

COMMENTARY

We can train our minds to be happier

One of the books on my nightstand these days is "The How of Happiness" by Sonja Lyubomirsky. A couple of years ago, I would have ignored a title like that, putting it in the same category as other ineffective quick fixes such as grapefruit diets and Al Franken's "I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and doggone it, people like me!" pep talks.

It's pretty well-established that an adult's general outlook on life doesn't change — this isn't the same as moods, which can change frequently, especially during Green Bay Packers season.

If our emotional well-being is compared to a control knob, the dial setting doesn't vary.

It may get bumped by experiences such as winning the lottery or losing a loved one. But studies show that the control knob returns to its original setting.

People who were unhappy before winning the lottery re-



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turn to their discontent once they adapt to their new circumstances. And happy people who experience loss return to a state of overall contentment after time to grieve.

So why would I bother to read a book about how to be happier?

The short answer to that question is "because of Richie Davidson." He's the University of Wisconsin-Madison neuroscientist who's coming to Appleton this month as part of the Appleton Education Foundation community education series.

Davidson's talk is titled, "Shaping Your Child's Brain." But it isn't just his work with children that earned him international recognition from Time magazine and the Dalai Lama. It's his work with the neuroplasticity of emotions in adults.

Neuroplasticity describes the capacity of our brains to heal, adapt and generate new cells throughout our lives.

Advances in technology such as MRIs have sparked a revolution in the last few decades concerning the amazing possibilities of our brains.

It turns out our experiences can dramatically shape our brains. Athletes, musicians and meditators — what Davidson calls "attentional athletes" — show distinct changes in their brains that reflect their rigorous training.

As a physical therapist, I'm thrilled to see how the promise of neuroplasticity is shaping the way rehabilitation is provided to people

with injury or disease.

For example, someone who suffers a stroke may receive treatment that involves walking on a treadmill while wearing a harness that allows body weight to be supported.

This can provide the individual with the experience of normal walking that would be otherwise impossible to perform. With repetition and training, recovery of the ability to walk with a normal pattern is encouraged.

But until I read about Davidson's work, I never considered the possibility that I could apply these same principles of training to my emotional state.

Davidson showed that we do have emotional setpoints, but we can adjust the control knob. We can train our minds to more readily experience positive emotions and dampen negative emotions.

How might my life be different if I could experience more joy and compassion and less anger and envy?

So how can I be happier?

Lyubomirsky defines happiness as the experience of positive emotions like joy and contentment, and the feeling that one's life is good and meaningful.

Some of the myths about happiness surprised me. Research shows that 50 percent of our happiness setpoint is accounted for by genes. Remarkably, only 10 percent is accounted for by circumstances.

Material wealth, physical appearance, even illness play only a small role in determining how happy we are. We don't "find happiness" based upon where we live, work and play. We won't find it by losing weight, altering our appearance, making more money or falling madly in love.

Rather, it's our intentional activity — how we think and act — that accounts for a full 40 percent of our happiness.

Many of the book's recommendations for how to be happier reflect truisms our grandmothers might have

said:

"No use crying over spilt milk."

"Be happy with what you've got."

"If life hands you lemons, make lemonade."

"Follow the golden rule."

Lyubomirsky cites research that supports these adages. People who find ways to regularly practice gratitude, forgiveness and kindness in their lives can train themselves to be happier.

Davidson sums it up best: "The message I take from my own work is that I have a choice in how I react, that who I am depends on the choices I make, and that who I am is therefore my responsibility."

Thank you to the Appleton Education Foundation for sponsoring Davidson's visit, as well as the other speakers in the community education series.