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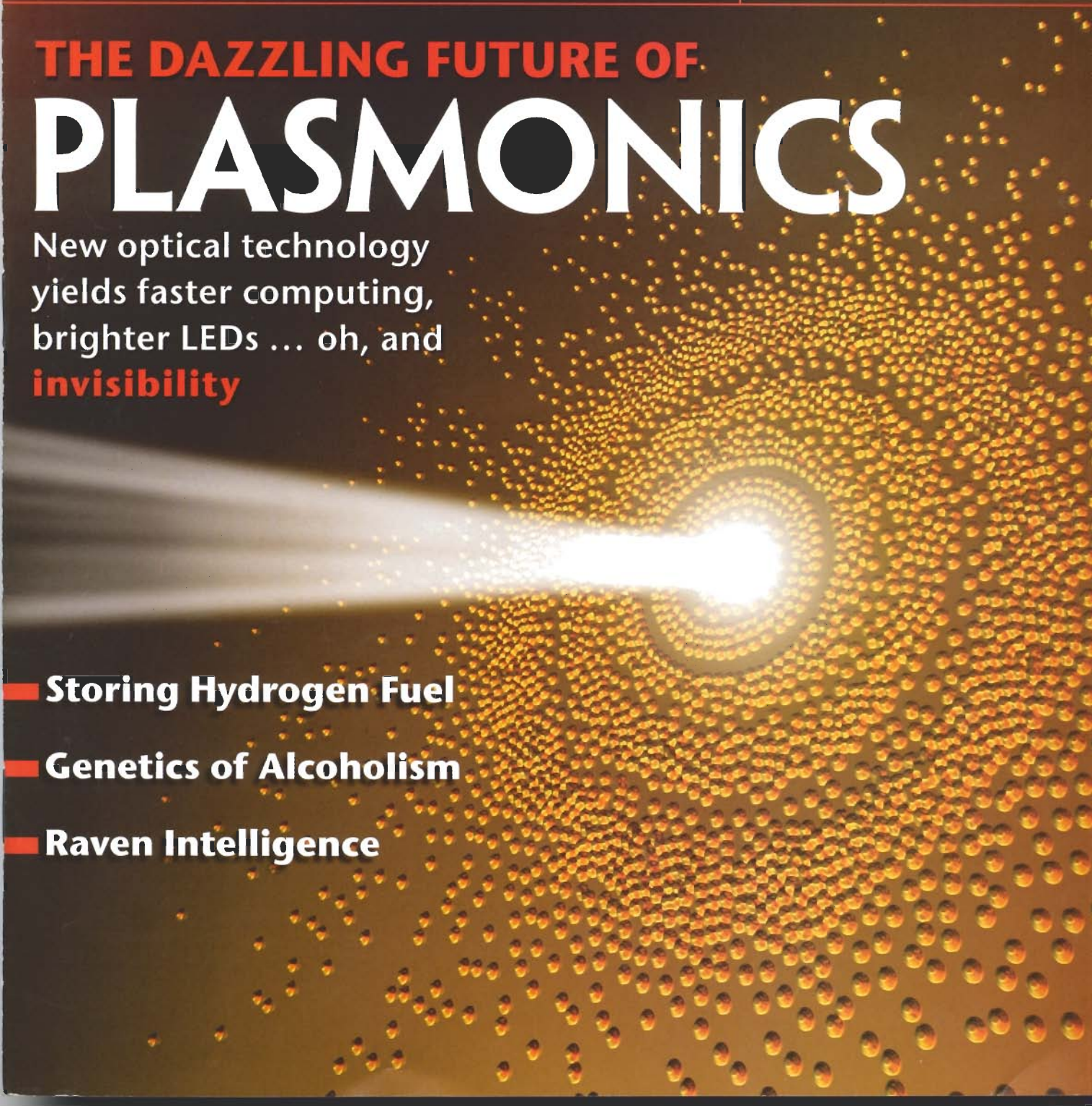
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The Science of Lasting Happiness

Through controlled experiments, Sonja Lyubomirsky explores ways to beat the genetic set point for happiness. Staying in high spirits, she finds, is hard work **By MARINA KRAKOVSKY**

The day I meet Sonja Lyubomirsky, she keeps getting calls from her Toyota Prius dealer. When she finally picks up, she is excited by the news: she can buy the car she wants in two days. Lyubomirsky wonders if her enthusiasm might come across as materialism, but I understand that she is buying an experience as much as a possession. The hybrid will be gentler on the environment, and a California state law letting some hybrids use the carpool lane promises a faster com-

mute between her coastal Santa Monica home and her job at the University of California, Riverside, some 70 miles inland.

Two weeks later, in late January, the 40-year-old Lyubomirsky, who smiles often and seems to approach life with zest and good humor, reports that she is “totally loving the Prius.” But will the feeling wear off soon after the new-car smell, or will it last, making a naturally happy person even more so?

An experimental psychologist investigating the possibility of lasting happiness, Lyubomirsky understands far better than most of us the folly of pinning our hopes on a new car—or on any good fortune that comes our way. We tend to adapt, quickly returning to our usual level of happiness. The classic example of such “hedonic adaptation” comes from a 1970s study of lottery winners, who a year after their windfall ended up no happier than nonwinners. Hedonic adaptation helps to explain why even changes in major life circumstances—such as income, marriage, physical health and where we live—do so little to boost our overall happiness. Not only that, but studies of twins and adoptees have shown that about 50 percent of each person’s happiness is determined from birth. This “genetic set point” alone makes the happiness glass look half empty, because any upward swing in happiness seems doomed to fall back to near your baseline.

“There’s been a tension in the field,” explains Lyubomirsky’s main collaborator, psychologist Kennon M. Sheldon of the University of Missouri–Columbia. “Some people were assuming you can affect happiness if, for example, you picked the right goals, but there was all this literature that suggested it was impossible, that what goes up must come down.”

Lyubomirsky, Sheldon and another psychologist, David A. Schkade of the University of California, San Diego, put the existing findings together into a simple pie chart showing what determines happiness. Half



SONJA LYUBOMIRSKY: HAPPINESS IS HARD

- Found through experiments that exercises in gratitude, kindness and optimism can make people happier—but only if they keep doing them.
- Sees an American preoccupation with happiness (she left Moscow at age 9).
- Of unrealistic expectations in the U.S. that happiness should be easy: “It’s the American quick-fix obsession.”
- Skeptical of self-help books offering empirically untested advice, she wrote her own book, *The How of Happiness*, due out in 2008.

the pie is the genetic set point. The smallest slice is circumstances, which explain only about 10 percent of people's differences in happiness. So what is the remaining 40 percent? "Because nobody had put it together before, that's unexplained," Lyubomirsky says. But she believes that when you take away genes and circumstances, what is left besides error must be "intentional activity," mental and behavioral strategies to counteract adaptation's downward pull.

Lyubomirsky has been studying these activities in hopes of finding out whether and how people can stay above their set point. In theory, that is possible in much the same way regular diet and exercise can keep athletes' weight below their genetic set points. But before Lyubomirsky began, there was "a huge vacuum of research on how to increase happiness," she says. The lottery study in particular "made people shy away from interventions," explains eminent University of Pennsylvania psychologist Martin E. P. Seligman, the father of positive psychology and a mentor to Lyubomirsky. When science had scrutinized happiness at all, it was mainly through correlational studies, which cannot tell what came first—the happiness or what it is linked to—let alone determine the cause and effect. Finding out that individuals with strong social ties are more satisfied with their lives than loners, for example, begs the question of whether friends make us happier or whether happy people are simply likelier to seek and attract friends.

Lyubomirsky began studying happiness as a graduate student in 1989 after an intriguing conversation with her adviser, Stanford University psychologist Lee D. Ross, who told her about a remarkably happy friend who had lost both parents to the Holocaust. Ross explains it this way: "For this person, the meaning of the Holocaust was that it was indecent or inappropriate to be unhappy about trivial things—and that one should strive to find joy in life and human relationships." Psychologists have long known that different people can see and think about the same events in different ways, but they had done little research on how these interpretations affect well-being.

So Lyubomirsky had to lay some groundwork before she could go into the lab. Back then, happiness was "a fuzzy, unscientific topic," she says, and although no instrument yet exists for giving perfectly valid, reliable and precise readings of someone's happiness from session to session, Lyubomirsky has brought scientific rigor to the emerging field. From her firm belief that it is each person's self-reported happiness that matters, she developed a four-question Subjective Happiness Scale. Lyubomirsky's working definition of happiness—"a joyful, contented life"—gets at both the feelings and judgments necessary for overall happiness. (If a sleep-deprived

new mom feels fulfilled but frazzled, and an aimless party girl feels empty despite loads of fun, neither would consider herself truly happy.) To this day, she rarely sees her studies' participants; they do most exercises out in the real world and answer detailed questionnaires on the computer, often from home. To assess subjects' efforts and honesty, she uses several cross-checks, such as timing them as they complete the questionnaires.

The research needed to answer questions about lasting happiness is costly, because studies need to follow a sizable group of people over a long time. Two and a half years ago Lyubomirsky and Sheldon received a five-year, \$1-million grant from the National Institute of Mental Health to do just that. Investigators have no shortage of possible strategies to test, with happiness advice coming "from the Buddha to Tony Robbins," as Seligman puts it. So Lyubomirsky started with three promising strategies: kindness, gratitude and optimism—all of which past research had linked with happiness.

Her aim is not merely to confirm the strategies' effectiveness

but to gain insights into how happiness works. For example, conventional wisdom suggests keeping a daily gratitude journal. But one study revealed that those who

**Count your blessings every day?
Not if you want to be really happy.**

had been assigned to do that ended up less happy than those who had to count their blessings only once a week. Lyubomirsky therefore confirmed her hunch that timing is important. So is variety, it turned out: a kindness intervention found that participants told to vary their good deeds ended up happier than those forced into a kindness rut. Lyubomirsky is also asking about mediators: Why, for example, does acting kind make you happier? "I'm a basic researcher, not an applied researcher, so I'm interested not so much in the strategies but in how they work and what goes on behind the scenes," she explains.

Initial results with the interventions have been promising, but sustaining them is tough. Months after a study is over, the people who have stopped the exercises show a drop in happiness. Like a drug or a diet, the exercises work only if you stick with them. Instilling habits is crucial. Another key: "fit," or how well the exercise matches the person. If sitting down to imagine your best possible self (an optimism exercise) feels contrived, you will be less likely to do it.

The biggest factor may be getting over the idea that happiness is fixed—and realizing that that sustained effort can boost it. "A lot of people don't apply the notion of effort to their emotional lives," Lyubomirsky declares, "but the effort it takes is enormous." ■

Marina Krakovsky (marinakrakovsky.com) often writes about experimental psychology.