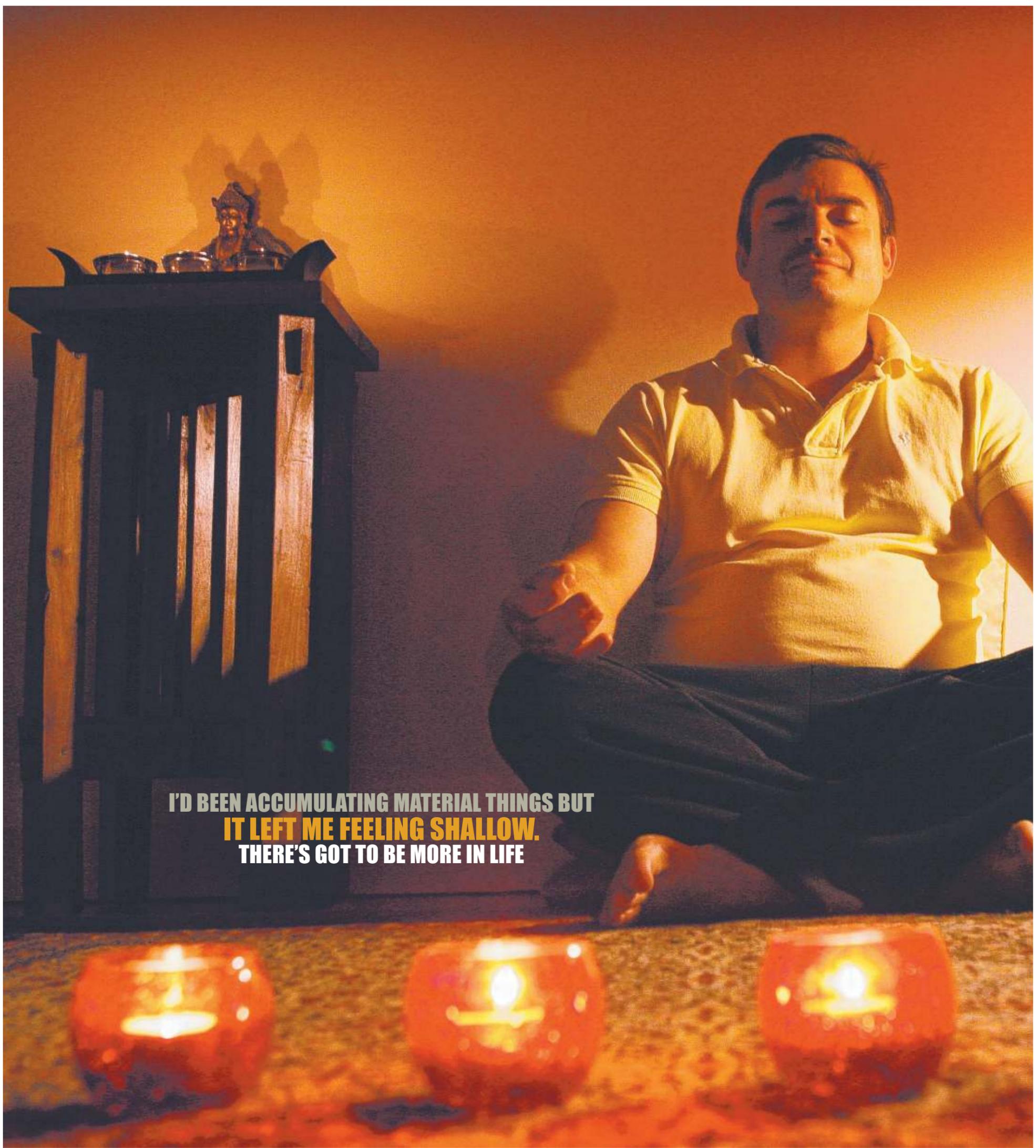


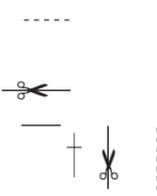
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**I'D BEEN ACCUMULATING MATERIAL THINGS BUT
IT LEFT ME FEELING SHALLOW.
THERE'S GOT TO BE MORE IN LIFE**

saweekend_may 1



THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

WE CAN BE HAPPY FOR A MOMENT, A DAY, A WEEK, BUT CAN WE MAKE IT A PERMANENT CONDITION?

WORDS ANDREW FENTON PICTURE JO-ANNA ROBINSON

SHIVANI Gupta had it all – a high-flying career in senior management at BHP in Adelaide, plenty of money and a big future ahead of her. Right from when she was very young, she had felt this drive to achieve. And to mark success, she would buy things. “It was really important to me where I lived and what I drove,” she says. “I thought acquiring all that stuff would make me happy. But I felt dissatisfied, like I wasn’t living up to what I could, and should, be doing in my life.”

The feeling crystallised during a visit to Nepal, where some of the poorest people she had ever met generously shared what little they had with her, a complete stranger. “It was one of the happiest nations I’d ever travelled to,” Gupta says. “I realised that these people, who have so little, were so content, and I had so much and I was so unhappy. They were so giving whereas I felt I was so stingy with my time and that I was not giving to other people.”

It was a turning point. Back in Australia she quit her job and set up a coaching business to follow her passion for helping others. Although she loves to work, she no longer clocks up 80 to 90 hours a week. She won’t work after 6pm or on weekends. Instead of her pursuit of status and wealth, she’s concentrating on relationships – marriage and her family. While each day isn’t perfect, the 37-year-old says she now feels happy more often than not. “I’m living according to my values.”

Vehicle inspector Silvo Demeo experienced a similar, nagging sense of unease after turning 40. “I’d been accumulating material things but it left me feeling shallow,” says Demeo, now 47, of Hectorville. “It’s a spiral. It’s a rat race. There’s got to be more in life.” To find it, he threw himself into self-help books, often reading two at a time. But he quickly became disillusioned with their simplistic answers. He went to church for a time and attended many motivational seminars, but nothing provided the substance he craved. Finally he found the Australian School of Meditation in Joslin. “I step in there and I feel 10 years younger,” he says. “I feel happier in general and I feel more settled. I feel free.”

Gupta and Demeo couldn’t find happiness in the corporate world or on the well-stocked shelves of our

Western consumer culture, so they sought it elsewhere. They’re not alone. The pursuit of happiness has long been at the centre of theories about human behaviour, but in today’s time-poor, cash-rich society, it’s almost become an obsession. We’ve seen many coaches, gurus and psychologists emerge, each with their own claim to have the best advice on how to increase our personal happiness. A tipping point came in 1998, when Dr Martin Seligman made “positive psychology” the theme of his presidency of the American Psychological Association. It was heralded as a revolution in the way psychologists approach their work. Instead of trying to cure the symptoms of mental illnesses, psychologists began to study ways to make healthy people even better.

“They started thinking: well, what about those people who aren’t sick or neurotic right now but who are just going about their lives?” says New York journalist Barbara Ehrenreich, author of *Smile or Die: How Positive Thinking Fooled America and the World*. “We could make them better! We could crank them up!”

The idea was wildly popular and why not? Who doesn’t want to be happier? Happiness is like money, beauty or success – even those blessed with an abundance often feel they could use more. Positive psychology soon became a dominant force, a staple of talk shows like *Oprah* and *Dr Phil*.

More significantly, governments around the world have started to look at ways to increase the happiness and wellbeing of their populations. In December last year, policy makers from more than 100 countries converged on Iguazu Falls in Brazil for the fifth international Gross National Happiness Conference. The idea came from the tiny kingdom of Bhutan in the Himalayas, which has legislated that happiness be a consideration in all policy making. Bhutan’s monarch famously proclaimed: “Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product” – which is exactly the sort of thing you might expect the leader of the 117th largest economy in the world to say.

Yet there’s no linear relationship between happiness and GDP. In Britain, people are three times wealthier than in the 1950s, but the proportion of people

Silvo Demeo found happiness through meditation.



Children in Nepal, where Shivani Gupta found a reason to change her life.

WHAT MAKES ME HAPPY **SEX**

CLAIRE HALLIDAY

I REMEMBER seeing my reflection in the wardrobe's mirror, in the moments after, and staring into the eyes of a woman who looked happy. It is a unique kind of happiness – that post-sex glow of perspiration and fulfilled desires. The happiness begins, in the earliest days of sex with this someone new, at the thrill of touch – skin on skin and tongues pressed together. Lips: soft and warm and hungry. Eventually, as we have passports stamped, jump from planes, ride horses, stay in for takeaway and continue to learn about each other (favourite movies, favourite music, that favourite restaurant that delivers) that happiness spreads like some sunshiny warmth, the heat travelling to the layers beneath my skin, tongues still entwined, the lips even softer than I ever thought possible but now hungry in a way that seems ravenous. And then that happiness lands in my heart. For a time, there is a new freedom – a feeling that anything is possible, that nothing is out of bounds and that he fills me, like warm water, rising up into my chest until the warmth becomes so fluid within my skin that I forget where I end and he begins.

And then...children and marriage and it doesn't matter about the order but sex, in those rarer moments between parenthood that it actually happens, takes on something even more meaningful and beautiful. I am softer – just here and there – but he says he doesn't care. His love for me is true. He wants me. Still. Perhaps more than ever. And if I see my reflection in the mirror, in the moments after (even though I insist that the lights are dimmer and the curtains drawn) there are still those happy eyes.



saying they are “very happy” has fallen from 52 per cent to 36 per cent.

The European Union has commissioned reports to look at ways of measuring non-economic indicators like health, family and leisure time. Even the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development got into the act at a conference last year which partly focused on “happiness”-style measurements. It could have an impact on how governments set policy.

“As has been famously said: people attend to whatever is measured,” says Professor Bob Cummins, head of the Australian Centre on Quality of Life at Deakin University. “If all you measure is how much people earn and the size of their house, that's what politicians will attend to. If you measure mood happiness, they might attend to that.”

Unfortunately, happiness researchers only have imperfect tools to measure the subjective emotion of happiness. Since 2001 Cummins has headed the Australian Unity Wellbeing index, which surveys people across the country to determine the levels of happiness. The questions concern living standards, health, achievements, relationships, spirituality, engagement with the community and perceptions of safety and future security.

When scientists talk about happiness, they don't mean the brief burst of pleasure afforded by sex, chocolate, booze or buying an enormous television. It's a deep and ongoing mood, a lasting sense of wellbeing. This sort of happiness doesn't mean people don't experience bad days – just that those are not their norm. The ABC's national medical reporter, Sophie Scott, who has written a book, *Roadtesting Happiness*, defines it like this: “Happiness is something where you have

the ability to feel fulfilled and able to cope with the challenges of life. It's not just pleasurable experiences like a nice dinner, but something that adds an extra dimension and meaning.”

A considerable body of research suggests that most Australians are satisfied with their own lives. Scored out of 100, most people are around 75, with the rest spread in a range between 60 and 90, influenced mainly by genetic make-up and environmental factors. The upper South East of South Australia and the Kangaroo Island/York Peninsula area turn out to be the second and third happiest places in the country, with a mean level of individual happiness around 80. Geelong, in Victoria, is the happiest place overall with 80.74 – and the least happy place in SA is the northern suburbs of Adelaide at 73.46.

Cummins says the evidence suggests a person's level of wellbeing hovers around their own “set point” which is kept in check in a manner similar to blood pressure or body temperature. This happiness “set point” is the reason most lottery winners soon revert to normal levels of happiness soon after their big win, and why people who have become paraplegic revert to something approaching normal after a time. Cummins's research also shows money is no arbiter of happiness, except in limited circumstances. Very poor people who manage to secure a normal income dramatically increase their happiness – mainly because money allows you to buy your way out of trouble. “If I'm well off and my car breaks down, it's an inconvenience,” he says. “I get a mechanic, I hire a car. But if I'm a poor person and my car breaks down, it's a disaster. You don't have the money to fix it; you might get fired because you can't get to work. So money is a protective resource.” But the effect of money on happiness wears off when household income reaches \$100,000 to \$150,000. “Once you get there you've essentially bought your way out of all of the things you can buy your way out of,” he says.

In fact, materialism is a threat to happiness because the single-minded pursuit of wealth and goods can cause people to neglect relationships in favour of the fleeting pleasure of purchases – a bit like an addict ignoring his loved ones to chase that elusive high.

It turns out the hippies were right all along and love really is the answer. The number one influence on happiness is the quality of your personal relationships. “We find that if people are in supportive relationships they can be in incredibly difficult circumstances, be poor and in ill health and their mood can be fine,” he says. “But it's a double-edged sword because if you've got a bad relationship, that's about the worst thing that can happen to you.”

For women, sex is a major factor in happiness. Scott cites Daniel Kahneman's study of 1000 employed women. “Sex was ranked as the activity that produces the single largest amount of happiness – and going to work the least,” she says. “If you can increase sex from once a month to once a week, it will increase your happiness as much as a 60 grand pay rise.” Unfortunately for men hoping to offer a “\$60,000 experience” as a pick-up line, separate research from 2004 found the happiest people had just one loving partner in the past year.

Age is another predictor of happiness, with those in their mid-70s and not in ill health or suffering pain among the happiest. Chronic stress, chronic pain and failed relationships are the greatest predictors of unhappiness. “You can certainly take (the happiness) score down very easily by giving someone a bad enough, hard time,” says Cummins. “The question is whether you can take it up, and there's no reliable evidence at this stage that you can movie happiness up more than a couple of percentage points.” He cites “50-100” studies showing that positive psychology techniques may ➤

SEVEN WAYS TO SELF-FULFILMENT

Shivani Gupta believes there are seven key areas or “universal values”. You need to determine which of them are a priority for your happiness.

- Family
- Financial (wealth)
- Mental (learning)
- Work
- Physical
- Social (friends)
- Spiritual

“You have a hierarchy of values, and one is your most important and seven is your least important,” she says. “If you try to live according to your top two or three values you’ll generally become a pretty happy person.” Gupta says we shouldn’t expect to be happy all the time and instead we should aim to learn from the times we’re unhappy – what is that moment teaching you?



lead to an initial increase in mood happiness, but people soon adapt and go back to their set point.

In contrast to Cummins, Scott likens the “set point” to our normal weight range – and says that through appropriate mental diet and exercise we can become a lot healthier. She cites the University of California’s Sonja Lyubomirsky’s study on controlled interventions to increase a person’s level of happiness over their natural set point. “They discovered that 50 per cent of happiness is to do with genetics, 10 per cent is what life throws at you – but 40 per cent is up for grabs,” she says. Lyubomirsky herself told last year’s *Happiness and It’s Causes* conference in Sydney that sustainable happiness is attainable. “If people desire greater happiness they need to invest as much time and effort in their emotional life as they do in their bodies,” she said.

But at one level, the debate over “set point” isn’t really that important to the average person, as we’ve all experienced times when we’ve been down in the dumps and could have benefited from strategies to increase our happiness levels.

That was certainly the case for Scott, who decided to write her book at a very low point in her life, following the death of her mother. “My idea was to look at the major ways people recommend to be happy,” she says. “Where do you start? Cognitive behaviour therapy, altruism, meditation, volunteering, charity work and things like diet and exercise.” She tried them all over the course of a year but is reluctant to suggest one single strategy that worked the best. Meditation didn’t work for her, she says, but the evidence suggests it could work for others. Scott found diet and exercise important

to her sense of wellbeing – and contends that health and happiness have a symbiotic relationship. “Happier people tend to be healthier and have stronger immune systems,” she says. “They’re less likely to pick up a cold and more likely to get better quickly after illness. But I think it’s a two-way street.”

Scott was most impressed with Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, which has been proven to treat mood disorders. At its most basic, CBT (when used to treat mood) is a way of changing your set negative thought patterns into more positive ones in order to change your feelings and reactions to events. “You can’t change the events but you can change how you react,” she says. “CBT is one of the most effective ways to be happy. Retraining your brain is really important.” She gives the example of a time she was giving a talk and two women walked out. She immediately felt rejected – and it was only later, when they sent a note of apology, that she discovered they had been called away. “I just assumed they’d hated it,” she says. “We make assumptions that colour our thoughts and we write narratives about what others are thinking – but they could be completely false.”

Changing negative beliefs into positive modes of thought lies at the heart of positive psychology. It’s rather like Shakespeare’s line for Hamlet: “There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it

so.” Given that our perception of the world is created subjectively to a large extent by our own brains, if we can retrain our brains to see things “better” we have the chance to become happier.

For example, depressed or anxious people will interpret situations differently to healthy people – often to their detriment. And there seems little doubt that more optimistic and cheerful people find it easier to make friends and form relationships. None of this is controversial – but a belief that seems to be a warped version of this basic idea became widespread in the self-help literature. It morphed into the bizarre notion that changing our own subjective mind-state can somehow affect reality. Mainstream positive psychologists didn’t put forward this notion – but Ehrenreich argues that positive psychology drifted away from its supposed academic roots over the same period. “It seemed to quickly turn into less a science than a cause,” she says. “There’s this religious element in the sense of being a movement, this is a belief, can we get positivity out to everybody and stop all the negative stuff in the world,” she says.

The bastard children of positive psychology turned up in self-help books and on TV. The most obvious example is the massive bestseller *The Secret*, by Australian author Rhonda Byrne. The “secret” here is that your thoughts affect your external reality – food doesn’t make you fat, thinking that food makes you fat is what does it. A woman can attract her perfect partner simply by believing in it enough, and by leaving space for his clothes in the closet he’ll magically come into her life. Byrne claims to have cured her poor eyesight using ➤

HAPPIER PEOPLE TEND TO BE HEALTHIER AND HAVE STRONGER IMMUNE SYSTEMS



WHAT MAKES US HAPPY **WINE**

BRUCE & DIANA KEIR

BRUCE and Diana Keir literally bottle happiness at Antechamber Bay on Kangaroo Island – at Chapman River Wines all varieties they sell go under the Happiness label. It's a fitting name because statistically speaking the Keirs should be pretty close to ecstatic. Kangaroo Island is the third happiest place in Australia, according to surveys of happiness levels by the Australian Centre on Quality of Life at Deakin University. And Bruce, 70, and Diana, 67, aren't far off the magic age of 74 which British research suggests is the happiest time of life. "We are in fact very happy," confirms Bruce. "It's terrific and we're thoroughly enjoying it."

The "sea change" couple started tending vines as a hobby in the mid 1990s but made the move to making wine full time in 2002 after purchasing 48.5ha. It was the catalyst for Bruce retiring from his job as a partner at advertising and communications firm THEM in Adelaide.

He isn't surprised to learn the island is supposedly among the happiest places in Australia with a mean "happiness" score for individuals of 79.97, well above the average of 75. "It's a pretty relaxed place to live. Everybody is easy going and happy and they all made the choice to come and live here," he says. Diana attributes the positive vibe to the natural beauty of the landscape and the sense of community among Kangaroo Island's 4259 residents. "When we picked the vintage a month ago, people arrived unannounced to help us," she says. "They heard we were doing it and just turned up to give us a hand."

She says the relative isolation and sparse population helps people live life at their own pace.

"Nothing really matters and the sea boat ride separates you from the worries of city life and the big issues," she says. "The TV reception is also quite bad, so maybe that makes people happier too!"



WHAT MAKES ME HAPPY

SHOES

AMBER PETTY

WHILE strolling through Covent Garden in London 10 years ago, something caught my eye that left me paralysed, unable to move on. Sitting alone in a shop window, my dream shoes were sparkling before me like precious jewels. They were, unfortunately, massively out of my price range. \$400 at the time was a lot to fork out. But they promised me so much. They were gold and covered in sparkles. The sort of shoes that I'd expect Glinda, the Good Witch of the South, to be strutting around Oz in. So I bought them. How could I not?

If a pair of shoes makes me want to spin around and tap dance then there's something going right. The funny thing is, I've only worn them a handful of times.

They are not simply shoes; they are a symbol of things that make me smile. Old school glamour, anything that shines, and heels that makes me feel like Ginger Rogers. They deserve their own cabinet!

After all, with shoes like these, who cares about my netball trophy? They are a symbol of my love of all things girlie, only these are fit for a queen. In fact, even a queen wouldn't dare wear out the soles on these.

The truth is, my shoes are actually too good for me. I respect them for that.



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WHAT MAKES ME HAPPY
MARATHONS
ANDREW HOLMAN

IT'S 29km and the legs feel heavy. Sweat pours from the brow. It pours from everywhere. Joints jar with each thud on the pavement, ligaments and tendons strain so tight they're like guitar strings ready to snap. Your pacing group fades into the distance, then one, two, three and more runners glide pass on the right. It's 30km. It's where a marathon really starts. But you're struggling. And that wall, that bloody wall, is just around the corner, the ultimate test of your spirit and willpower. Your eyes fix on a group of spectators. They clap and cheer. You smile at them and take a deeper breath, a breath that reminds you why you're here in the first place. It's the journey you travel to get to the start, it's the paths you cross, the creeks, the hills and the seashores. It's the hours of solitude on winding roads. It's the wind that cools and the sun that tests. It's the fresh morning air, the raindrops on your face, the smell of eucalypt, the laugh of kookaburras and the occasional koala peering down as you jog by. Suddenly goosebumps travel from the bottom of your spine to below your neck. You feel recharged. Ten feet tall. Unstoppable, unbeatable. A final rush. You break free. You break through. A perfect rhythm. That final surge. That finish line. Sheer joy. Sheer happiness. A perfect end.

"the secret". "It's parallel to certain types of religion," she says. "It's a certain type of belief and it's about wish fulfilment."

The logical flip side is that negative outcomes and failure come from not believing enough in the inevitability of your own success. Ehrenreich recalls attending motivational seminars for white-collar workers who'd been let go through no fault of their own as a result of downsizing and corporate mergers. They were told the loss of their jobs was down to them because they didn't have the right attitude. This sort of victim-blaming actively works against improving society, she argues. "You don't want to be working for social change or be a dissident of some kind because whatever is wrong, it's just a matter of changing yourself subjectively," she says. "Anybody can make what they want of their situation, so we're not really responsible."

A decade after positive psychology became part of the zeitgeist, its leading exponent, Martin Seligman, appeared to concede the evidence underpinning the science of happiness hadn't kept pace with the publicity and grandiose claims surrounding the field. At a recent conference about *The Future of Positive Psychology* Seligman shocked the audience by saying: "I've decided my theory of positive psychology is completely wrong. Why? Because it's about happiness, which is scientifically unwieldy." He went on to suggest instead a new "plural theory" embracing anthropology, political science and economics instead.

For her part, Gupta says the whole idea of attempting to become permanently happy is foolish anyway. "It's not normal and it's not possible – and the unhappiest

people I know are the ones who read the most books on happiness," she says. "They say, 'I'm not happy but I should be because I've got 38 books and 112 strategies and I do them all'. Don't aim for happiness – aim for a balanced life. There will be times you'll be dissatisfied and that's OK."

The good news is there are benefits to being a little unhappy, and some serious drawbacks to being too cheerful. "If we increase mood happiness to 80 or so – and we do this experimentally – people behave in different ways," says Cummins. "It's good-time behaviour. They become nicer and more co-operative but they have a problem processing information. The brain doesn't bother because in the good times it doesn't matter what decisions you make because all decisions are good." From an evolutionary perspective, your happy brain assumes you're completely safe and want for nothing so mistakes don't matter. "People with high happiness levels are careless and reckless – they think they're invincible so they take risks," he says. And mild unhappiness and stress can have a strong protective effect – the emotions make you more aware of your surroundings, you process information better and make more careful decisions.

Harvard Psychologist Daniel Gilbert puts it succinctly. "Biologists have a word for animals that don't experience negative emotions," he says. "It's called 'dinner'." ■

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