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You Make Your Own Luck

Written by Alan Bellows on 03 April 2006

Some individuals seem to have an inexplicable abundance of good fortune. They are successful in matters of love, in their careers, in their finances, and in leading happy and meaningful lives. Yet these people don't seem to work particularly hard, nor do they posses extraordinary intelligence or other gifts. Of course there are also the natural opposites of the superfortunate; people who repeatedly fail despite their efforts and talents.

As is true with so many human problems, people tend deal with this difficult-to-quantify inequality by giving it a name– "luck"– and then disclaiming any responsibility for how much of it they are apportioned. Luck is considered by many to be a force of nature, coming and going as inevitably as the tide. But Richard Wiseman, a professor at Britain's University of Hertfordshire, has conducted some experiments which indicate to him that we have a lot more influence on our own good fortune than we realize.

Professor Wiseman executed a ten-year study to determine the nature of luck, and published his findings in a book called *The Luck Factor: The Scientific Study of the Lucky Mind*. Among other things, he experimentally studied the lottery winnings from people who count themselves as "lucky" and compared them to those who are self-described as "unlucky," and found that one's perception of their own luck before a lottery has no bearing on their likelihood of winning. Naturally this outcome was no surprise, because lotteries are driven purely by random chance. But in another test, the good professor asked participants to count the number of photographs in a sample newspaper, and subjects who has described themselves as "lucky" were much more likely to notice a message on page two, disguised as a half-page advertisement with large block letters: STOP COUNTING–THERE ARE 43 PHOTOGRAPHS IN THIS NEWSPAPER.

Obviously *some* measure of luck is based on chance, but this experiment and many others have led Wiseman to conclude that a significant portion of one's good fortune is not random, but rather due to one's state of mind and behaviors. He concludes that luck is an artifact of psychology, where a person is lucky not because of cosmic accidents, but because one achieves a particular mindset which precipitates and amplifies "lucky" events. While this observation may seem obvious, there are many interesting particulars in his findings.

Professor Wiseman's newspaper test illustrated that people who feel lucky do indeed differ from those who do not, but not due to to some outside force. The lucky individuals were paying more attention to their surroundings, which made them more likely to notice the message in the newspaper. During his long study on the nature of luck, he has found that "lucky" individuals usually posses many intersecting qualities, including extroverted personalities, a lack of anxiety, open-mindedness, and optimism. Each of these play an important role in one's luck production.

The essence of luck is opportunity, so it follows that the more opportunities one encounters and the more receptive one is to those opportunities, the "luckier" one is. Wiseman has found that lucky people smile twice as often as others, and engage in more eye contact than unlucky people do. Such outgoing, extroverted behavior exposes a person to more opportunities due to the increased social interaction. Similarly, open-mindedness allows one to encounter a greater number of unique prospects, and makes one more apt to embrace new opportunities.

Professor Wiseman has outlined four principles to help one increase their good fortune:

Principle One: Maximise Chance Opportunities

Lucky people are skilled at creating, noticing and acting upon chance opportunities. They do this in various ways, including networking, adopting a relaxed attitude to life and by being open to new experiences.

Principle Two: Listening to Lucky Hunches

Lucky people make effective decisions by listening to their intuition and gut feelings. In addition, they take steps to actively boost their intuitive abilities by, for example, meditating and clearing their mind of other thoughts.

Principle Three: Expect Good Fortune

Lucky people are certain that the future is going to be full of good fortune. These expectations become self-fulfilling prophecies by helping lucky people persist in the face of failure, and shape their interactions with others in a positive way.

Principle Four: Turn Bad Luck to Good

Lucky people employ various psychological techniques to cope with, and often even thrive upon, the ill fortune that comes their way. For example, they spontaneously imagine how things could have been worse, do not dwell on the ill fortune, and take control of the situation.

Unsurprisingly, optimism plays a key role in luckiness, since it strongly affects luck production and luck perception. Wiseman's study shows that a lucky, optimistic person is far more satisfied with all areas of their lives than an unlucky, pessimistic person. An optimist feels lucky for spotting a silver lining, however gray the cloud… yet a pessimist will curse their luck even in the face of good fortune, because they can't see past the green grass on the other side of the fence.

Fortunately, one's mindset is entirely within one's control. An unlucky person who resolves to change their luck can become more social; they can make a conscious effort to be optimistic and make the best of any situation; and they can be more open to new ideas and experiences. In short, if you go looking for luck, you'll probably find it… or so says the professor. With any luck, he's right.

Further reading:
Article from Scientific American
Buy *The Luck Factor* on Amazon.com

Found via KirstenMortensen.com

Alan Bellows is the founder, designer, and managing editor of DamnInteresting.com, and he is perpetually behind schedule.

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