women. Similarly, a recent meta-analysis found that gender inequality impacted job satisfaction but not life satisfaction, which remained similar between women and men in spite of gender inequality (Batz-Barbarich, Tay, Kuykendall, & Cheung, 2018). In summary, the research on gender
differences in well-being leads to a message similar to the research on income and well-being: Namely, the factors that increase well-being are complex, and nothing indicates that either gender is inevitably doomed to be less happy than the other.

**Attractiveness, Climate, and Other Predictors**

Several studies have looked at the impact of physical attractiveness and well-being. A substantial body of research has found that most people tend to automatically attribute a variety of positive qualities to good-looking people (Feingold, 1992). Of course, these attributions are not always correct. But what about good looks and subjective well-being: Is there an important relationship? A study of married couples found no significant relationship between these two variables (Diener, Wolsic, & Fujita, 1995). A more recent study found that physical attractiveness was related to well-being for women, but only for those living in urban settings (Plaut, Adams, & Anderson, 2009). If someone believes that being physically attractive is important, then will cosmetic surgery improve his or her well-being? The evidence suggests that cosmetic surgery can enhance well-being in specific circumstances, but the psychological elements responsible for a positive outcome are difficult to determine (see Askegaard, Gertsen, & Langer, 2002). However, appearing better looking may be simpler than undergoing costly and potentially dangerous cosmetic surgery. That is, most people appear more attractive merely by smiling (Reis et al., 1990). We have more to say about physical attractiveness in Chapter 5.

Although education is a means to a better job for most people, does it affect happiness? A recent analysis found that a college degree could increase the odds of being “happy” by about 37% (Yang, 2008). However, another study found that once an individual attains a middle-class income level, further education does not impact happiness in any significant way (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999).

A note for anyone who has fantasized about escaping to a lush tropical island: People may believe that relaxing at such a place will bring the joy they crave, but they are often mistaken about what will make them happy. Nevertheless, climate does have an impact on mood. For example, Hawaii is consistently rated among the three “happiest” states (see Chapter 11). Studies have found that pleasant warm weather does improve mood, but only in the spring (Keller et al., 2005). A 2-week vacation on a Caribbean island can certainly relieve the tension of a high-stress job—but only temporarily. So a trip to that lush tropical island may be a good source of relaxation and well-being, but it probably won’t produce lasting happiness. On the other hand, a recent study found that people living in areas with more moderate temperature (i.e., 72°F/22°C average temperature) scored higher on personality traits related to sociability, emotional stability, and personal growth (Wei et al., 2017).

A study of Koreans and Americans examined how good they were at predicting their well-being in retirement (Oishi, Whitchurch, Miao, Kurtz, & Park, 2009). Many participants believed that a happy retirement derived from living in a pleasant climate and having a variety of recreational options. However, actual retirees reported that practical factors—such as access to health care and shopping convenience—were more important to their well-being. Although long-term well-being is only mildly influenced by a person’s locale, most Americans reported a preference for natural environments over urban settings (see Martens, Gutscher, & Bauer, 2011).

Finally, for our discussion, it is worth noting that a recent study suggested that being taller has an impact on one’s well-being. Deaton and Arora (2009) found that people
taller than average reported more enjoyment of life and less pain and sadness than others. However, taller individuals also reported more stress and for women, more worry. Injecting a bit of humor into their research, Deaton and Arora calculated that each additional inch in height above the average boosted happiness as much as a 4.4% rise in family income for men and a 3.8% increase in income for women.

**Impact of Discrimination on Subjective Well-Being**

We have seen that several bottom-up predictors can influence general well-being in a positive way. But sad to say, there are also bottom-up predictors that exert a detrimental effect on well-being. The following discussion examines some of these predictors but also looks at ways people can nullify the negative impact and turn challenges into advantages. Our earlier discussion of gender and well-being indicated that discrimination may have an impact on the well-being of women; so although that research is germane to this section, we will not review it again.

A meta-analysis by Schmitt, Postmes, Branscombe, and Garcia (2014) looked at a variety of studies that investigated perceived discrimination and well-being or the “consequences of the subjective perception that one faces discrimination” (p. 921). Their meta-analysis contained the results of studies with a total of 144,246 participants. The first general conclusion was that perceived discrimination has a negative impact on well-being. This conclusion held for all types of discrimination they investigated—concerning race, gender, sexual orientation, HIV+ status, mental illness, physical disability, and obesity. The conclusion also held for all types of well-being: positive affect, life satisfaction, and self-esteem. Sad to say, the negative effects of discrimination impacted children more severely. The negative effects were also stronger for people from disadvantaged groups, such as those with meager financial resources. As would be expected, they also found that being the personal target of discrimination had a more negative impact than being a member of a discriminated group.

A study by Bucchianeri, Eisenberg, Wall, Piran, and Neumark-Sztainer (2014) examined the consequences of harassment for adolescents and found similar results to the Schmitt, Postmes, Branscombe, and Garcia (2014) meta-analysis. That is, harassment had a negative impact on well-being, which held true for all types of harassment (i.e., harassment based on gender, race, social status, and weight) for both males and females. In summary, their general conclusions were dismaying. Discrimination hurts all types of well-being, and the negative effects begin in childhood and can continue throughout life.

On the other hand, their meta-analysis also revealed several factors that helped to diminish the impact of discrimination. Positive social support was an important factor in moderating the impact of discrimination. They also found that engagement-type coping strategies, or attempts to alter the situation or one’s reaction to it, were more effective than disengagement coping—in which the discrimination is ignored or denied. In addition, positive identification with a group appeared to be important for higher well-being. For instance, perceived racism had less impact if the individual felt a positive identification with his or her race. Indeed, the authors found that positive group identification may have been partially responsible for the finding that perceived racism and sexism had a smaller impact on well-being than discrimination based on mental illness, HIV+ status, or weight. Similarly, they also found that positive group identification resulted in self-esteem being less impacted by discrimination than either happiness or life satisfaction. Finally, the authors asserted a somewhat counterintuitive idea that “the consequences of perceiving
discrimination are not exclusively negative” (Schmitt et al., 2014, p. 937, italics in original). Although this statement could be easily misinterpreted, what they meant was that discrimination can help a person form an accurate understanding of the world. Such an understanding is essential for choosing effective coping strategies as well as for accurately evaluating one’s skills and talents. For example, if a talented woman does not obtain a promotion at work it can help her self-esteem to know she was passed over due to sexism and not because she lacked the necessary skills for the job. Of course, the sexism still existed; nevertheless, she didn’t make the mistake of blaming herself. This example leads to the next possible advantage: Accurate knowledge can lead to collective resistance to fight discrimination, such as sexism in the workplace.

**Race and Subjective Well-Being**

When examining the relationship between subjective well-being and race, it is possible to investigate differences between racial groups within a specific culture and differences among ethnically diverse cultures. This section focuses on differences in subjective well-being within specific cultures in the United States. Differences that have been found among countries and diverse ethnic groups are explored in Chapter 11.

Studies in the United States have found that, in general, White Americans tend to report higher subjective well-being than African Americans, Latinos, or Native Americans (Argyle, 1999; Yang, 2008). Some studies find Asian Americans reported high self-esteem as well as levels of happiness comparable to White Americans (Chang, 2001). However, rates of depression may be higher among Asian Americans, especially among young Asian women, than among European Americans (Oishi & Diener, 2001). Among African Americans, more recent findings show changes over time. A 2016 Gallup poll found that 88% of African Americans stated they were “very/somewhat satisfied” with their life in comparison to 89% of non-Hispanic Whites. Other more recent surveys find higher scores on happiness, optimism, and other markers of well-being for African Americans than for Whites (see Zuckerman et al., 2017). In addition, African American men aged 70 or older reported being happier than older White men (Yang, 2008). In a study of African Americans, significant predictors of happiness and life satisfaction included being older, being married, having more income, attending religious services, having good health, and having friends with whom to discuss important issues (Taylor, Chatters, Hardison, & Riley, 2001). Not surprisingly, these predictors were almost identical to significant predictors for other racial groups. It also appears that social changes in attitudes and levels of discrimination do have an impact. Since 1995, disparities in well-being between African Americans and Whites in the United States have been diminishing (Yang, 2008). Young Native Americans report fairly high levels of self-esteem. Unfortunately, the self-esteem of Native Americans decreased when they encountered White urban culture and faced unemployment, discrimination, and cultural clashes (Fuchs & Havinghurst, 1973). It is also important to note that individuals from multiracial backgrounds can face unique discrimination challenges (Snyder, 2016).

Research has identified several factors that help to increase well-being in spite of discrimination. As mentioned above, positive group identification can be helpful. A study by Grills et al. (2016) found that identification with Afrocentric values was helpful for African American youth. Research by Davis et al. (2015) investigated forgiveness for race-related offenses and found that religious commitment and less need for revenge were related to
stronger racial/ethnic identity. Finally, when factors such as income, education level, and occupational level within a society were taken into account, the effects of race and ethnicity on subjective well-being were smaller (Yang, 2008). Nevertheless, these do not disappear entirely.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

As earlier mentioned, negative consequences exist for all types of discrimination, including discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, or sexual preferences. Recently, the topic of discrimination against LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender) individuals has become prominent in many countries around the world. Kyle Bandermann and Dawn Szymanski (2014) investigated “heterosexist oppression” and found that the consequences for LGBT people can be serious enough to meet the criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Even in Iceland, a country known for its sexual equality, young LGBT people suffered greater depression, anger, and stress than heterosexuals of the same age. Last, Ghabrial (2017) investigated narratives from LGBT and queer people of color and found unique issues coming from multiple sources of discrimination.

Research has also found several factors that can help minimize the impact of discrimination. As with most other areas of life, positive well-being among LGBT people has been associated with greater social support (Davey, Bouman, Arcelus, & Meyer, 2014). One of the unique coping strategies for LGBT people is to “come out” or to be public about their sexuality. Kosiw, Palmer, and Kull (2015) found that coming out was associated with higher self-esteem and lower depression and could increase a sense of resilience. A study by Laura King and Summer Noelle (2005) examined the narrative themes in “coming out stories” written by gay men and lesbians. They found that well-being was associated with stories rich in “intimacy imagery” or detailed descriptions of positive interpersonal relationships. A study by Szymanski, Mikorski, and Carretta (2017) looked at LGBT issues from a positive psychology orientation. They found that coping with discrimination through greater education about LGBT issues and advocacy for LGBT rights were associated with commitments to social justice and greater self-awareness (see also Dunn & Szymanski, 2017). Dawn Szymanski and Mikorski (2016) found that the presence of meaning was advantageous to the well-being of LGBT people.

One of the unique aspects of this topic is gender-confirming surgery. A study by Prunas, Anzani, and Di Sarno (2017) found greater self-acceptance and higher eudaimonic well-being after gender-confirming surgery for both trans men and trans women. For some researchers, higher eudaimonic well-being is similar to greater maturity. A study by St. de Aubin and Sherven (2008) used ego development as a measure of maturity. They found that lesbians who did not internalize homonegativity (that is, negative stereotypes about sexual orientation) scored higher on ego development or maturity.

Bottom-Up Predictors and the “Happiest Man in America”

In summary, the economic, social, and demographic factors of our lives do matter to our happiness. Bottom-up predictors such as gender, income, race, and marital status interact in relatively complex ways throughout the life span to influence levels of subjective well-being. However, none of these factors need dictate our happiness and well-being. To affirm this view, imagine a “very happy” person based on bottom-up predictors. In fact, the Gallup organization used a number of significant demographic characteristics to find the
“happiest man in America” (Rampell, 2011). He is Mr. Alvin Wong of Honolulu, Hawaii, a 69-year-old Chinese American who is 5'10" tall, has been married for over 35 years, has two children, owns his own business, and is a kosher-observing Jew. According to most of the bottom-up predictors, Mr. Wong fits the profile of the happiest man. It turns out that Mr. Wong says he is quite happy. However, there is obviously more to greater well-being than the statistical predictors used in this somewhat tongue-in-cheek analysis.

### Increasing Happiness and Life Satisfaction

As we begin this section on strategies to increase subjective well-being, it might be wise to consider if well-being can be changed significantly. You will recall from Chapter 2 that set point theory suggests genetics largely determines our level of long-term well-being. We hope you will also recall that newer research affirms that people can change over time and that our genetic inheritance does not completely determine our long-term happiness (e.g., Headey, Muffels, & Wagner, 2010). However, another issue might impact how successful we can be at changing our level of well-being.

When exposed to a certain level of stimulus, we become habituated and adapt to that level relatively quickly. When we adapt to a positive stimulus and no longer feel the effects, it is called *hedonic adaptation*. Earlier we saw that an outcome of such adaptation can be the hedonic treadmill, in which we need an ever-increasing income level to obtain the positive boost from a rise in income. With positive experiences, when we initially feel something pleasant, our happiness has much to do with the fact that a baseline level of happiness has just changed. We notice the change. It grabs our attention. At that instant, the difference between our earlier state and the present one is more pronounced than it will ever be again. For almost immediately, adaptation begins to set in and the new level of happiness begins the inevitable transformation into our new baseline. When it becomes the new baseline, we don't notice it as much; that is, as we feel more positive emotion we adapt to it—and that level becomes “the new normal.” We then need more positive emotion in order to feel “happy” again.

Despite the hedonic treadmill theory, several large studies now affirm that people can change and that adaptation to positive emotions is not inevitable (e.g., Lucas, 2007). Diener, Lucas, and Scollon (2006) argued that there are at least five important reasons to believe that the idea of a hedonic treadmill is wrong, which means that people can make lasting positive changes in their lives. These researchers noted that people in Western countries generally report levels of happiness “above average,” so they can’t be adapting to positive emotion (adaptation would imply a return to a neutral point). Also, people may have multiple set points (for example, one for work satisfaction, another for marital satisfaction, and so on), and some set points may be more fluid than others. In addition, research is clear that people can increase their happiness and life satisfaction. For example, the use of better styles of coping can definitely result in higher well-being.

In order to avoid the hedonic treadmill, one must adopt one of two strategies (Larsen & Prizmic, 2008). The first is to find ways to speed up adaptation to negative events. If this strategy is successful, then we could adjust more quickly to negative emotions so as to experience these more briefly in our lives. The second strategy is to slow down adaptation to positive events. If this strategy is successful, then it would take longer for us to adapt to
positive events with the result that we would feel positive emotions for greater amounts of
time. Therefore, interventions to increase life satisfaction, and especially to increase hap-
piness, must either help discharge negative emotions (like anger, resentment, or worry)
more rapidly—or help maintain positive emotions like gratitude, admiration, or joy for
longer. Either strategy can be successful in amplifying well-being, and people who report
being happier are perhaps more skilled at both strategies (Larsen & Prizmic, 2008).

**Intensity and Frequency of Positive Emotion**

Now that we know happiness and life satisfaction can be changed, how should we go
about changing? Do some general guidelines exist? First to consider is whether more intense
or more frequent positive emotions should be the goal. That is, are people happier if they
feel mild positive feelings every day or, rather, if they feel extremely happy once a week?
The peak-and-end rule in emotion research states that we select a few moments from our
memories in determining how we will feel about an entire past event (Fredrickson, 2000b).
Specifically, we select the most intense emotion from our memories as well as the last emo-
tion. For instance, if your romantic evening was mostly routine and only mildly enjoy-
able, but you experienced one spectacular moment of fun and the date ended with the most
passionate kiss of your life, then you’ll remember that entire evening as being fabulous.
Therefore, intensity of emotion seems more crucial for happiness.

However, frequency is more important than intensity (Diener, Sandvik, & Pavor, 1991).
Consistently feeling moderate subjective well-being seems to have a more beneficial effect
than an occasional experience of bliss. Partially this is because super joyful experiences are
rare and therefore unlikely to affect everyday well-being. In addition, research on emotional
dynamics, or how emotions change over time, has found that people who are generally
more positive have patterns of emotion that are more stable, less variable, more predict-
able, and more consistent across types of positive emotion than people who report lower
positivity (Houben, Van Den Noortgate, & Kuppens, 2015). People who experience large
fluctuations in their emotions throughout the day generally feel more negative emotions
than positive. So, although movies and novels about a brief but passionate romance or a
sad-and-struggling athlete who wins the gold medal often fuel popular imagination, in real-
ity a daily dose of mild positive feeling is more likely to induce long-term benefits than a
tremendous dose of positive emotion.

**Strategies for Creating a Good Mood**

In today’s world, many people seek out advice on how to increase their well-being
through self-help strategies provided either in print or over the Internet (Parks, Schuller, &
Tasimi, 2012). Research on self-help strategies has generally found they can be helpful, at
least in the short term (Parks et al., 2012). A straightforward way to change one’s subjective
well-being is to do something that increases the ratio of positive to negative emotions in
one’s life. Most people develop various strategies to increase the frequency of positive emo-
tions. Indeed, people are fairly clever in finding ways to bring themselves out of bad moods
(Thayer, Newman, & McClain, 1994). For example, many persons report they improve their
moods by listening to music (Croom, 2015; Ferguson & Sheldon, 2013; Juslin & Laukka,
2004). However, music that improves well-being may depend on the particular genre as well
as one’s personality characteristics. For example, one study found that males reacted more
aggressively after hearing heavy metal music (Mast & McAndrews, 2011), and another study found increased rates for suicide in metropolitan areas of the United States with a larger audience for country music (Stack & Gundlach, 1992). Can music really be bad for your health? These studies suggest it can.

**Fordyce’s Happiness Training Program**

An early intervention to increase happiness was the Happiness Training Program developed by Michael Fordyce (1977, 1981, 1983, 1988). He devised a package designed to teach the “fourteen fundamentals of happiness” (1981), grouped in the following way: 1) change your activities (that is, be more active, be productive at meaningful work, get organized); 2) change your thinking (that is, think optimistically, orient yourself to the present, lower your expectations and aspirations, value happiness—put it first in your life); 3) nurture relationships (that is, develop and nurture close relationships because they are the primary source of happiness, develop an outgoing and social personality, spend more time socializing); 4) value personal growth (that is, work on a healthy personality, be yourself); and 5) decrease negative emotions (that is, eliminate negative feelings, stop worrying).

The correspondences between his list and the subjective well-being literature are obvious. Fordyce’s (1977, 1983) studies found that scores on standard measures of happiness were increased following implementation of his program. Of course, other factors are helpful. For instance, Smith, Compton, and West (1996) found that happiness scores could be increased further when people practiced a simple meditation technique in addition to implementing Fordyce’s program for happiness.

**Comments on Fordyce’s Program**

Although there are certainly many correspondences between Fordyce’s 14 fundamentals and the subjective well-being literature, two of Fordyce’s fundamentals deserve special attention. Fordyce asserted that we should “lower expectations and aspirations.” The research basis for this fundamental comes from studies that show greater satisfaction among those whose actual self and ideal self (or whose actual achievements and goals) are close together. Often the further apart they are, the less one feels well-being. Early in the 20th century, William James insightfully said one way to raise self-esteem was to lower our unrealistic expectations for ourselves. Thus, people should be less perfectionist about both themselves and others, and they should not set their goals unrealistically high. However, it can be difficult to distinguish how realistic a goal actually is for any particular person. It seems better to allow people to set their goals high and then teach them how to use the struggle, challenge, and even failure for personal growth.

Fordyce also proposed that people should place the pursuit of happiness first in their lives. However, many other theorists dating back to Maslow (1971) have argued that
happiness is a by-product of other activities and is, in fact, more elusive when relentlessly pursued (see Oishi et al., 2007). A study of the Valuing Happiness Scale found that worrying about one’s level of happiness or constant monitoring of one’s happiness does indeed correlate with lower well-being (Luhmann et al., 2015).

**Sustainable Happiness**

The **sustainable happiness model** (SHM) suggests that changes in subjective well-being can be made and sustained if the focus of change is in the proper domain (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006a). According to the SHM, long-term happiness is a function of a) one’s genetically determined *set point*; b) *circumstantial factors*, such as where a person lives, age, gender, and past life events (for example, previous traumas); and c) *intentional activity*, or how people choose to spend their time, interact with others, and think about situations.

People can do little to modify their set point, and often circumstances are difficult to change. However, there are considerable options to change intentional activity. Indeed, consistent with SHM, Sheldon and Lyubomirsky (2006a) found that college students who changed their activities (for example, began pursuing a new goal or life passion) had a larger increase in well-being than those who changed their circumstances (for example, improved their living arrangements or financial situation). One study found that even reading stories written in the active voice increases happiness more than reading stories written in the passive voice (Lucas, Lloyd, & Magaloni, 2005). It may also be advantageous to mix several daily activities that each help fulfill different needs (Tay & Diener, 2011).

To achieve lasting changes in well-being, making these changes in the correct way is key. For instance, the pursuit of goals can help increase well-being, but only if the goals fit the person’s interests and values (Sheldon et al., 2010). In another study, Lyubomirsky, Tkach, and Sheldon (2004) asked participants to perform five acts of kindness per week for 6 weeks. They found that the exercise increased well-being. Similarly, the researchers asked participants to “count your blessings” or recognize things about which they were grateful. The researchers again found increases in well-being, but only if all five acts were performed in one day.

Studies have also found that having a *happiness growth mind-set* helps such interventions to work better (Van Tongeren & Burnette, 2016). This idea derives from Carol Dweck’s (2007) concept of growth mind-set, which refers to a person’s belief that she or he has abilities that can be developed through dedication and effort (Dweck & Master, 2009). A happiness growth mind-set is the belief that one’s happiness can be developed.

**Barbara Fredrickson’s Positivity**

Barbara Fredrickson (2001; Cohn & Fredrickson, 2009), who developed the broaden-and-build model of positive emotions (see Chapter 2), recommended several ways in which positive emotions may be fostered and cultivated. Fredrickson (2000a) listed strategies that can be helpful when trying to increase positive emotionality in life; many of these are covered in more detail in later chapters. These strategies include the following: be more open and increase awareness in order to appreciate the sensory experiences of life, be sociable, cultivate kindness, cultivate healthy distractions to get your mind off your troubles, dispute negative thinking, find nearby nature or natural settings (see also Burns, 2007), apply
your strengths and virtues, use mindfulness meditation, do good or help others, practice gratefulness, savor or relish positive feelings, visualize your future, and imagine you have reached your own best potential. She also advised that relaxation strategies such as meditation, positive imagery, massage, and muscle relaxation can be useful (Fredrickson, 2000a). A unique style of meditation called loving-kindness is especially helpful (Fredrickson et al., 2008; see Chapter 10). Fredrickson (2007) also suggested that people keep a daily diary of positive events, that is, record the good things they experience daily. Many of Fredrickson’s suggestions advised people to stop ruminating about issues and to focus attention on sensory sensations, activities, or helping other people. Other suggestions asked people to notice the things in life that are positive, including little events that bring joy.

**Quality of Life Therapy**

Michael Frisch (2006, 2016) created an approach to subjective well-being that he calls quality of life therapy (QOLT). Frisch’s theory is built on ideas from cognitive-behavioral therapy and asks people to rate their satisfaction with 16 areas of everyday life. These include such life domains as health, self-esteem, work, learning, love, friends, home, and community. Because people can be satisfied with different life domains while experiencing various levels of positive emotion, they are asked to rate their satisfaction with these life areas, rather than how they feel about the 16 life areas. Frisch’s model is not an additive one. That is, QOLT does not assume that optimal well-being necessarily requires full satisfaction in all 16 life areas. Indeed, it is easy to see that the attainment of full satisfaction in all 16 areas is a rather herculean task that few persons could possibly accomplish.

QOLT is built on what Frisch called the CASIO model of assessment. In this model, when we attempt to increase our sense of well-being, we can evaluate and change our objective life circumstances (C), our attitude or interpretation of life domains (A), our standards of fulfillment or goals (S), how important we believe an area is to our life (I), or we can focus attention on other areas that already give us a sense of satisfaction (O). QOLT uses the results of the CASIO assessment to create interventions that can be used to increase a sense of life satisfaction. Studies of QOLT have found that it can be a useful strategy for fostering greater well-being (Frisch et al., 2005; Frisch, 2016).

**Making Interventions More Effective**

Today a wide range of positive psychology exercises and interventions can be used to foster greater well-being (Hoffman, 2016; Parks et al., 2012; Wood & Terrier, 2010). In addition, outside the formal literature on positive psychology, people use many therapeutic lifestyle changes to increase well-being. These include physical exercise, nutrition, recreation, stress management, and spiritual involvement (Walsh, 2011a). Of course, the challenge is to maintain a greater sense of well-being over time and through the ups and downs of life. This issue applies whether the intervention is delivered in print, over the Internet, or in a psychotherapist’s office. The first way to enhance the effectiveness of these interventions is to examine if some actually work better than others.

**Comparing Interventions: Which Ones Work Better?**

Seligman, Steen, Park, and Peterson (2005) completed an interesting study that tracked people’s behavior for 6 months and compared the effectiveness of five positive psychology
interventions designed to increase subjective well-being. Two of the five had a lasting impact on well-being. The first asked people to “write down three good things that went well each day and their causes every night for a week” (p. 416). The second activity asked people to complete the VIA Survey of Character (see Chapter 2) and to use one of their signature strengths “in a new and different way every day for a week” (p. 416). Both activities increased happiness and decreased symptoms of depression for 6 months. Another activity asked people to write and deliver a letter of gratitude to “someone who had been especially kind to [you] but had never been properly thanked” (p. 416). This activity substantially increased happiness for about 1 month, but the impact tapered off over 6 months.

Richard Wiseman created the Science of Happiness Project in Britain to evaluate the effectiveness of four happiness interventions (see Scott, 2009). Around 2,000 people participated by practicing one of four happiness interventions: 1) express gratitude, 2) smile more, 3) recall a pleasant event that happened the previous day, or 4) perform an act of kindness. Wiseman found that all four interventions boosted happiness, but the greatest increase occurred among those who recalled a pleasant event from the previous day. Wiseman concluded that the greatest increase in happiness comes from simply reliving happy memories.

Sheldon and Lyubomirsky (2006b) compared two interventions. The first was the gratitude activity mentioned earlier. The second asked people to write about their “best possible selves” or to imagine what life will be like in the future when “everything has gone as well as it possibly could” and you have “succeeded at accomplishing all your life goals [and] the realization of your life dreams.” They found that both activities decreased negative mood. Even the control condition that asked people to “pay greater attention to the daily details of your life” decreased negative mood. The best possible selves intervention produced the largest immediate increase in well-being, followed by the gratitude activity. In addition, the best possible selves activity produced the greatest motivation to continue. Finally, the “fit” between a particular activity and the individual’s personality was important for motivation and the activity’s success.

One highly provocative study compared the impact of hedonic well-being and eudaimonic well-being on gene expression. In this case, the study examined genes involved in antiviral and inflammation associated with stress. Barbara Fredrickson and her colleagues (2013) found that people with high levels of eudaimonic well-being showed favorable gene expression in their immune cells. Surprisingly to the researchers, people with high levels of hedonic well-being showed less favorable, or even adverse, gene expression in their immune cells. The results became even more important for interventions when the researchers found that both eudaimonic and hedonic groups reported similar levels of positive emotions. That is, both groups reported they felt “positive,” but their genomes were reacting differently. Clearly, more research is needed to follow up on this provocative study.

**Moderators of Effectiveness**

As we have just seen, one way to evaluate effectiveness is to compare interventions. Perhaps a better strategy for evaluating effectiveness is to look for circumstances that either foster or inhibit effectiveness across intervention types (see Boehm, Ruberton, & Lyubomirsky, 2018).

One of the most obvious moderators of effectiveness is motivation. Without individual motivation and effort, clearly even interventions shown by research to be effective will have
little impact on well-being. Along with the requisite for motivation goes the requisite for persistence. Research has shown that interventions practiced for longer periods of time tend to have a greater impact (e.g., Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Culture can also have an impact on positive psychology interventions; that is, a growing body of research has found that Asians (who come from collectivist cultures) respond to positive psychology interventions somewhat differently than Americans and Europeans (who come from individualistic cultures) (see Boehm et al., 2018). A variable mentioned earlier—the person-activity fit—also has a significant impact on how effective an intervention might be for a specific individual. The person–activity fit refers to the fact that people react differently to interventions because of personal characteristics or traits. For example, some interventions tend to be a better fit for women than men (e.g., Thompson, Peura, & Gayton, 2015), whereas others may be a better fit with older rather than younger people (e.g., Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Still other interventions may be a better fit depending on the individual’s basic personality traits. In The How of Happiness, Sonja Lyubomirsky (2007) described five strategies, or “hows” of sustainable happiness, to foster a greater feeling of well-being. In addition to mentioning the moderators listed above, she advised to vary the timing and variety of one’s activities. By doing so, one can avoid falling into a rut and ensure that favorite activities provide an ongoing stream of fresh positive experiences. This suggestion is also part of the hedonic adaptation model designed to counter hedonic adaptation (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006a, 2012). The model also includes the suggestion to continue appreciating or savoring subtle changes in one’s happiness. Lyubomirsky’s last “how” is to cultivate and nurture social support for one’s efforts at change.

Another frequently seen moderator is the capacity of the intervention to increase positive emotion, as well as fulfill basic needs. The needs seen most often in the research are those for autonomy, competence, and relatedness posited by self-determination theory (e.g., Sheldon et al., 2010). A review of studies on positive psychology interventions examined factors that contributed to failed interventions (van Zyl & Rothman, 2014). Failed interventions tended to 1) focus on only one predictor of well-being (for example, only happiness), 2) did not take into account mediating factors like gender or age, and 3) ignored basic knowledge about psychological processes. Another review looked at the effects of positive psychology interventions 3.5 years after completing the interventions (Proyer et al., 2015). Their findings combined many of the factors listed above: Happiness scores after 3.5 years were predicted by initial liking of the intervention, initial benefits received, continued practice and effort, and how much improvement in happiness was felt by the participants.

**General Comments on Increasing Happiness**

The research on interventions to increase happiness has shown that it is possible to increase scores on measures of happiness and life satisfaction through psychological and physiological interventions. A caveat is that evidence on the heritability of positive affect suggests that it may not be possible for everyone to be cheerful, jovial, and optimistic most of the time. This point relates to interesting findings from a study indicating that college students had difficulty distinguishing among pleasure, happiness, and contentment (Evans, Guerra, Romero, & Lucas, 2008). Therefore, some people may be pursuing happiness, but what they really would like is to feel greater contentment.

A study related to this idea found that feeling relaxed, energized or activated, and safe or content all impacted well-being, but feeling safe or content resulted in the greatest
reduction in depression, anxiety, stress, and self-criticism (Gilbert et al., 2008). This study also suggested that feeling energized, relaxed, and safe or content may represent the three basic dimensions of positive emotionality. Some researchers have therefore urged that contentment be studied as an alternate way to assess well-being (McKenzie, 2015). An article by Cordaro, Brackett, Glass, and Anderson (2016) reviewed how contentment has been defined over the past 4,000 years and defined contentment as “perceived completeness” or the perception that one’s present situation is both enough and complete. In a similar way, some people have recently begun looking at the construct of peace of mind as a way to measure well-being. These researchers point out that peace of mind is close to how well-being is thought about in China and the East (Xu, Rodriguez, Zhang, & Liu, 2015). The newly created Peace of Mind Scale (PoM) was positively associated with measures of well-being and was, in fact, more highly related to well-being for Taiwanese individuals than for European Americans (Lee, Lin, Huang, & Fredrickson, 2013). Of course, the PoM scale can be used to assess well-being among people living anywhere in the world.

Last, it may be that all the constructs we use to assess well-being are merely aspects of a more general orientation to life. The construct of love of life refers to generally positive feelings toward one’s own life. It is a combination of positive attitudes toward life, perceiving positive outcomes in one’s life, and a sense of meaningfulness (Abdel-Khalek, 2007).

CAN YOU BE TOO HAPPY?

In this section, we provide some cautionary tales about happiness and discuss why negative emotions are necessary for a full life, a life lived well. Once again, we see that living the good life is more than simply putting on a “happy face” and experiencing positive emotions. Rather, all emotions can potentially contribute to the good life.

Cautionary Tales: The Down Side of Feeling Up

Beyond a doubt, research supports the notion that feeling more positive emotions is advantageous in many life domains. However, several cautions are in order when thinking about how to be happier. We have already seen that feeling too happy (that is, a 10 on a 10-point scale) may actually interfere with well-being and diminish physical health. A 2011 article by Gruber, Mauss, and Tamir summarized research on what they called the “dark side” of happiness (also see Gruber, 2018). The studies they reviewed found that wanting happiness too much can lead to loneliness, being happy can make people more gullible, and being too happy can result in selfishness. In addition, they found that being a bit comfortable with negative emotions can actually result in less negativity. It seems that if we allow some negative feelings, then we don’t struggle against them, and, therefore, we don’t perpetuate negative emotions with our struggles. It also appears that when happy people make decisions they are prone to more stereotypical thinking, rely on shortcuts too often, and are less prone to check for errors (see Lyubomirsky, Diener, & King, 2005). People who are happier may also be more prone to the primacy effect in impression formation; that is, they may too hastily form opinions about others derived from first impressions (Forgas, 2010). In essence, being extremely happy may mean that we don’t pay much attention to what’s actually happening around us. Similarly, being in a positive mood may tend to make us more
selfish (Tan & Forgas, 2010). Perhaps being able to feel the suffering of others or the sadness in the world increases our empathy, social sensitivity, and sense of justice.

Turning now to self-esteem, we suggest that most people realize it is possible for self-esteem to be too high. Holding overly favorable views of one’s abilities is a common judgment error (see “positive illusions”), which often decreases ability to distinguish accuracy from error in many decision-making tasks (Kruger & Dunning, 2009). Baumeister and his colleagues showed that when people with high self-esteem feel threatened, they can set unrealistic goals that have a greater potential for failure (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1993; Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996). Furthermore, there are two types of high self-esteem: secure and fragile (Kernis, 2003). High self-esteem that is fragile can be unstable, and it has been associated with elevated hostility (Zeigler-Hill et al., 2014). It is also possible that frequent concerns about one’s own happiness can produce constant monitoring of one’s emotions and create a fragile and vulnerable sense of self.

As we have seen, because optimism is a belief, it can be a false belief. For example, most people believe their own risk for developing cancer or heart disease is much lower than their statistical risk for those events (Weinstein, 1980). This type of realistic optimism creates a false sense of security and a bias in risk perception that, in some cases, can literally be fatal. People who are highly optimistic may also give up on difficult tasks more quickly than other people (Aspinwall & Richter, 2000). That is, unless optimists are highly motivated to complete a task, they may not wish to damage their outlook by risking failure. People may also be too optimistic about how optimism will help their performance. Tenny, Logg, and Moore (2015) found that optimism improved persistence at a task, but it did not improve actual performance. They suggested that people could be too optimistic about optimism. Similarly, an investigation of 18- to 96-year-old people in Germany found that the benefits of optimism were related to age and life circumstances (Lang, Weiss, Gerstorf, & Wagner, 2013). For example, people over 65 who were overly optimistic about their future had worse health outcomes. Those who were more realistic about the impact of aging on their health did better over time, partially because they were more aware of potential health problems and took preventative actions.

James Collins (2001) wrote about the “Stockwell paradox,” which he named after Admiral James Stockwell’s experience as a prisoner during the Vietnam War. Stockwell said he never lost hope he would survive the imprisonment. However, he added that those who didn’t survive were “the optimists.” In this case, the optimists believed their ordeal would soon be over, so they were constantly disappointed. Stockwell asserted that people must not confuse faith in an eventual happy outcome with a denial of the reality of one’s current predicament.

Finally, the “power of positive thinking” can have a downside for some people. Those who possessed low self-esteem felt worse after repeating affirmations (“I’m a lovable person”) or when asked to think about how that statement was true for them (Wood, Perunovic, & Lee, 2009). Similarly, those who scored high on neuroticism did not feel less negative emotions when asked to reappraise a past negative event by giving it a positive interpretation (Ng & Diener, 2009).

**We Also Need Negative Emotions**

The previous discussion of happiness segues nicely into a discussion of an unexpected topic—negative emotions. For among the most frequently voiced comments about the
future of positive psychology concerns the necessity to integrate positive and negative emotions into a broader conceptualization of well-being and the good life (Brown & Holt, 2011). Several investigators have suggested that in order for people to experience a full life, it is necessary for them to feel both positive and negative emotions, rather than eliminate the negative ones (Ivtzan, Lomas, Hefferon, & Worth, 2015; Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2014). Years of research in the domains of psychotherapy and counseling, resilience, posttraumatic coping, and creativity have made it abundantly clear that both positive and negative emotions are necessary for adaptation and personal growth. Blaine Fowers (2005, 2008) posited that a life well lived requires a type of wisdom that can balance claims of “the good” that are often contradictory and in competition; often such claims necessitate use of both positive and negative emotions. Indeed, the interpretation of emotions as either “positive” or “negative” may change with the specific situation (see Wong, 2011). In this light, Gordon Allport insisted that it is possible to exhibit optimal mental health and not be happy! In brief, some exposure to unwelcome life events may be needed for people to cultivate personal strengths (Stokols, 2003).

Sadness and depression can at times be helpful emotions. In a paper titled “The Bright Side of Being Blue,” Andrews and Thomson (2009) presented their analytical rumination hypothesis, which proposes that feeling depressed and sad can have positive consequences. The idea is that when we are depressed, we can take time to reflect and analyze the complex problems that may have prompted the depression (Andrews & Thomson, 2009). Of course, this valuation may not apply to cases of severe depression. Negative emotions can also prompt creative ways to deal with difficult feeling. A clever insight led to the creation of the “Complaints Choir,” which allows people to sing about what irritates them. People in these choirs can sing about something as personal as a noisy neighbor, which they get to sing about in large groups! One person explained, “When everyone is singing your complaint, it’s very cathartic. It’s as if you have a lot of support for your complaint” (see Tarm, 2007).

Last, studies have examined what is called **emodiversity** or our “emotional ecosystem” (Quoidbach et al., 2014). The idea behind emodiversity is that greater well-being is found when people acknowledge both their positive and negative emotions (for a critique see Brown & Coyne, 2017). An intriguing study found that changes in mixed positive and negative emotional experiences preceded improvements in well-being (Adler & Hershfield, 2012). Specifically, the study found that psychotherapy clients who wrote narratives that acknowledged both their positive and negative emotions were more likely to improve. Quoidbark and her colleagues (2014) speculated that greater emotional diversity may help increase resilience and counter our tendency to adapt or habituate to specific positive emotions, thus making positive emotionality more stable and salient in our lives. As an example of how experiences with complex emotionality can contribute to well-being, we offer the research on nostalgia.

**Nostalgia**

Our emotions may also be difficult to categorize as simply **positive** or **negative**. A good example of how a blend of positive and negative emotions can be psychologically beneficial comes from **nostalgia**. The word derives from ancient Greek, combining **nostos** (to return home or to one’s native land) and **algos** (referring to “pain, suffering, or grief”). The term was first formulated in 1688 by a Swiss physician named Johannes Hofer, who discussed it in
his medical dissertation. He used nostalgia in describing the extreme emotional condition of Swiss soldiers stationed far from home, whose symptoms included sadness, diminished senses, and physical weakness. For several centuries thereafter, nostalgia had a medical and essentially pathological connotation associated with homesickness. But in the 1950s, popular American usage demedicalized and depathologized it as well. In a seminal study involving American college students, sociologist Fred Davis (1979) redefined nostalgia as a “positively toned evocation of a lived past” (p. 18) and asserted that it “allows human beings to maintain their identity in the face of major transitions . . . in the life cycle [such as] from childhood to pubescence, from adolescence to adulthood, from single to married life, from spouse to parent” (p. 4).

Subsequent psychological research (Batcho, 1995; Havlena & Holak, 1991) characterized nostalgia as both intense and complex, comprising mainly positive emotions like warmth, joy, gratitude, and affection, yet also including negative emotions such as sadness, longing, and wishfulness. For this reason, investigators (see especially Havlena & Holak, 1991) have described nostalgia as “bittersweet,” typically combining a pleasant memory of the past with a sense of loss from the realization that the past is gone. Research also indicates that men and women experience nostalgia differently due to their different socialization experiences (Csikzentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981) and that some people may have a greater disposition for nostalgia than others (Holbrook, 1993; Zimmer, Little, & Griffiths, 1999).

In a series of studies, Zhou, Sedikides, Wilschut, and Ding-Guo (2008) found that nostalgia relieved individuals’ feelings of loneliness and increased their perceived social support. The restorative function of nostalgia was particularly salient among those with high resilience. The investigators concluded that nostalgia is a psychological resource that fosters mental health by strengthening one’s sense of social connectedness and belongingness. In other words, nostalgic memories from our childhood or adolescence—such as those involving family trips or birthday parties—amplify our sense that we are loved by others, even though we cannot physically relive those bygone joyful moments.

Finally, it should be remembered that other perspectives on the good life do not focus exclusively on conventional ideas about happiness in their approach to well-being. For instance, the oldest perspective on well-being concerns wisdom, which is not defined solely by how much positive emotion a wise person feels. Also, the happiness of a new mother or father is different from that of a gold medal–winning athlete—and different from that of a Buddhist monk. The relationships among emotions and a sense of well-being are complex—like life itself—and the psychological models used to explain these have just begun to explore the intricacy involved in creating an apparently simple judgment that “life is good.”

**SUMMARY**

This chapter presented research on subjective well-being, which studies happiness and life satisfaction. Investigations in Western countries show that people generally report above-average levels of happiness, and yet the desire to be happier seems universal. Researchers have found several variables that are predictors of subjective well-being including high self-esteem, positive relationships, optimism, a
sense of control, extraversion, and a sense of meaning and purpose in life. Although earning more income is related to higher well-being, the relationship between these two factors is complex and nonlinear. In general, gender, age, race, and geographic climate account for small portions of subjective well-being. We discussed several other factors that impact subjective well-being, such as adaptation, cognition, and social comparisons. Finally, a few interventions to increase happiness were highlighted.

### Key Terms and Ideas

- happiness 65
- satisfaction with life 65
- neuroticism 65
- bottom-up theory 70
- top-down theory 70
- learned optimism 73
- personal control 74
- self-efficacy 74
- sense of meaning 75
- social comparison processes 76
- hedonic treadmill 83
- sustainable happiness model 95
- quality of life therapy 96
- contentment 99
- peace of mind 99
- love of life 99
- emodiversity 101

### Books


### On the Web

- [http://www.eddiener.com](http://www.eddiener.com). The home page of Dr. Ed Diener (affectionately known as “the Jedi master of happiness”), one of the most respected and prolific researchers on subjective well-being.
- [http://zenhabits.net/75-simple-pleasures-to-brighten-your-day](http://zenhabits.net/75-simple-pleasures-to-brighten-your-day). More simple pleasures plus other suggestions for well-being.
- [https://www.edge.org/conversation/june_gruber-misunderstanding-positive-emotion](https://www.edge.org/conversation/june_gruber-misunderstanding-positive-emotion). Dr. June Gruber discusses the downside of positive emotions and other topics.
Personal Exploration

Think of the happiest person that you know in your own life, such as a family member or relative, friend or neighbor, teacher or clergy. Interview this person in depth and see if you can identify the various factors that contribute to his or her happiness. It might be useful to ask such questions as a) Were you always such a happy person? If not, what helped you to become happier? b) Does anything affect your happiness on a day-to-day basis? If so, what? c) Do you ever find yourself in a bad mood? If so, are there ways that you’ve learned to put yourself back into a pleasant mood? d) Do you have any advice for others who would like to become as happy as you are? If so, what tips or suggestions can you offer?