ABSTRACT. We examined the relationship between the character strength of kindness and subjective happiness (Study 1), and the effects of a counting kindnesses intervention on subjective happiness (Study 2). In Study 1, participants were 175 Japanese undergraduate students and in Study 2, participants were 119 Japanese women (71 in the intervention group and 48 in the control group). Results showed that: (a) Happy people scored higher on their motivation to perform, and their recognition and enactment of kind behaviors. (b) Happy people have more happy memories in daily life in terms of both quantity and quality. (c) Subjective happiness was increased simply by counting one’s own acts of kindness for one week. (d) Happy people became more kind and grateful through the counting kindnesses intervention. Discussion centers on the importance of kindness in producing subjective happiness.

KEY WORDS: gratitude, intervention, kindness, positive psychology, subjective happiness.

INTRODUCTION

One of the central topics of concern to positive psychology is happiness (Seligman, 2003; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Recent research on happy people has demonstrated several important findings. Compared with less happy people, happy people have better social relationships and more pleasant everyday lives. For example, Diener and Seligman (2002) showed that very happy people have highly satisfying relationships with friends, romantic partners, and family members and that, compared to their less happy peers, they report more positive events and emotions in their daily lives relative to negative ones. They also found that very happy people are more...
extraverted, more agreeable, and less neurotic and that they score lower on several measure of psychopathology. Other studies have shown that subjective happiness is one of the key factors in subjective well-being and overall satisfaction with life (Buss, 2000; Diener, 2000; Strack et al., 1991; Suh et al., 1998).

Gratitude is an important human strengths that contributes to subjective happiness (Emmons and Crumpler, 2000; McCullough et al., 2002; Peterson and Seligman, 2004). McCullough et al. (2001) showed that grateful individuals were especially appreciative of the contribution of others to their happiness. Watkins et al. (2003) suggested that grateful persons would further be characterized by the appreciation of life’s simple pleasures. These results imply reciprocal relationships among gratitude, subjective happiness, and good social relationships. Consequently, compared with unhappy people, happy people report close and satisfying relationships and feel more gratitude in their lives (Park et al., 2004). Whereas gratitude results when people receive kindness from other people, kindness entails enacting kind behavior toward other people. We expected that in addition to the strength of gratitude, the strength of kindness would also play an important role in increasing subjective happiness.

Few researchers have focused on the strength of kindness per se among happy people. It has been reported that women respond more positively when observing a random act of kindness than do men, suggesting that women may be more attuned to kindnesses (Baskerville et al., 2000). Therefore, in the current studies we focus on women. We postulated that, as a strength, kindness has three components: (a) the motivation to be kind to others; (b) the recognition of kindness in others; and (c) the enactment of kind behavior in one’s daily life.

We also explored possible mechanisms that might link kindness to subjective happiness. We assumed that various emotional, motivational and cognitive processes influence the recognition and enactment of kind behaviors and thereby might affect subjective happiness. For example, Lyubomirsky et al. (2001) showed in laboratory studies that unhappy people are more inclined than happy people to rely on passive social comparisons at both the group and individual level. They suggested