A Conversation With Lindsey Buckingham (page 78)

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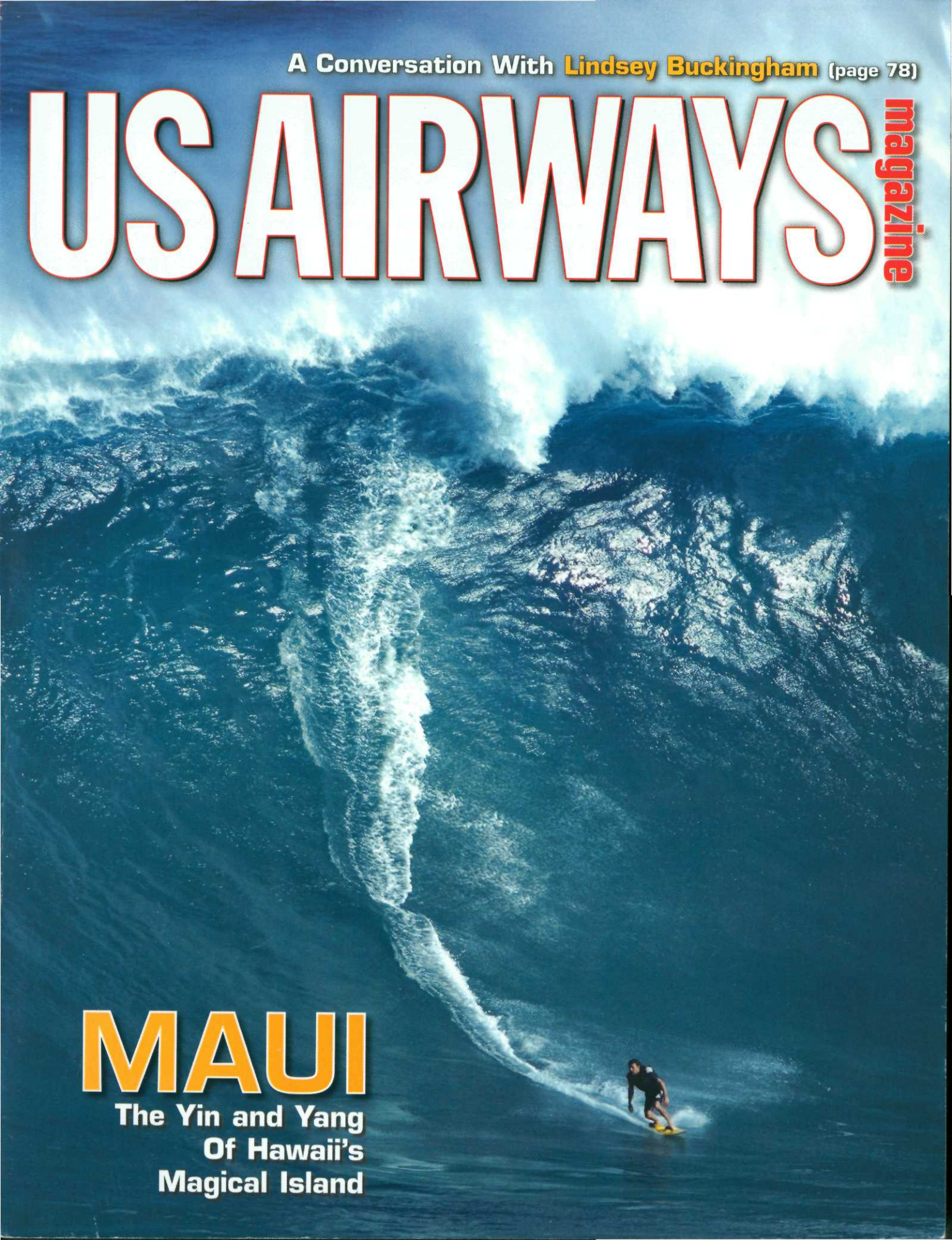
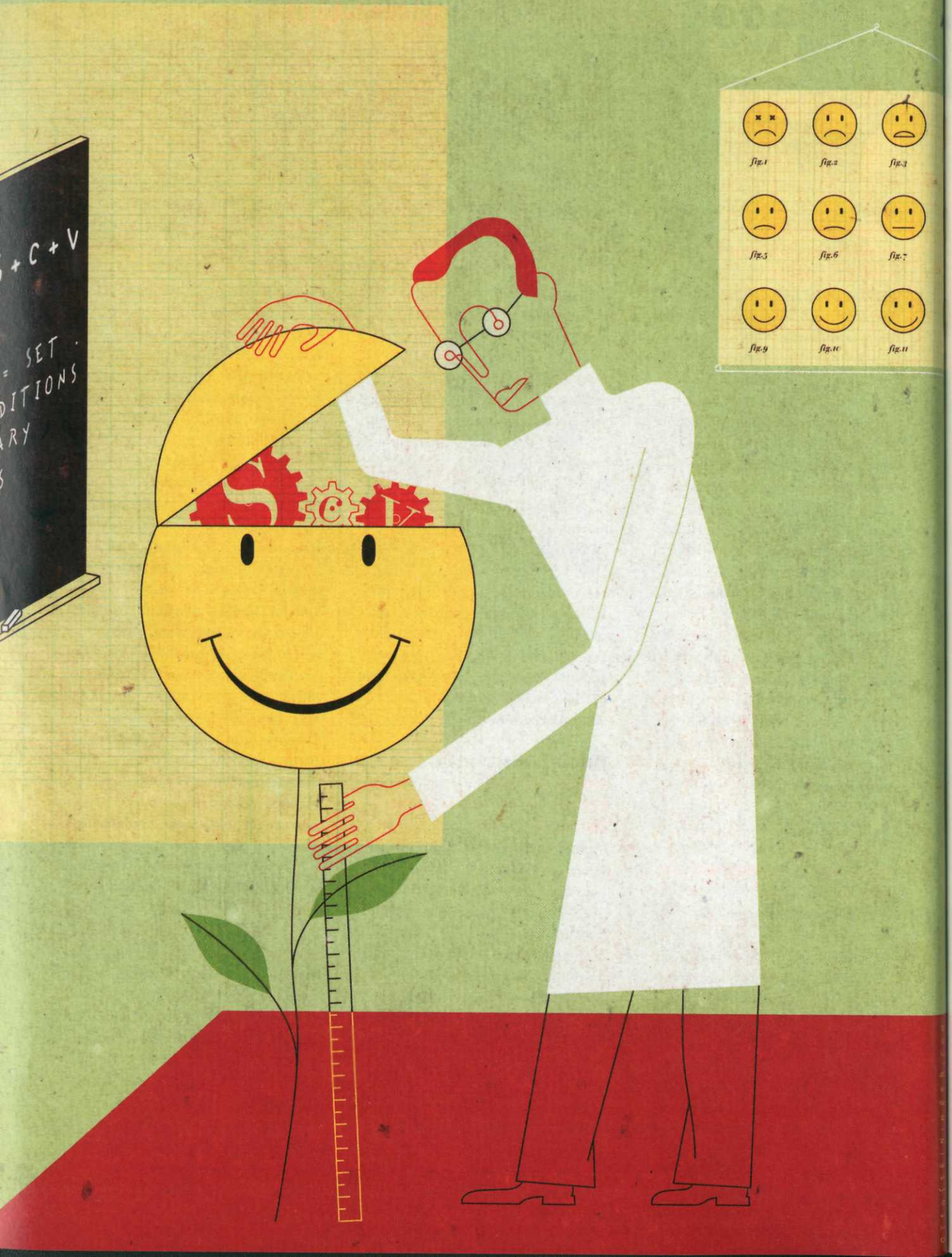


MAUI

The Yin and Yang
Of Hawaii's
Magical Island



A FORMULA FOR happiness

Researchers believe that they've uncovered the building blocks of happiness — and the good news is that they aren't written in stone.

by **LIZ SEYMOUR** / *illustrated by* **OTTO STEININGER**

Are you happy? If you're like 90 percent of Americans, you probably answer "yes" to that question, at least most of the time. But are you as happy as you could be? If not, how could you be happier? And what is happiness anyway?

These are the big questions being asked by researchers in a new and rapidly growing field called Positive Psychology. Beginning with the premise that what goes right is every bit as interesting as what goes wrong, psychologists study everything from how nursing home residents respond to choosing and caring for their own houseplants, to the comparative happiness of identical twins separated at birth, to the happiness quotients of paraplegics and of lottery winners. What they've discovered can be expressed in a surprisingly simple formula: H = S + C + V, or Level of Happiness = Set Point + Conditions of Your Life + Voluntary Activities.

"Our formulation of happiness, which we call subjective well-being, says that it is composed of life satisfaction, positive emotions, and low levels of negative emotions," says Ed Diener, professor of psychology at the University of Illinois. "We used to examine what causes happiness, but recently we have begun to examine what happiness itself causes. Is it just a good thing? How does it influence our motivation and behavior?"

The pursuit of happiness has, of course, been around for a very long time. Psychologists and social scientists have been studying it since the 1960s, and philosophers and religious leaders have been pondering it much longer. But the study of happiness didn't become a discipline in its own right until 1998, when the American Psychological Association adopted the term "positive psychology." In less than a decade, research centers like the Positive Emotion and Psychophysiology (PEP) Lab at the University of North Carolina and the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania have conducted hundreds of studies into what makes for a happy person.

Is happiness worth the effort? Yes, say psychologists. Research studies confirm what common sense has always told us: Happy people live longer, enjoy healthier lives, achieve more success, and maintain stronger relationships than the chronically unhappy. "This doesn't mean that people need to be euphoric or ecstatic all the time," says Diener, "but rather that people who are in a positive state the majority of the time have an advantage in terms of success." The surprise is that anyone can be happier — and it really isn't all that hard. Read on.

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SET POINT

The English poet William Blake wrote that "some are born to sweet delight/some are born to endless night." Although the late David Lykken, a professor at the University of Minnesota, didn't put it quite so lyrically, he concluded more or less the same thing. Based on three decades of research on twins — much of it on identical twins raised apart — Lykken found that 50 percent of our proclivity for happiness or for melancholy (our "set point") is determined by our genes. "From person to person, the variation is really quite large," says Jonathan Haidt, professor of psychology at the University of Virginia and author of *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*. "Some people's brains are set to see opportunities. Other people's brains are set to see the world as full of danger."

But genetics is not destiny. Sonja Lyubomirsky, professor of psychology at the University of California–Riverside and one of the originators of the happiness formula, compares the genetically determined happiness set point to our inherited tendency to stay thin or to put on weight. "All the set point means," she says, "is that in the same way some people have to work on maintaining their weight, you may have to work to achieve the same level of happiness as someone else. It may be harder, but it can be done."

You can't change your

genes, but you can tinker with the essential wiring of your brain. Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, such as Prozac, Zoloft, and others, work to prolong the action of serotonin, the brain chemical that helps to regulate mood.

Meditation, it turns out, also works with the brain's basic structure. Researchers at the Laboratory for Affective Neuroscience at the University of Wisconsin hooked meditating Tibetan monks up to brain monitors and found that the left prefrontal cortex — the part of the brain that is most active when we are happy and alert — lit up like Times Square. Follow-up studies with a group of stressed-out employees at a biotech company proved that even non-monks can raise their set points through meditation.

A third effective way to reset the set point is through a type of therapy called "cognitive therapy," a process designed to retrain the brain to break the cycle of its own negative thoughts — essentially to recognize the world of opportunities instead of the world of dangers.

CONDITIONS

Robert Louis Stevenson wrote "The world is so full of a number of things, / I'm sure we should all be as happy as kings." Sorry Robert, but studies show that those things, whatever their number, contribute surprisingly little — somewhere between 8 and 15 percent — to our sustained happiness. Variables such as age, education, health, income, personal appearance, and even climate are ineffective at overriding our genetically determined set point.

The reason external factors have little impact on our level of happiness lies deep in our brains, which turn out to be amazingly adaptable to both good and bad circumstances. Using experimental MRI and EEG techniques, scientists can observe neurons firing most urgently to new stimuli; once nerves habituate to a situation, whatever its nature, they respond less. Studies of lottery winners on the one hand and people who became paraplegic from an accident on the other prove the point: Within a year after the event that changed their lives, they were pretty much back to their earlier level of happiness. That holds just as true for less dramatic conditions, says Lyubomirsky. "If you make a stable change — if you buy a bigger house, for instance — you'll get used to it after a while and return to your set point. It works the opposite way as well, which is why daily hassles make people very unhappy. You never get a chance to adapt because the conditions are constantly changing."

With habituation comes an internal itch (a study found that people of all income levels say that they would be happier if they earned 25 percent more) which is why, for good or bad, we're always chasing rainbows. "We evolved to be not content," says Haidt. "We are the offspring of our discontented ancestors."

VOLUNTARY ACTIVITIES

The S and the C account for a hefty 60 percent of our happiness. "But that still leaves 40 percent," points out Lyubomirsky, "which is really quite a lot." The V in the happiness formula is made up of a long list of small but powerful voluntary actions we can take to change our lives and our attitudes.

Martin Seligman, originator of the term "positive psychology" and director of the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania, divides the building blocks of happiness into two broad categories: pleasures and gratifications. Pleasures are sensual and emotional (a good meal, a dip in the ocean, a back rub) but generally fleeting in their effect. Gratifications are those activities that call on our skills and strengths and give us a sense of a job well done. Seligman divides gratifications even further into what he calls "signature strengths" — marks of character such as perseverance, kindness, curiosity, and humility that make each of us the individuals that we are.

A couple of years ago Haidt demonstrated the difference between pleasures and gratifications to his introductory psychology students — and taught them something about the basic nature of happiness in the process. He assigned them four activities: attend a lecture, perform an act of kindness, express gratitude to someone, and eat an ice cream cone. Only the ice cream cone failed to lift the students' moods for the whole day. "The way I look at it," says Haidt, "we are an ultrasocial species; we evolved to live in intensely social groups. We are most fully engaged in life when we are part of something that isn't just for ourselves."

Liz Seymour writes for a variety of national publications.

Happy Feats

Want to be happy? An experiment conducted on Martin Seligman's Web site, ***authentichappiness.org***, reinforces the revolutionary idea that true happiness lies in building on our strengths, not rooting out our flaws. Test subjects reported that benefits from these three simple exercises lasted for as much as six months.

1. Write a letter of gratitude to someone from your past who has been particularly kind to you, but who has never been properly thanked. Then deliver the letter in person.
2. Every evening for a week, write down three good things that happened that day and explain what brought them about.
3. Take the Signature Strengths Questionnaire on ***authentichappiness.org*** to identify your own strengths, and then use one of your top five strengths in a different way every day for a week.