

THE HAPPINESS ADVANTAGE

**The Seven Principles
of Positive Psychology
That Fuel Success and
Performance at Work**

SHAWN ACHOR



To my parents, both teachers,
who have dedicated their lives to the belief that we can all
shine brighter

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breath go in and out. While you do so, try to remain patient. If you find your mind drifting, just slowly bring it back to focus. Meditation takes practice, but it's one of the most powerful happiness interventions. Studies show that in the minutes right after meditating, we experience feelings of calm and contentment, as well as heightened awareness and empathy. And, research even shows that regular meditation can permanently rewire the brain to raise levels of happiness, lower stress, even improve immune function.²⁷

Find Something to Look Forward To. One study found that people who just *thought about* watching their favorite movie actually raised their endorphin levels by 27 percent.²⁸ Often, the most enjoyable part of an activity is the anticipation. If you can't take the time for a vacation right now, or even a night out with friends, put something on the calendar—even if it's a month or a year down the road. Then whenever you need a boost of happiness, remind yourself about it. Anticipating future rewards can actually light up the pleasure centers in your brain much as the actual reward will.

Commit Conscious Acts of Kindness. A long line of empirical research, including one study of over 2,000 people, has shown that acts of altruism—giving to friends and strangers alike—decrease stress and strongly contribute to enhanced mental health.²⁹ Sonja Lyubomirsky, a leading researcher and author of *The How of Happiness*, has found that individuals told to complete five acts of kindness over the course of a day report feeling much happier than control groups and that the feeling lasts for many subsequent days, far after the exercise is over.³⁰ To try this yourself, pick one day a week and make a point of committing five acts of kindness. But if you want to reap the psychological benefit, make sure you do these things deliberately and consciously—you can't just look back over the last 24 hours and declare your acts post hoc. ("Oh yeah, I held the door for that guy coming out of the bank. That was nice.") And they need not be grand gestures, either. One of my favorite acts is

paying the toll of someone behind me on the Mass Pike. Being able to counter the negative effects of traffic-induced stress is \$2 well spent in my book.

Infuse Positivity Into Your Surroundings. As we'll read more about in the next chapter, our physical environment can have an enormous impact on our mindset and sense of well-being. While we may not always have complete control over our surroundings, we can make specific efforts to infuse them with positivity. Think about your office: What feelings does it inspire? People who flank their computers with pictures of loved ones aren't just decorating—they're ensuring a hit of positive emotion each time they glance in that direction. Making time to go outside on a nice day also delivers a huge advantage; one study found that spending 20 minutes outside in good weather not only boosted positive mood, but broadened thinking and improved working memory.³¹ The smartest bosses encourage employees to get a breath of fresh air at least once a day, and they reap the benefits in heightened team performance.

We can also change our surroundings to keep negative emotions at bay. If stock tickers send your mood into a tailspin every time you glance their way, turn off CNBC. For that matter, you might also try watching less TV in general; studies have shown that the less negative TV we watch, specifically violent media, the happier we are. This doesn't mean shutting ourselves off from the real world or ignoring problems. Psychologists have found that people who watch less TV are actually *more* accurate judges of life's risks and rewards than those who subject themselves to the tales of crime, tragedy, and death that appear night after night on the ten o'clock news.³² That's because these people are less likely to see sensationalized or one-sided sources of information, and thus see reality more clearly.

Exercise. You have probably heard that exercise releases pleasure-inducing chemicals called endorphins, but that's not its only

benefit. Physical activity can boost mood and enhance our work performance in a number of other ways as well, by improving motivation and feelings of mastery, reducing stress and anxiety, and helping us get into flow—that “locked in” feeling of total engagement that we usually get when we’re at our most productive. One study proved just how powerful exercise can be: Three groups of depressed patients were assigned to different coping strategies—one group took antidepressant medication, one group exercised for 45 minutes three times a week, and one group did a combination of both.³³ After four months, all three groups experienced similar improvements in happiness. The very fact that exercise proved just as helpful as anti-depressants is remarkable, but the story doesn’t end here.

The groups were then tested six months later to assess their relapse rate. Of those who had taken the medication alone, 38 percent had slipped back into depression. Those in the combination group were doing only slightly better, with a 31 percent relapse rate. The biggest shock, though, came from the exercise group: Their relapse rate was only 9 percent! In short, physical activity is not just an incredibly powerful mood lifter, but a long-lasting one. Walk, bike, run, play, stretch, jump rope, pogo stick—it doesn’t matter as long as you get moving.

Spend Money (but Not on Stuff). Contrary to the popular saying, money *can* buy happiness, but only if used to *do* things as opposed to simply *have* things. In his book *Luxury Fever*, Robert Frank explains that while the positive feelings we get from material objects are frustratingly fleeting, spending money on experiences, especially ones with other people, produces positive emotions that are both more meaningful and more lasting.³⁴ For instance, when researchers interviewed more than 150 people about their recent purchases, they found that money spent on activities—such as concerts and group dinners out—brought far more pleasure than material purchases like shoes, televisions, or expensive watches.³⁵

Spending money on other people, called “prosocial spending,” also boosts happiness. In one experiment, 46 students were given \$20 to spend.³⁶ The ones who were told to spend the money on others (for instance, by treating a friend to lunch, buying a toy for a younger sister, or donating to charity) were happier at the end of the day than the ones who had been instructed to spend the money on themselves.

What are your own spending habits? Draw two columns on a piece of paper (or take ten minutes at work to create a nifty spreadsheet) and track your purchases over the next month. Are you spending more on things or on experiences? At the end of the month, look back over each column and think about the pleasure each purchase brought you, and for how long. You may quickly find yourself wanting to reappportion money from your “having” column to your “doing” column.

Exercise a Signature Strength. Everyone is good at something—perhaps you give excellent advice, or you’re great with little kids, or you whip up a mean batch of blueberry pancakes. Each time we use a skill, whatever it is, we experience a burst of positivity. If you find yourself in need of a happiness booster, revisit a talent you haven’t used in a while.

Even more fulfilling than using a skill, though, is exercising a strength of character, a trait that is deeply embedded in who we are. A team of psychologists recently catalogued the 24 cross-cultural character strengths that most contribute to human flourishing. They then developed a comprehensive survey that identifies an individual’s top five, or “signature,” strengths.³⁷ (To learn what’s in your own top five, go to www.viasurvey.org and take the survey for free.) When 577 volunteers were encouraged to pick one of their signature strengths and use it in a new way each day for a week, they became significantly happier and less depressed than control groups.³⁸ And these benefits lasted: Even after the experiment was over, their levels of happiness remained heightened a full

six months later. Studies have shown that the more you use your signature strengths in daily life, the happier you become.

One of mine is the “love of learning,” and I feel noticeably depleted on the days I don’t find an opportunity to use this strength. So, I find ways to incorporate learning into some of my boring daily tasks. For instance, I have to travel nearly 300 days a year for my work, and the continuous stream of airports and hotels can weigh on my mental health. I’d love to visit a museum in each new city, but unfortunately I often can’t spare the time. So I decided that for each new place I visit, I would learn one historical fact. Even this small cognitive exercise makes an enormous difference in my mindset as I wing my way across the continents. So take the survey to find out your own signature strengths, then try to incorporate at least one of them into your life each day.

As you intergrate these happiness exercises into your daily life, you’ll not only start to *feel* better, but you’ll also start to notice how your enhanced positivity makes you more efficient, motivated, and productive, and opens up opportunities for greater achievement. But the Happiness Advantage doesn’t end there. By changing the way you work, and the way you lead the people around you, you can enhance the success of your team and your whole organization.

**PUTTING THE HORSE BEFORE THE CART:
LEADING WITH THE HAPPINESS ADVANTAGE**

Anyone can send ripples of positivity throughout their workplace. But one thing I’ve found in my work with managers and companies is that this is even more true for leaders or people in a position of authority—mainly because (a) they determine company policies and shape the workplace culture; (b) they are often expected to set an example for their employees; and (c) they tend to interact with

the most people over the course of the day. Sadly, in the modern workplace, leaders often scoff at the idea that focusing on happiness can have real bottom-line results. Bosses and managers have a tendency to honor the employees who can go the longest without breaks or vacation and those who don’t “waste” their time socializing. Few executives encourage their employees to take time out from their work days for exercise or meditation, or allow them to leave 30 minutes early one night a week to do some local volunteering—even though, as the research proves, the return on investment for each of these activities is huge.

Even more misguided, though, are the managers who discourage even the activities that involve relatively little time investment. Most of the people I work with admit that they would be embarrassed or ashamed if the boss walked by as they were laughing at a YouTube video, or talking to their five-year-old son on the phone, or telling a joke to colleagues in the hallway. And yet as we’ve seen, all these practices provide exactly the kinds of quick bursts of positive emotions that can improve our performance on the job. And the bosses who discourage positivity in their employees are at a double disadvantage, because these tend to be people who are most negative themselves. In short, sacrificing positivity in the name of time management and efficiency actually slows us down.

The best leaders use the Happiness Advantage as a tool to motivate their teams and maximize employee potential. We all know how this can be done on an organizational level. Google is famous for keeping scooters in the hallway, video games in the break room, and gourmet chefs in the cafeteria. The founder of Patagonia instituted a “Let My People Go Surfing” policy. (Should the mood strike you, he told employees, grab a surfboard from the office closet and hit the waves.) The data couldn’t be clearer that these policies—as well as more conventional happiness boosters like gym memberships, health benefits, and on-site day care—consistently deliver big dividends. Coors Brewing Company, for example, reported a \$6.15 return in profitability for every \$1 spent on its corporate

procrastination and undercut productivity. I often encounter this problem in my own professional life, but I had to travel all the way to Hong Kong for the gravity of the situation to really hit home.

THE PATH TO DISTRACTION

It was the second day of the training session I was giving at a large technology company in Hong Kong, a city so electric it makes Times Square look like Topeka. I had found some time to work privately with Ted, one of the lead managers on the marketing team, who was struggling to keep up with his workload. No matter how much he worked, he always felt behind, and he had to keep extending his hours to keep up with it all. "I don't do anything except work now," Ted confessed, "and it's still not enough."

I told him that he wasn't alone. I hear this same story, almost word for word, no matter what country I'm in or who I'm talking with. Regardless of our job description, we never seem to have enough time to get everything done. Eight-hour workdays turn into 12- and 14-hour ones, and still we feel behind. How can this be? Why do we have so much trouble being productive? After listening to Ted describe, from start to finish, how he went about his day, two important answers suddenly clicked into place: (1) Ted was working all the time, and (2) Ted was almost never working.

When Ted arrives at 7 A.M., the first thing he does is open his Internet browser. His home page is CNN, so he starts reading up on the day's breaking news. His intent is to scan the major headlines and move on, but invariably, he ends up clicking through the other links that catch his eye. Then without even thinking about it, he opens two different websites where he checks his stocks and investments to see how they fared overnight.

Next, he checks his e-mail, which will continue to stay open throughout the day, alerting him every time he receives new messages. Once he wades through his in-box, clicks on a couple more

links and attachments, and fires back a few responses, he's ready to get to work. Sort of. Turns out, Ted generally gets about 30 minutes of real work done before he takes a quick coffee break. Then he sits back down at his computer, where he can't help but notice that his home page has a whole new batch of headlines to scan. And what's this? Ten new e-mails? He'd better read them. Then he checks his stocks, again, just to be sure financial Armageddon hasn't kicked in. Finally, Ted refocuses and gets into a groove writing a new marketing plan . . . which lasts for about 10 minutes until his concentration is broken again by the arrival of new e-mail. To quote Kurt Vonnegut, "and so it goes."

Does this sound at all familiar? After a few quick calculations, we concluded that Ted probably checks his stocks three times an hour, his e-mail five times an hour, and news websites about once an hour. And that's actually quite typical. The American Management Association reports that employees spend an average of 107 minutes on e-mail a day.¹⁶ A group of London workers I spoke with admitted that they checked stocks about 4 or 5 times an hour; that's 35 times a day. And I suspect that if most office workers tallied up all the minutes they spent each day on blogs, social networking sites, Amazon.com, and so forth, it would paint a very alarming picture indeed. No wonder it's so hard to get anything done!

And that's not even the worst of it. The actual time we give to these distractions is part of the problem, but the larger issue is that our attention hits a wall each time we stray. Research shows that the average employee gets interrupted from their work every 11 minutes, and on each occasion experiences a loss of concentration and flow that takes almost as many minutes to recover from.¹⁷ Yet in today's world, it's just too easy for us to be tempted. As a *New York Times* article put it, "distracting oneself used to consist of sharpening a half-dozen pencils or lighting a cigarette. Today, there is a universe of diversions to buy, hear, watch and forward, which makes focusing on a task all the more challenging."¹⁸

As Ted and I worked to find ways to minimize the distractions,

I had an epiphany: It's not the sheer number and volume of distractions that gets us into trouble; it's the ease of access to them. Think about it. If you want to check your stocks, do you have to sit there and watch a stock ticker run through the whole alphabet? Of course not. You can program a website to update you on the ones you're interested in and give you regular updates. If you want to read the latest political news or some commentary on the hot new movie, do you have to troll through all the dozens of sites and blogs to find one on the desired subject? No way. You can set up an RSS feed for your favorite blog topics and have them delivered right to your inbox. Similarly, you can get all your favorite sports news, celebrity gossip, restaurant reviews, and everything else e-mailed right to you. Technology may make it easier for us to save time, but it also makes it a whole lot easier for us to waste it. In short, distraction, always just one click away, has become the path of least resistance.

REDIRECTING THE PATH: THE 20-SECOND RULE

In allowing himself to be swept along this path, Ted had become ensnared in a series of very bad habits. In his case, these all involved procrastination, which got me thinking: Could the psychological mechanisms that were derailing Ted's productivity also explain why I had failed to follow my regimen of guitar playing? Had the path of least resistance led me astray? I thought back to that initial experiment. I had kept my guitar tucked away in the closet, out of sight and out of reach. It wasn't far out of the way, of course (my apartment isn't that big), but just those 20 seconds of extra effort it took to walk to the closet and pull out the guitar had proved to be a major deterrent. I had tried to overcome this barrier with willpower, but after only four days, my reserves were completely dried up. If I couldn't use self-control to ingrain the habit, at least not for

an extended period, I now wondered: What if I could eliminate the amount of activation energy it took to get started?

Clearly, it was time for another experiment. I took the guitar out of the closet, bought a \$2 guitar stand, and set it up in the middle of my living room. Nothing had changed except that now instead of being 20 seconds away, the guitar was in immediate reach. Three weeks later, I looked up at a habit grid with 21 proud check marks.

What I had done here, essentially, was put the *desired* behavior on the path of least resistance, so it actually took less energy and effort to pick up and practice the guitar than to avoid it. I like to refer to this as the 20-Second Rule, because lowering the barrier to change by just 20 seconds was all it took to help me form a new life habit. In truth, it often takes more than 20 seconds to make a difference—and sometimes it can take much less—but the strategy itself is universally applicable: Lower the activation energy for habits you want to adopt, and raise it for habits you want to avoid. The more we can lower or even eliminate the activation energy for our desired actions, the more we enhance our ability to jump-start positive change.

SIRENS & SLURPEES

This is not a new idea—but it is a really good one. Remember the scene from Homer's *Odyssey* where Odysseus tries to guide his ship past the dangerous Sirens, those beauties with voices so seductive they could lure any man to certain death? Odysseus knows he will be powerless to resist their call, so he tells his men to tie him to the ship's mast, ensuring that they will sail safely by. Because he knows willpower will fail him, he puts enough activation energy in between him and the path of temptation.

More than two thousand years later, and in only a slightly different cultural context, the main character in the movie *Confessions*

of a *Shopaholic* freezes her credit cards in blocks of ice to physically stop herself from an impulsive buy. Sounds silly, but putting ten minutes of hair-drying and chiseling in between her and her AmEx was enough to stall her troubling habit. Sure, this may be an exaggeration (from Hollywood, how surprising), but financial advisors actually do recommend that people who can't resist the siren song of a sale leave their credit cards at home in a desk drawer, safely out of reach.

Luckily, shopping isn't one of my big weaknesses, but watching too much television used to be. According to a quick Google search, the average American watches five to seven hours of television a day. At one point, I was watching about three hours a day, which was of course decreasing my productivity and time with my real-life friends. I wanted to watch less television, but every time I'd come home from work, I would be tired from teaching, and it was so easy to sit down on the couch and press the "on" button on the remote control. So I decided to do another experiment on myself. This time, I determined to play the same trick my brain had played upon me when I didn't play the guitar. I took the batteries out of the remote control, took my stopwatch, and walked the batteries exactly 20 seconds away and left them in a drawer in my bedroom. Would that be enough to cure me of my TV habit?

The next few nights when I got home from work, I plopped down on the couch and pressed the "on" button on the remote—usually repeatedly—forgetting that I had moved the batteries. Then, frustrated, I thought to myself, "I hate that I do these experiments." But sure enough, the energy and effort required to retrieve the batteries—or even to walk across the room and turn the TV on manually—was enough to do the trick. Soon I found myself reaching for a book I had purposefully placed on the couch, or the guitar that now sat on a stand right by the couch, or even the laptop, now positioned in easy reach, on which I was writing this manuscript. As the days passed, the urge to watch TV waned, and the new activities became more habitual. Eventually, I even found myself doing things

that required far more activation energy than retrieving batteries, like going out to play pickup basketball or meeting friends for dinner. And I felt much more energized, productive, and happy for it.

By adding 20 seconds to my day, I gained back three hours.

The 20-Second Rule is an especially crucial ally in our quest for healthier eating habits. Researchers have found that they can cut cafeteria ice cream consumption in half by simply closing the lid of an ice cream cooler.¹⁹ And that when people are required to wait in another, separate line to purchase chips and candy, far fewer will do so.²⁰ In essence, the more effort it takes us to obtain unhealthy food, the less we'll eat of it, and vice versa. This is why nutritionists recommend that we prepare healthy snacks in advance so that we can simply pull them out of the refrigerator, and why they recommend that when we do eat junk foods, we take out a small portion, then put the rest of the bag away, well out of our reach. In his book *Mindless Eating*, Brian Wansink writes about a friend of his who couldn't resist stopping at 7-Eleven to get a Slurpee on his way home from work each day.²¹ Finally, "he decided that if he couldn't keep his car from driving into 7-Eleven, he would take a different route home, zigzagging around the temptation." Our best weapon in the battle against bad habits—be they Slurpees, *Seinfeld* reruns, or distractions at work—is simply to make it harder for ourselves to succumb to them.

Clever minds have come up with some creative ways to put barriers between ourselves and our vices. For instance, in an increasing number of U.S. states, compulsive gamblers can request that the government put them on a list that actually makes it illegal for them to enter casinos or collect any gambling earnings. Some cell phone carriers offer a service to prevent imbibers from "drunk dialing" by blocking all outgoing calls (except 911) after a certain hour on weekends. The Google e-mail client Gmail offers a similarly amusing but effective option that requires someone to solve a series of

math problems before they can send an e-mail late at night, thereby protecting employees who have downed a bottle of wine from e-mailing their bosses a misspelled list of grievances.

Governments, too, have found a way to use the 20-Second Rule in service of the greater public good. For example, polls show that the number of people willing to be organ donors is quite high, but that most are deterred by the long process of filling out the right forms to do so. In response, some countries have switched to an opt-out program, which automatically enrolls all citizens as donors.²² Anyone is free to withdraw their name, of course, but when staying on the list becomes the default option, most people will do so. This really works; when Spain switched to opt-out, the number of donated organs immediately doubled.

Before I stumbled upon the 20-Second Rule, I'm not sure I could have done much more to help Ted in Hong Kong than diagnose his paradoxical problem: He was working almost all the time, yet almost never working. But once I realized why he was having so much trouble staying focused, I decided it was time to see how this strategy could take office distractions off the path of least resistance.

SAVE TIME BY ADDING TIME

The first step is a seemingly counterintuitive one—disable many of the shortcuts that were originally designed to “save time” at the office. For example, I encouraged Ted to keep his e-mail program closed while he worked, so it would no longer send jarring alerts whenever he received new mail. Any time he wanted to check e-mail, he'd have to actively open the program and wait for it to load. While this reduced involuntary interruptions, it was still too easy for him to click on the little Outlook icon whenever his mind wandered, so to protect against habitual checking, we made it even more difficult. We disabled the automatic login and password for the account, took the shortcut off the computer desktop, then hid

the application icon in an empty folder, buried in another empty folder, buried in another empty folder. Essentially, we created the electronic version of Russian stacking dolls. As he told me one day at the office, only half jokingly, it was now “a total pain in the ass” to check e-mail.

“Now we're getting somewhere,” I replied.

We did the same for his other distractions, disabling his stock widget, changing his home page from CNN to a blank search page, and even turning off his computer's ability to process cookies so it couldn't “remember” the stocks and websites he usually checked. Every additional button he was required to click, even every additional address he was required to type into a web browser, raised the barrier to procrastination and improved his chances of remaining on task. I pointed out that he still had complete freedom to do what he wanted; just like in an opt-out program, his choice had not been taken away at all. The only thing that had changed was the default, which was now set to productivity, instead of to distraction.

That first day in Hong Kong, Ted was not only skeptical, but a little annoyed with me. It seemed to him (and to the other executives on whom I had inflicted similar miseries) that I was only making their busy lives more difficult. Who was I to disable their cookies? (I don't even know what cookies are!) But a few days later, once they realized how much more work they were getting done (and in less time), they had come around.

SLEEP IN YOUR GYM CLOTHES

The 20-Second Rule isn't just about altering the time it takes to do things. Limiting the choices we have to make can also help lower the barrier to positive change. You may recall how Roy Baumeister's willpower studies showed that self-control is a limited resource that gets weakened with overuse. Well, these same researchers have discovered that too much choice similarly saps our reserves.

Their studies showed that with every additional choice people are asked to make, their physical stamina, ability to perform numerical calculations, persistence in the face of failure, and overall focus drop dramatically.²³ And these don't have to be difficult decisions either—the questions are more “chocolate or vanilla?” than they are *Sophie's Choice*. Yet every one of these innocuous choices depletes our energy a little further, until we just don't have enough to continue with the positive habit we're trying to adopt.

One of the life habits I wanted to create was exercising in the morning. I knew from numerous research studies that exercise in the morning raises your performance on cognitive tasks and gives your brain a “win” to start a cascade effect of positive emotions. But information is not transformation, because every morning I would wake and ask myself, Do I want to exercise? And my brain would reply, No I do not.

If you've ever tried to start up the habit of early-morning exercise, you have probably encountered how easy it is to get derailed by too much choice. Each morning after the alarm clock sounds, the inner monologue goes something like this: Should I hit the snooze button or get up immediately? What should I wear to work out this morning? Should I go for a run or go to the gym? Should I go to the nearby gym that's more crowded or the quieter gym that's slightly farther away? What kind of cardio should I do when I get there? Should I lift weights? Should I go to kickboxing class or maybe yoga? And by that point you're so exhausted by all the options, you've fallen back asleep. At least that's what would happen to me. So I decided to decrease the number of choices I would have to make in order to get myself to the gym.

Each night before I went to sleep, I wrote out a plan for where I would exercise in the morning and what parts of my body I would focus on. Then, I put my sneakers right by my bed. Finally—and most important—I just went to sleep in my gym clothes. (And my mom wonders why I'm not married yet.)

But the clothes were clean, and I had essentially decreased the

activation energy enough so that when I woke up the next morning, all I had to do was roll off my bed, put my feet (which already had socks on them) into my shoes, and I was out the door. The decisions that seemed too daunting in my groggy morning state had been decided for me, ahead of time. And it worked. Eliminating the choices and reducing the activation energy made getting up and going to the gym the default mode. As a result, once I ingrained a lifetime positive habit of morning exercise, I now don't have to sleep in my gym clothes anymore.

Subsequently, in talking to athletes and nonathletes worldwide, I hear the same from both: Something weird happens in the human brain when you put your athletic shoes on—you start to think it is easier to just go work out now than to “take all this stuff back off again.” In reality, it's easier to take off the shoes, but your brain, once it has tipped toward a habit, will naturally keep rolling in that direction, following the path of perceived least resistance.

This isn't just about getting yourself to exercise. Think of the positive changes you want to make at your job, and figure out what it would mean to “just get your shoes on” at work. The less energy it takes to kick-start a positive habit, the more likely that habit will stick.

SET RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Whether you're trying to change your habits at work or at home, the key to reducing choice is setting and following a few simple rules. Psychologists call these kinds of rules “second-order decisions,” because they are essentially decisions about when to make decisions, like deciding ahead of time when, where, and how I was going to work out in the morning.

Of course, this technique isn't just good for decisions like whether to use the treadmill or StairMaster. In his brilliant book *The Paradox of Choice*, Barry Schwartz explains how setting rules

in advance can free us from the constant barrage of willpower-depleting choices that make a real difference in our lives.²⁴ If we make a rule to never drive a car when we've had more than one drink, for example, we eliminate the stress and uncertainty of trying to make a judgment call every time we aren't sure if we're too drunk to drive (which probably means we are). At work, setting rules to reduce the volume of choice can be incredibly effective. For example, if we set rules to only check our e-mail once per hour, or to only have one coffee break per morning, we are less likely to succumb in the moment, which helps these rules to become habits we stick to by default.

Rules are especially helpful during the first few days of a behavior-changing venture, when it's easier to stray off course. Gradually, as the desired action becomes more habitual, we can become more flexible. For instance, you won't often hear an experienced chef say, "I make it a rule to always follow the recipe exactly as it is," because some of the best dishes are made through creative experimentation in the kitchen. But for a beginning cook like me, this rule is entirely necessary. Since I don't know enough about cooking to know *how* to be spontaneous, straying from the rules could lead to disaster, or to a dozen tuna-fish brownies.

I once worked with an account executive named Joseph, who needed rules at work the same way I need rules in the kitchen. He was a pretty reserved, somber individual—in dress and manner he reminded me of one of those seventeenth-century New England preachers. That was just on the surface, though. Deep down, Joseph desperately wanted to capitalize on the Happiness Advantage by spreading positivity to his team, but acting upbeat and openly encouraging his employees just didn't come naturally to him. Each morning, he would set out to be more positive but always found himself quickly falling back into his default mode. He admitted to me that when he attempted positive interaction during team meetings, he would get overwhelmed by choices like: What should I say that's encouraging? To whom? When should I say it? How much praise should I give? Paralyzed by indecision, he'd end up saying

nothing at all, and the meeting would end with Joseph once again silently lamenting another missed opportunity. All these decisions had required too much activation energy. We needed to set some rules to make this easier.

The first rule was this: Every day, before he walked through the conference room doors, he had to think of one employee he could thank for something. Then, the second rule was: Before he started the meeting and anything else could get in the way, he had to publicly thank that person. A simple sentence would do, and then he could move on to the rest of the meeting as planned, without the myriad choices hanging over his head.

A month later, I happened to be back at the company for a training session when I ran into Joseph in the hallway. No one would have described him as ebullient, but he certainly appeared happier and warmer than before. He told me that our daily rule had made it far easier for him to follow through on his goal, and he was enjoying the benefits of increased positivity in the workplace. In fact, two weeks into his new ritual, he found himself wanting to say a *second* positive comment to someone later on in the meeting, even though he had already reached his goal. Now he could relax the rules, confident the new habit was firmly in place.

IT'S ALL IN THE SHOES

This book is full of ways we can capitalize on the Happiness Advantage. But without actually putting those strategies into action, they remain useless, like a set of expensive tools that sit locked behind a glass case. The key to their use—to permanent, positive change—is to create habits that automatically pay dividends, without continued concerted effort or extensive reserves of willpower. The key to creating these habits is ritual, repeated practice, until the actions become ingrained in your brain's neural chemistry. And the key to daily practice is to put your desired actions as close to the

path of least resistance as humanly possible. Identify the activation energy—the time, the choices, the mental and physical effort they require—and then reduce it. If you can cut the activation energy for those habits that lead to success, even by as little as 20 seconds at a time, it won't be long before you start reaping their benefits. The first step metaphorically—and sometimes literally—is just to get your shoes on.

SOCIAL INVESTMENT

Why Social Support Is Your Single Greatest Asset

was 18 years old, lost in a burning building, and blind. As I fumbled through the flames, it occurred to me: Maybe I shouldn't have volunteered for this.

It was my senior year of high school, and I was coming to the tail end of my 90 hours of volunteer firefighter training in my hometown of Waco, Texas. The final test before completing the training was called the Fire Maze, an exercise in which the veteran firefighters would put us newbies through our first, real-life, full-scale fire. Weighed down with flame-repellent suits, oxygen tanks, and dread, we were led to an empty farm silo called the Smoke Tank. The firefighters opened the metal door to reveal a giant room filled with an intricate wooden maze, with walls ten feet high and combustibles like old tires and pieces of wood littering the floor. Before we even had time to take in the whole scene, the veteran firefighters put torches to the wood, and the entire maze lit up in flames.

The Texas sun had already heated the day to nearly 100 degrees, but that seemed cool compared to the furnace blast now racing through the building. We picked up our masks, only to find that they had been completely covered in black paint—to replicate how hard it is to see in a real fire, our instructors said. I looked out at the growing blaze in front of us; this "fake" fire seemed plenty real to me. I put on my mask. I couldn't see a thing.

The firefighters yelled our instructions over the roar of the flames:

nothing is more crucial to our success than holding on to the people around us. Yet when the alarm bells at work go off, all too often we become blind to this reality and try to go it alone; and as a result we end up like I did, circling helplessly at some dead-end corner until we run out of air.

I have seen too many businessmen and -women fall prey to this miscalculation. I can remember hearing the trading bell ring at the end of one particularly vicious day in November of 2008. The Dow was way down; countless sums of money had been lost. I watched as swarms of traders loosened their ties and walked dejectedly off the floor. But what struck me was that they didn't retreat to the stronghold of their teams as they normally did after a day of trading. They all walked off silent and alone.

These were smart, capable people with MBAs from some of the world's leading institutions, yet in a situation that required them to be firing on all cylinders, they were actively undercutting themselves. At the very time that they needed one another most, they were forgoing their most valuable resource: their social support. Time and again during those perilous months, I saw companies jettison team trainings and social "perks," ignoring plummeting team morale in favor of things deemed more "important." But in fact, nothing was more important than what they were letting go of.

We don't have to go to the brink of a collapsing economy to understand how easy it is to retreat into our own shells at the moment we need to be reaching out to others the most. We've all been there some time or another. A daunting project gets dropped on our desk, and we get consumed with worry that we'll fail to meet the demands. Is there enough time to get it all done? What will happen if we don't? As the deadline looms and the pressure mounts, we start eating lunch at our desks, working late, coming in on weekends. Soon, we're "focused like a laser" (or so we tell ourselves), which means no face time with direct reports, no casual hallway chats, no time even for nonessential calls with clients. Even our e-mails are

more brusque and impersonal. As for time with family and friends, well, these things are the first to go when we're in crisis mode. But even though we're giving work our undivided attention, our productivity is declining, and as the deadline nears, our goal seems to be slipping further and further out of reach. And so we hunker down, shut off our cell phones, retreat into the bunker of ourselves and double-lock the door.

One of two things usually happens at this juncture. Either we falter and fail to finish the project, or we power through and get it done, then immediately get rewarded with another challenging project, though we now have zero oxygen left in our tank. Either way, we're not only miserable, dejected, and overwhelmed, but lost in a dead end, unable to perform—and all alone.

The most successful people take the exact opposite approach. Instead of turning inward, they actually hold tighter to their social support. Instead of divesting, they invest. Not only are these people happier, but they are more productive, engaged, energetic, and resilient. They know that their social relationships are the single greatest investment they can make in the Happiness Advantage.

INVESTING IN THE HAPPINESS ADVANTAGE

One of the longest-running psychological studies of all time—the Harvard Men study—followed 268 men from their entrance into college in the late 1930s all the way through the present day.¹ From this wealth of data, scientists have been able to identify the life circumstances and personal characteristics that distinguished the happiest, fullest lives from the least successful ones. In the summer of 2009, George Vaillant, the psychologist who has directed this study for the last 40 years, told the *Atlantic Monthly* that he could sum up the findings in one word: "love—full stop." Could it really be so simple? Vaillant wrote his own follow-up article that analyzed

the data in great detail, and his conclusions proved the same: that there are “70 years of evidence that our relationships with other people matter, and matter more than anything else in the world.”²

This study’s findings have been duplicated time and again. In their book *Happiness*, psychologists Ed Diener and Robert Biswas-Diener review the massive amount of cross-cultural research that has been conducted on happiness over the last few decades, and they conclude that, “like food and air, we seem to need social relationships to thrive.”³ That’s because when we have a community of people we can count on—spouse, family, friends, colleagues—we multiply our emotional, intellectual, and physical resources. We bounce back from setbacks faster, accomplish more, and feel a greater sense of purpose. Furthermore, the effect on our happiness, and therefore on our ability to profit from the Happiness Advantage, is both immediate and long-lasting. First, social interactions jolt us with positivity in the moment; then, each of these single connections strengthens a relationship over time, which raises our happiness baseline permanently. So when a colleague stops you in the hallway at work to say hello and ask about your day, the brief interaction actually sparks a continual upward spiral of happiness and its inherent rewards.

Positive outliers already know this to be true—indeed, it’s what makes them positive outliers. In a study appropriately titled “Very Happy People,” researchers sought out the characteristics of the happiest 10 percent among us.⁴ Do they all live in warm climates? Are they all wealthy? Are they all physically fit? Turns out, there was one—and *only* one—characteristic that distinguished the happiest 10 percent from everybody else: the strength of their social relationships. My empirical study of well-being among 1,600 Harvard undergraduates found a similar result—social support was a far greater predictor of happiness than any other factor, more than GPA, family income, SAT scores, age, gender, or race. In fact, the correlation between social support and happiness was 0.7. This may not sound like a big number, but for researchers it’s huge—most

psychology findings are considered significant when they hit 0.3. The point is, the more social support you have, the happier you are. And as we know, the happier you are, the more advantages you accrue in nearly every domain of life.

SURVIVING AND THRIVING WITH SOCIAL INVESTMENT

Our need for social support isn’t just in our heads. Evolutionary psychologists explain that the innate need to affiliate and form social bonds has been literally wired into our biology.⁵ When we make a positive social connection, the pleasure-inducing hormone oxytocin is released into our bloodstream, immediately reducing anxiety and improving concentration and focus. Each social connection also bolsters our cardiovascular, neuroendocrine, and immune systems, so that the more connections we make over time, the better we function.

We have such a biological need for social support, our bodies can literally malfunction without it.⁶ For instance, lack of social contact can add 30 points to an adult’s blood pressure reading.⁷ In his seminal book *Loneliness*, University of Chicago psychologist John Cacioppo compiled more than thirty years’ worth of research to convincingly show that a dearth of social connections is actually just as deadly as certain diseases.⁸ Naturally, it causes psychological harm as well; it shouldn’t surprise you that a national survey of 24,000 workers found that men and women with few social ties were two to three times more likely to suffer from major depression than people with strong social bonds.⁹

When we enjoy strong social support, on the other hand, we can accomplish impressive feats of resilience, and even extend the length of our lives. One study found that people who received emotional support during the six months after a heart attack were three times more likely to survive.¹⁰ Another found that participating in

a breast cancer support group actually doubled women's life expectancy post surgery.¹¹ In fact, researchers have found that social support has as much effect on life expectancy as smoking, high blood pressure, obesity, and regular physical activity.¹² As one set of doctors put it, "When launching a life raft, the prudent survivalist will not toss food overboard while retaining the deck furniture. If somebody must jettison a part of life, time with a mate should be last on the list: He needs that connection to live."¹³ When set adrift, it seems, those of us who hold on to our raftmates, not just our rafts, are the ones who will stay afloat.

SOCIAL CAPITAL AS STRESS RELIEF

The same strategy—hold onto others—is just as crucial for our survival as we navigate the daily stresses of the working world. Studies show that each positive interaction employees have during the course of the work day actually helps return the cardiovascular system back to resting levels (a benefit often termed "work recovery"), and that over the long haul, employees with more of these interactions become protected from the negative effects of job strain. Each connection also lowers levels of cortisol, a hormone related to stress, which helps employees recover faster from work-related stress and makes them better prepared to handle it in the future.¹⁴ Furthermore, studies have found that people with strong relationships are less likely to perceive situations as stressful in the first place.¹⁵ So in essence, investing in social connections means that you'll find it easier to interpret adversity as a path to growth and opportunity; and when you *do* have to experience the stress, you'll bounce back from it faster and better protected against its long-term negative effects.

In the volatile world of work, this ability to manage stress, both physically and psychologically, is a significant competitive

advantage. For one, it has been found to greatly reduce a company's health care costs and rate of absenteeism. But perhaps more important, it directly impacts individual performance. Researchers have found that the "physiological resourcefulness" that employees gain from positive social interactions provides a foundation for workplace engagement—employees can work for longer hours, with increased focus, and under more difficult conditions.¹⁶ For instance, when AT&T was suffering massive layoffs and internal turmoil after being split into three separate companies, one senior leader working daily in the trenches noticed that certain employees were faring better under the pressure than others.¹⁷ As he commented to Harvard professor Daniel Goleman, "The pain is not being felt everywhere. In a lot of the tech units where people work in tight teams, and where they find great meaning in what they do together, they're fairly impervious to the turmoil." Why? Because individuals who invest in their social support systems are simply better equipped to thrive in even the most difficult circumstances, while those who withdraw from the people around them effectively cut off every line of protection they have available, at the very moment they need them most.

To fully understand the importance of this distinction and the consequences it has for our future success, let's take a quick trip to the gridiron.

ALL I NEED TO KNOW I LEARNED FROM THE NATIONAL FOOTBALL LEAGUE

In the world of American football, a few positions get virtually all the attention: quarterbacks, wide receivers, and star running backs. They're the ones who grab most of the headlines, and their paychecks and fame are testament to their importance. But another group of football players is equally highly paid and perhaps even