2. Do External Events Create Enduring Happiness?

Happiness depends, as nature shows, less on exterior things than most suppose.

William Cowper, 1731–1800

Suppose someone gave you a million dollars. How happy do you think that would make you feel, and how long would you feel that way? Now suppose you were seriously injured in a car accident. How unhappy do you think that would make you feel, and how long would you feel that way? If you’re like most people, you believe events of this type will have a sharp and enduring influence on your general level of happiness (Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998; T. D. Wilson, Wheatley, Meyers, Gilbert, & Axsom, 2000). But this is usually not the case. Although dramatic events cause short-term changes in happiness, their influence tends to wane rather quickly and people soon find themselves feeling pretty much as they felt before.

An investigation by Brickman, Coates, and Janoff-Bulman (1978) provides the best-known evidence for this effect. These investigators interviewed three groups of people: lottery winners, accident victims (who were either paraplegic or quadriplegic), and a control group of people who had recently encountered neither good fortune nor misfortune. Among other things, the groups were asked: “How happy are you now (at this point in your life)?” “How happy were you in the recent past?” and “How happy do you expect to be in a couple of years (0 = Not at all; 5 = Very much)?” Figure 5.14 shows the results, and several findings are of interest: First, the lottery winners (some of whom had just won a million dollars or more) were no happier than the control group. Second, although the accident victims were currently less happy than the lottery winners and the controls, their happiness ratings fell above the scale midpoint of 2.5, suggesting that they did not feel terribly unhappy in an absolute sense. Finally, all three groups expected to be equally happy in the future. Apparently, when it comes to happiness, remarkable events can have rather unremarkable consequences (see also Dijkers, 1997).

FIGURE 5.14
Happiness Ratings for Accident Victims, Lottery Winners, and Controls

The data show that (1) lottery winners do not report greater happiness than controls; (2) accident victims, while less happy than the other two groups, are still quite happy; and (3) all three groups expect to be very happy in the future.

Source: Brickman, Coates, and Janoff-Bulman (1978).