

The WORLD BOOK of  
**HAPPINESS**

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*'Bad is stronger than good.'*

## *Beyond good and bad*

'When we meet people and are asked "*how are you?*" or "*how are you doing?*" we would seldom dare to give a negative answer. Numerous surveys worldwide show that the vast majority of respondents report above-medium levels of happiness, including people in disadvantageous conditions, such as those who are old, poor, disabled or have endured misfortunes in their past.'

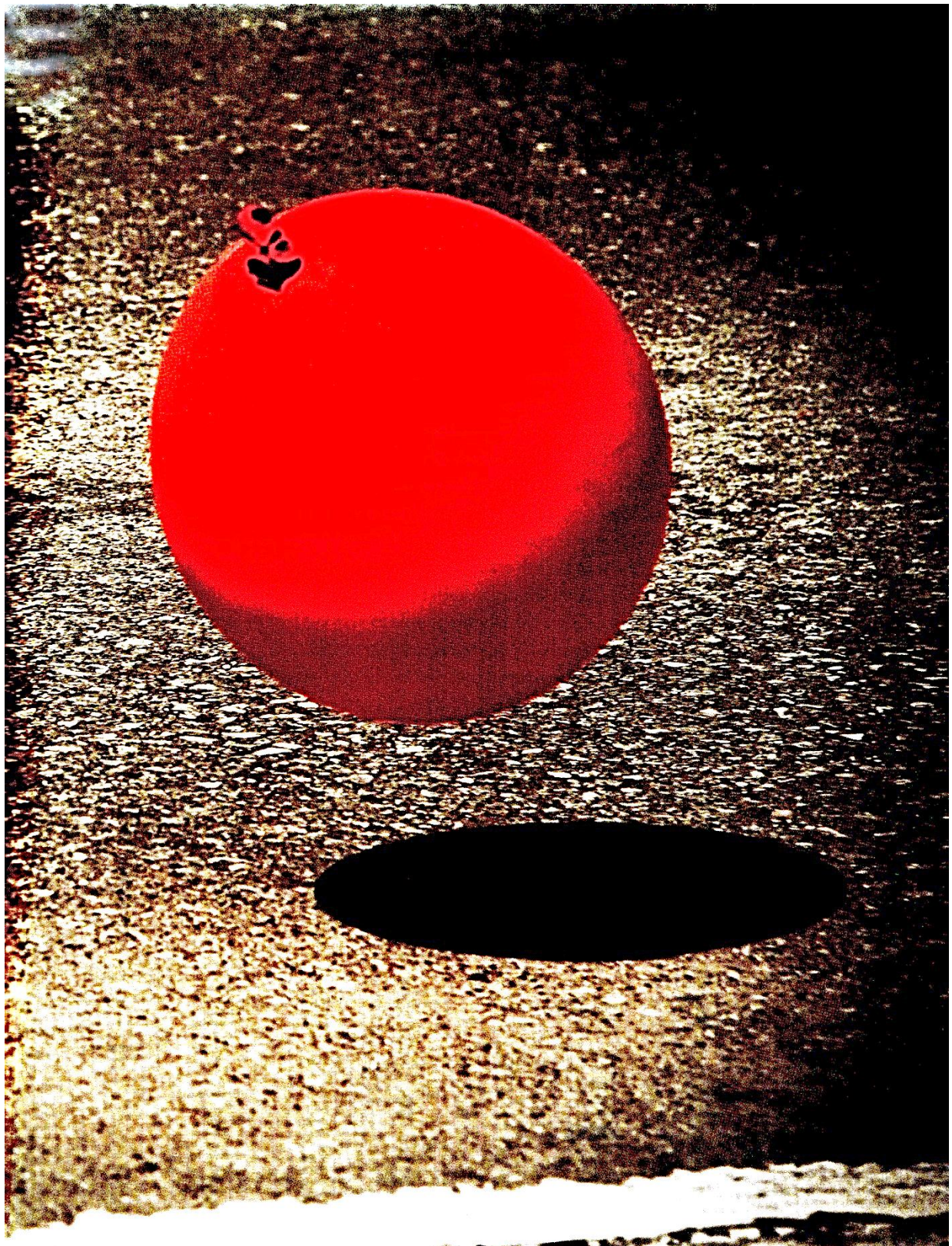
Where do we find the strength to be happy?

Professor **Dov Shmotkin** develops an integrated theory on the pursuit of happiness in the face of adversity.

### **Our secret agent in a hostile world**

The inclination to be (basically) happy can often appear contradictory, not only to a variety of pessimistic philosophical traditions, but also to an empirical body of evidence which shows that 'bad is stronger than good'. This evidence indicates that undesirable, harmful or unpleasant outcomes have a greater psychological impact than desirable, beneficial or pleasant ones. Thus, while people can usually adjust to most adverse conditions, certain negative events (e.g., disability, unemployment) may lower happiness permanently. Psychological trauma, which often represents ineradicable loss or suffering,







may perpetuate its harsh impact by depleting resources and instigating further cycles of loss. The predominant power of 'the bad' over 'the good' is reasonably explained by the critical implications that negative experiences may bear for a person's protection and survival.

But how can most people be happy if the bad in their life is stronger than the good? Indeed, this discrepancy between the two bodies of evidence cannot easily be dismissed. It genuinely reflects two conflicting principles of positivity and negativity in human life. The conceptual model that I propose may introduce a more integrative formulation about the role of happiness. In my model, subjective well-being (the more academic term for happiness) is not treated merely as a desired outcome, but rather as a dynamic system whose role is to constitute a *favourable psychological environment*, which allows us to function normally and competently with minimal disruptions. Complementary to subjective well-being in this model is a system termed the *hostile-world scenario*, referring to an image of actual or potential threats to a person's life or, more broadly, to a person's physical and mental integrity. The hostile-world scenario is nourished by beliefs about catastrophes and afflictions, such as accidents, violence, natural disasters, wars, illness, aging, and death. This image of adversity scans for any potentially negative conditions or for an even worse condition, when a negative one already prevails. When activated adaptively, the hostile-world scenario helps people to stay vigilant to threats in their struggle to remain safe and well. However, an extreme hostile-world scenario generates a sense of living precariously in a disastrous world.

Subjective well-being and the hostile-world scenario regulate each other by various mechanisms, in order to fulfil their respective tasks of promoting pleasure and accomplishment, while ensuring safety and protection. A detailed description of these mechanisms is beyond the present scope of this text. Generally, a state of subjective well-being can counteract, or dismantle, the negative repercussions of a highly activated hostile-world scenario. But this is not an adaptive move in all conditions: if we face a real danger, we need to cope with it, rather than staying in elusive well-being. In fact, in certain conditions it is even warranted to co-activate both subjective well-being and the hostile-world scenario: for example, when novel situations may stimulate our subjective well-being, while the hostile-world scenario simultaneously ensures our alertness to potential dangers. These and other mechanisms illustrate how subjective well-being constantly negotiates with the hostile world, so that life is not overridden by the nightmarish imminence of catastrophe, nor is it driven to the naivety of a fool's paradise.

The quest for happiness is still a source of considerable perplexity. Happiness has many different faces (what we really experience, what we tell to others, what we remember), which may be contradictory at times. Is happiness a realistic outcome within tangible reach of most people, or is it an elusive and treacherous experience which ultimately leads those who seek it into greater unhappiness? Protagonists for both ideas can readily be found.. My approach is that happiness is essentially more dialectical than commonly assumed – because it functions as our secret agent in a hostile world.

### **The keys**

- **Happiness is a dynamic system whose role is to constitute a *favourable psychological environment*, which allows us to function normally and competently with minimal disruptions.**
- **The hostile-world scenario helps people to stay vigilant to threats in their struggle to remain safe and well.**
- **A state of subjective well-being can counteract, or dismantle, the negative repercussions of a highly activated hostile-world scenario.**

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The work of Professor Dov Shmotkin expands studies on subjective well-being across the life span, as well as on long-term traumatic effects amongst Holocaust survivors. Shmotkin is affiliated to the Department of Psychology and the Herczeg Institute on Aging at Tel Aviv University (Israel). He is a member of research teams that have conducted national surveys of Israel's older population.



In this challenging book, 100 top experts in positive psychology from around the world from Iceland to South Africa, and China to Australia, share the best way to find and keep happiness. This modern science has gained considerably in knowledge and standing in recent decades. Without philosophical or spiritual speculations, this book provides clear insights based on worldwide scientific research. The subjects tackled include time, health, success, well-being, the future, compassion, genetics, free-will, humour, pain, choice, family, friends and more. It not only explores the individual, but also the well-being of organisations and nations, resulting in a unique global vision of happiness.

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