



# Sonja Lyubomirsky: Pioneer in the Empirical Study of Happiness and Well-Being Interventions

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A complete profile of the “who’s who” in well-being science would be remiss if it did not include Sonja Lyubomirsky, PhD, a pioneer in the field who is especially notable for establishing an empirical inquiry into the causes and consequences of happiness and its sustainable pursuit through rigorous, experimental methods. Happiness has been a longstanding human concern and priority, from the philosophy of the ancient Greeks in 300 BC to the development of humanistic psychology in the 1960s primarily grounded in philosophical and qualitative approaches, and finally, to the emergence of positive psychology in the 1990s as an empirically-based field of inquiry into the science of living well. Dr. Lyubomirsky played a pivotal role in founding and shaping the field, and establishing the study of happiness as a scientific and methodologically rigorous discipline is a hallmark of her ongoing legacy.

Originally from Russia, Dr. Lyubomirsky began her longstanding career in happiness research fortuitously in 1989, when the first meeting with her PhD academic advisor, Lee Ross, PhD (a preeminent scholar on social cognition, conflict, and nego-

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tiation), resulted in pondering questions such as, “What is the secret to happiness?” and “Why are some people happier than others?” During the subsequent decade, Dr. Lyubomirsky dedicated her academic career to studying the differences between characteristically happy and unhappy people and illuminated several cognitive and motivational differences that impact dispositional happiness (e.g., the tendency to engage in social comparison, the tendency to focus and reflect on positive life events; Lyubomirsky, 2001).

Equipped with the knowledge of the tendencies of enduringly happy people, Dr. Lyubomirsky then committed 25 years (and counting) to experimentally developing positive activity interventions: short (1-to-6-week), self-administered, and accessible experiments testing behaviors that people can carry out in their everyday lives that reflect the practices of characteristically happy people, and ultimately, boost well-being for happiness seekers themselves (Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013; Lyubomirsky & Layous, [in press](#)). Notably, many of the cognitive and behavioral strategies that boost happiness are social in nature. Accordingly, many positive activity interventions are socially focused and include performing acts of kindness for others, cultivating and expressing gratitude, and engaging in more social interactions. Promoting social connection is a crucial theme of Dr. Lyubomirsky’s well-being intervention research and remains a focus of her current work.

Dr. Lyubomirsky has also been a longstanding scientific ambassador of well-being science for lay audiences. She has authored two best-seller books for general audiences and has been translated into 39 languages: *The How of Happiness* (2008) and *The Myths of Happiness* (2013). In addition, her work has been covered in multiple popular press outlets, and she has made hundreds of media appearances on radio, podcasts, TV, and films. Dr. Lyubomirsky’s commitment to science translation and accessibility has meant that enumerable people can harness scientifically-informed insights in their pursuits of happiness.

Dr. Lyubomirsky’s contributions to well-being science for both scientific and lay audiences have received much recognition from the field. It would be a daunting task to list all of her awards and accomplishments. However, some notable recognitions include nearly 80,000 total career citations (as of May 2024), an honorary doctorate from the University of Basel (2021), the Carol and Ed Diener Award in Social Psychology from the Society for Personality and Social Psychology (2018), election as a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (2023), and the Templeton Positive Psychology Prize from the American Psychological Association (2002). Along with her various recognitions from the broader scientific community, Dr. Lyubomirsky is also a valued peer and mentor at the University of California, Riverside, where she has been a tenure-track faculty member since 1994 and where she has been recognized as Faculty Mentor of the Year (1999–2000), Faculty of the Year (1999–2000), and Faculty Research Lecturer (2023–2024).

Dr. Lyubomirsky is a light to the people pulled into her orbit. If I could break the fourth wall as I write this invited, honorific profile of her life and work, I can attest to the quality, kindness, and generosity of her mentorship. Since her tenure at the University of California, Riverside began in 1994 (where she has been recognized as a Distinguished Professor since 2019), she has nurtured new generations of academic talent focused on the empirical and rigorous investigation of happiness, and I am

truly fortunate to be in their ranks and under her wing. Dr Lyubomirsky's research program is as active as ever, and she continues to blaze new trails in well-being science and further unpack how to foster true social connection, a key component of abiding happiness.

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