

RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS



The Luck Factor

Richard Wiseman

Contents

About the Book
About the Author
Also by Richard Wiseman
Title Page
Dedication
Epigraph
Acknowledgements
Introduction
Your Luck Journal

Part One: Initial Research

1. The Power of Luck
2. Lucky and Unlucky Lives

Part Two: The Four Principles of Luck

3. Principle One: Maximise Your Chance Opportunities
4. Principle Two: Listen to Your Lucky Hunches
5. Principle Three: Expect Good Fortune
6. Principle Four: Turn Your Bad Luck Into Good

Part Three: Creating Luckier Lives

7. Luck School
8. Learning to be Lucky

- 9. Graduation Day
- 10. Beyond The Luck Factor

Appendices

Appendix A

Appendix B

Notes

Copyright

About the Book

The revolutionary book that reveals the four scientific principles of luck - and how you can use them to change your life.

For over ten years, psychologist Professor Richard Wiseman has been conducting a unique research project, examining the behaviour of over a thousand volunteers who considered themselves 'lucky' or 'unlucky'. The results reveal a radical new way of looking at luck:

- *You* hold the key to creating your luck
- There are four simple behavioural techniques that are scientifically proven to help you attract good fortune
- You can use these principles to revolutionise every area of your life - including your relationships, personal finances and career

For the first time, the elusive luck factor has been identified. Using the simple techniques described in this book, you can learn how to increase your levels of luck, confidence and success.

About the Author

Professor Richard Wiseman began his working life as an award-winning professional musician and was one of the youngest members of The Magic Circle. He obtained a first class honours degree in Psychology from University College London, a doctorate in Psychology from Edinburgh University, and was awarded the prestigious Perrott-Warwick Scholarship from Trinity College Cambridge. He now heads a research unit based within the Psychology Department at the University of Hertfordshire.

Professor Wiseman's research has been widely reported in many of the world's leading science journals, and he has presented his findings at many national and international academic conferences.

He has featured on hundreds of radio and television programmes, and feature articles about his work have appeared in *The Times*, the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Guardian*. He has also devised several large-scale experiments involving thousands of people. Many of these have been carried out in collaboration with the *Daily Telegraph* and the BBC science programme *Tomorrow's World*.

Also by Richard Wiseman

Magic in Theory

Did You Spot the Gorilla?

The Little Book of Luck

Parapsychology

Quickology

59 Seconds: Think a Little, Change a Lot

The Luck Factor

Richard Wiseman



arrow books

To Caroline

If an unlucky man sold umbrellas, it would stop raining; if he sold candles, the sun would never set; and if he made coffins, people would stop dying.

Yiddish saying

Throw a lucky man in the sea and he will come up with a fish in his mouth.

Arab proverb

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following people for their help in conducting the research described here and in writing this book: Dr Caroline Watt, Dr Matthew Smith, Dr Peter Harris, Dr Emma Greening, Dr Wendy Middleton, Clive Jeffries, and Helen Large. I am also grateful to the various organisations that helped fund and support this work: the Leverhulme Trust, the University of Hertfordshire, and the BBC. This book would not have been possible without the guidance and expertise of my agent Patrick Walsh, and editors Kate Parkin, Anna Cherrett and Jonathan Burnham. Finally, my special thanks to the hundreds of lucky and unlucky people who were kind enough to participate in my research, and share their fascinating life experiences.

Introduction

Lucky people meet their perfect partners, achieve their lifelong ambitions, find fulfilling careers, and live happy and meaningful lives. Their success is not due to them working especially hard, being amazingly talented or exceptionally intelligent. Instead, they appear to have an uncanny ability to be in the right place at the right time and enjoy more than their fair share of lucky breaks. This book describes the first scientific study into why lucky people live such charmed lives, and offers ideas for how others can enhance their own good fortune.

The research took several years to complete, and involved interviews and experiments with hundreds of exceptionally lucky and unlucky people. The results reveal a radically new way of looking at luck and the vital role that it plays in our lives. People are not born lucky. Instead, lucky people are, without realising it, using four basic principles to create good fortune in their lives. Understand the principles and you understand luck itself. More importantly, these principles can be used to enhance the amount of good luck that you experience in your life.

In short, this book presents that most elusive of holy grails - a scientifically proven way to understand, control and increase your luck.

Beginner's luck

I have always had a lifelong interest in the remarkable. When I was a child, I became fascinated with magic and illusion. By the time I was ten, I could make handkerchiefs vanish into thin air and thoroughly shuffle a deck of cards without altering their order. In my early teens I joined one of the world's best-known magic societies – The Magic Circle in London. By my early twenties I had been invited to America to perform several times at the prestigious Magic Castle in Hollywood.

I quickly discovered that to be a successful magician you need to understand a great deal about what is going on inside other people's heads. Good magicians know how to distract other people's attention, how to avoid making an audience suspicious, and how to prevent them from working out the correct solution to the trick. As time went on, I became more and more interested in the psychological principles that lay behind the performance of conjuring. This eventually led me to enrol for a degree in psychology at University College London, and I later studied for my doctorate in psychology at the University of Edinburgh. After Edinburgh, I established my own research unit at the University of Hertfordshire.

At this unit we have carried out scientific research into a wide range of psychological phenomena. Perhaps because of my background in magic, I have directed the team to examine areas of psychology that are somewhat unusual.

Some of this work has involved investigating mediums who appear to talk to the dead, psychic detectives who claim to help the police solve crime and healers who seem able to psychically cure illness.¹ We have also examined how people's behaviour changes when they lie, explored how magicians use psychology to deceive their audiences, investigated ways of detecting lying and deception, and held training courses for people who wish to increase their ability to uncover dishonesty.² I have published the findings

of this work in scientific journals, presented them at academic conferences and lectured on their practical applications to the business world.

A few years ago I was asked to give a public talk about my work. I had given many similar talks before, but had no idea that this one would radically affect the future direction of my research.

I decided to incorporate a simple magic trick into the talk. I intended to borrow a ten pound note from someone in the audience, place it into one of twenty identical envelopes and mix them up. I would ask the person to choose one of the envelopes and then set fire to the remaining nineteen. I would then open the one remaining envelope, remove their money and congratulate the person on their choice.

But the performance that night was slightly odd. I borrowed a note from a woman in the audience, placed it into one of the envelopes, mixed them up and laid them out in a row. I had kept track of the note and knew that it was in the envelope on the far left. I asked the woman to choose an envelope and was delighted when she chose the envelope that actually contained her money. I gathered up the other envelopes and set fire to them. As the ashes rose into the air, I opened the one remaining envelope and removed the woman's money.

Although the audience laughed and applauded, the woman who had lent me the money didn't look at all surprised. I asked her how she felt about what had happened and she calmly explained that this sort of thing happened to her all of the time. She was always in the right place at the right time and had experienced a great deal of good fortune in both her professional and personal life. She said that she wasn't certain why it happened, and had always put it down to being lucky.

I was intrigued by her confidence in being lucky and asked if anyone else in the audience thought that they were exceptionally lucky or unlucky. A woman at the front of the auditorium raised her hand and described how her good luck had enabled her to achieve many of her lifetime ambitions. A man at the back of the hall said that he had always been very unlucky, and was convinced that if I had borrowed his money then it definitely would have ended up as ash. Only the day before the talk he had bent over to pick up a lucky penny, hit his head on a table and nearly knocked himself unconscious.

After the talk I thought about what had happened. Why should the two women have been especially lucky? And what about the unlucky man? Was he just clumsy or was there more to his bad luck than that? Was there more to luck than mere chance? I decided to conduct some initial research into the topic. At that time, I had no idea what was ahead of me. I thought that perhaps the research would involve a handful of experiments with a few dozen people. In fact, the project would take eight years to complete and involve working with hundreds of exceptional people.

This book presents the first comprehensive account of my research. I begin by outlining how luck has the power to transform our lives – how a few seconds of good luck can often bring lasting happiness and success, while even a brief encounter with ill fortune can result in failure and despair. I will then discuss my initial work on the topic and how this work eventually led to the discovery of the four principles that are at the heart of a lucky life. After discussing each of these principles in detail, I will describe techniques and exercises based on these ideas that can be used to create luckier lives.

But before we start, I would like you to answer a few simple questions about yourself.

Your Luck Journal

Throughout the book I am going to ask you to complete various questionnaires and exercises. Many of these are based upon the psychological testing that I carried out during my research with lucky and unlucky people. Please keep a record of your responses in a special 'luck journal' - a dedicated notebook or pad that should be roughly A5-sized (8 inches by 6 inches), lined and contain at least forty pages. Your responses will reveal how the various principles of luck relate to you, and help determine the best way for you to enhance the good fortune in your life.

EXERCISE 1: Luck Profile

The first questionnaire is very simple. At the top of the first page in your luck journal, please write the heading 'Luck Profile'. Now draw a vertical line down the centre of the page. On the left-hand side of the page write down the numbers 1 to 12 in a column. In the right-hand column write a number between 1 and 5 to indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements, using the following scale:

- 1 - Strongly disagree
- 2 - Disagree
- 3 - Uncertain
- 4 - Agree

5 – Strongly agree

Please read each statement carefully. If you are not certain about the degree to which the statement describes you, simply write down a number that feels most appropriate. Do not spend too long thinking about each statement and answer as honestly as possible.

Luck Profile	
<i>Statement</i>	<i>Your rating (1-5)</i>
1 I sometimes chat to strangers when queuing in a supermarket or bank.	
2 I do not have a tendency to worry and feel anxious about life.	
3 I am open to new experiences, such as trying new types of food or drinks.	
4 I often listen to my gut feelings and hunches.	
5 I have tried some techniques to boost my intuition, such as meditation or just going to a quiet place.	
6 I nearly always expect good things to happen to me in the future.	
7 I tend to try to get what I want from life, even if the chances of success seem slim.	
8 I expect most of the people that I meet to be pleasant, friendly and helpful.	
9 I tend to look on the bright side of whatever happens to me.	
10 I believe that even negative events will work out well for me in the long run.	

11 I don't tend to dwell on the things that haven't worked out well for me in the past.

12 I try to learn from the mistakes that I have made in the past.

We will return to your answers at various times throughout the book and use them to reveal your personal 'luck profile' - a unique assessment of how you use luck in your life and, more importantly, how you can enhance the amount of good fortune you encounter.

Part One

Initial Research

CHAPTER ONE

The Power of Luck

Entirely too much stress is put on the making of money. That does not require brains. Some of the biggest fools I know are the wealthiest. As a matter of fact, I believe that success is 95 percent luck and 5 percent ability. Take my own case. I know that there are any number of men in my employ who could run my business just as well as I can. They didn't get the breaks – that's the only difference between them and me.³

*Julius Rosenwald,
Past President of Sears, Roebuck and Company*

Luck exerts a dramatic influence over our lives. A few seconds of bad fortune can unravel years of striving, whilst a moment of good luck can lead to success and happiness. Luck has the power to transform the improbable into the possible; to make the difference between life and death, reward and ruin, happiness and despair.

John Woods, a senior partner in a large legal firm, narrowly escaped death when he left his office in one of the Twin Towers in New York seconds before the building was

struck by a hijacked aircraft. This is not the only time that he has been lucky. He was on the 39th Floor of the World Trade Centre when it was bombed in 1993, but escaped without injury. In 1988, he was scheduled to be on the Pan-Am flight that exploded above Lockerbie in Scotland, but cancelled at the last minute because he had been cajoled into attending an office party.⁴

The effects of good and bad luck are not confined to matters of life and death. They can also make the difference between financial reward and ruin. In June 1980, Maureen Wilcox bought tickets for both the Massachusetts Lottery and the Rhode Island Lottery. Incredibly, she managed to choose the winning numbers for both lotteries, but didn't win a penny – her Massachusetts numbers won the Rhode Island Lottery and her Rhode Island numbers won the Massachusetts Lottery.⁵ Other lottery players have had the gods of fortune smile on them. In 1985, Evelyn Marie Adams won \$4 million on the New Jersey Lottery. Four months later she entered again, and won another \$1.5 million. Even luckier was Donald Smith. He won the Wisconsin State Lottery three times – in May 1993, June 1994 and July 1995 – collecting \$250,000 each time. The chances of winning this lottery even once are over a million to one.⁶

However, it isn't just about the money. Luck also plays a vital role in our personal lives.

Stanford psychologist Alfred Bandura has discussed the impact of chance encounters and luck on people's personal lives.⁷ Bandura noted both the importance and prevalence of such encounters, writing that '... some of the most important determinants of life paths often arise through the most trivial of circumstances'. He supports his case with several telling examples, one of which was drawn from his own life. As a graduate student, Bandura became bored with a reading assignment and so decided to visit the local

golf links with a friend. Just by chance, Bandura and his friend found themselves playing behind two attractive female golfers, and soon joined them as a foursome. After the game, Bandura arranged to meet up with one of the women again, and eventually ended up marrying her. A chance meeting on a golf course altered his entire life.

In another example, Bandura described how a simple postal mix-up resulted in Ronald Reagan meeting his future wife Nancy. In the autumn of 1949, Nancy Davis noticed her name in a list of communist sympathizers that had been printed in a Hollywood newspaper. Nancy knew that her name did not belong there and that the mix-up was the result of there being another actress called Nancy Davis. She was concerned about the effect that the listing might have on her career, and so asked her director to discuss the issue with the then President of the Screen Actors Guild, Ronald Reagan. Reagan assured her director that he understood the situation and that the SAG would defend Nancy Davis if anyone acted against her because they thought she was a communist. Davis asked to meet with Reagan to discuss the issue further. The two of them met, quickly fell in love and, before long, were married to each other. One lucky meeting changed their lives forever.

A number of researchers have also discussed the effect of good and bad fortune on people's choice of career, and success in their professional lives.⁸ Once again, they have noted how the impact of these factors is often far from trivial, with many people reporting how chance meetings and lucky opportunities frequently led to a significant shift in career direction or a dramatic promotion. Indeed, the powerful effect of good and bad fortune on people's professional lives has caused one of America's leading career counsellors to remark:

Each one of us could tell stories of how crucial, unplanned events have had a major career impact and how untold thousands of minor unplanned events have had at least a small impact. Influential unplanned events are not uncommon; they are everyday occurrences. Serendipity is not serendipitous. Serendipity is ubiquitous.⁹

These types of factors have certainly influenced my own career. When I was eight I was asked to complete a school project on the history of chess. Being a diligent young student, I decided to pay a visit to my local library to find some books on the topic. Quite by chance, I was directed to the wrong shelf and came across some books on conjuring. I was curious, and started to read all about the secrets that magicians use to achieve the impossible. This was my first introduction to the world of magic, and it influenced the whole of my life. I have no idea what might have happened if I had been directed to the correct shelf and found the chess books. Perhaps I wouldn't have developed an interest in magic, trained as a psychologist or conducted the research described in this book.

Luck has also exerted a considerable influence on the careers of many highly successful businesspeople.

By the end of his career, Joseph Pulitzer was an extraordinarily successful businessman and philanthropist. He owned one of the largest newspapers in America, helped raise money to fund the pedestal on which the Statue of Liberty now stands and endowed the world-famous 'Pulitzer Prize' for writing. Yet all of this may never have happened if it wasn't for just one lucky break. Pulitzer was originally born in Hungary. As a young man he suffered both poor health and extremely bad eyesight. When he was seventeen, he came to America as a penniless immigrant, but found it difficult to find employment. As a result,

Pulitzer spent a great deal of time playing chess in his local library. On one such visit he happened to meet an editor of a local newspaper. This chance encounter resulted in Pulitzer being offered a job as a junior reporter. After four years he was given the opportunity to buy shares in the paper and jumped at the chance. It was a shrewd decision – the paper proved highly successful and he made a considerable profit. Pulitzer continued to make highly successful decisions throughout his life, and he became an editor, and eventually owner, of two of the best-known newspapers of his day. By the end of his career, the man who had started his working life as a poor immigrant had become one of the most influential people in America. His entire career may have taken a completely different direction had it not been for a chance meeting in the chess room of his local library.¹⁰

Many other businesspeople have also put much of their success down to chance meetings and good luck. Take, for example, the case of Barnett Helzberg Jr. By 1994 Helzberg had built up a chain of highly successful American jewellery stores with an annual revenue of around \$300 million. One day he was walking past the Plaza Hotel in New York when he heard a woman call out ‘Mr Buffett’ to the man next to him. Helzberg wondered whether the man might be Warren Buffett – one of the most successful investors in America. Helzberg had never met Buffett, but had read about the financial criteria that Buffett used when buying a company. Helzberg had recently turned sixty, was thinking of selling his company and realised that his might be the type of company that would interest Buffett. Helzberg seized the opportunity, walked over to the stranger and introduced himself. The man did indeed turn out to be Warren Buffett and the chance meeting proved highly fortuitous because about a year later Buffett agreed to buy Helzberg’s chain of stores. And all because Helzberg just happened to be

walking by as a woman called out Buffett's name on a street corner in New York.^{[11](#)}

And how did Buffett get to be one of the richest men in America? In an interview in *Fortune* magazine, he explained the important role that luck had played early on in his career. When he was twenty, Buffett was rejected from Harvard Business School. He immediately went to a library and began looking into the possibility of applying to other business schools. It was only then that he noticed that two business professors whose work he admired both taught at Columbia. Buffett applied to Columbia at the last minute and was accepted. One of the professors later became Buffett's mentor, and helped initiate his highly successful career in business. As Buffett later remarked: 'Probably the luckiest thing that ever happened to me was getting rejected from Harvard.'

The important role played by luck on people's careers is not just limited to the world of business. In 1979, Hollywood producer George Miller was looking for a battle-weary, scarred, tough man to play the lead in the movie *Mad Max*. The night before his audition, Mel Gibson, then an unknown Australian actor, was attacked on the street by three drunks. He arrived for the audition looking beaten and tired, and Miller immediately offered him the part.^{[12](#)} British supermodel Kate Moss was equally fortuitous. In the early 1990s she was on holiday with her father. The two of them were standing in a check-in queue at JFK airport when a talent scout walked past and noticed her striking looks. Moss went on to become one of the world's most successful and sought-after models - and all because of a lucky chance encounter.^{[13](#)}

And luck does not just determine the success of actors and models - it even affects the careers and success of scientists and politicians.

Perhaps the most famous example of such scientific serendipity is Sir Alexander Fleming's discovery of penicillin. In the 1920s, Fleming was working to develop more effective antibiotics. Part of his research involved the microscopic examination of bacteria that had been artificially grown in flat glass containers known as 'petri dishes'. Fleming inadvertently left one of the petri dishes uncovered, and a piece of mould fell into it. By chance, the mould contained a substance that killed the type of bacteria in the dish. Fleming noticed the effect of the mould, was intrigued and worked hard to identify the substance responsible. He eventually discovered the antibiotic, and named it penicillin. Fleming's chance discovery has saved countless lives, and has been hailed as one of the biggest advances in the history of medicine.

In fact, chance events and accidents have frequently altered the course of science, and have played an important part in many famous discoveries and inventions, including the contraceptive pill, X-rays, photography, safety glass, artificial sweeteners, Velcro, insulin and aspirin.¹⁴

The important role that luck plays in politics is illustrated in the career of American President Harry Truman. As a young man, Truman experienced a great deal of ill fortune. He intended to go to college after graduating from high school, but his father lost almost everything in a bad business venture, and so Truman was forced to spend his formative years ploughing his grandfather's farm. Soon after the First World War he started a clothing store in Kansas City, but again experienced more bad luck when he was made bankrupt during the recession. It was not until his late thirties that he obtained his first lucky break - a friend encouraged him to run as county judge and he unexpectedly won the contest. When he was forty-two, he ran for presiding judge and once again won. A few years later, he was nominated for the US Senate and again won.

In 1944, the Democrats dropped the then vice-president Henry Wallace and nominated Truman as a running mate to Franklin D. Roosevelt. After just eighty-two days in office, Roosevelt unexpectedly died, making Truman president. Truman's good luck continued throughout his presidency – he pulled off one of the biggest upsets in American political history by beating Thomas E. Dewey in the 1948 presidential elections and, just a few years later, survived an assassination attempt by two Puerto Rican nationalists. In his memoirs, Truman wrote:

Popularity and glamour are only part of the factors involved in winning elections. One of the most important of all is luck. In my case, luck was always with me.^{[15](#)}

In short, luck plays a massively significant role throughout many different aspects of our lives. Luck has the power to transform both our personal and professional lives. To many, this is a terrifying idea. Most people like to think that they are in control of their future. They try hard to obtain certain outcomes and avoid others, but, to a large extent, this feeling of control is an illusion. Luck makes a mockery of even our best intentions. It has the power to change everything, within seconds, for better or worse. Any time, any place and without warning.

For over one hundred years, psychologists have studied how our lives are affected by our intelligence, personality, genes, appearance and upbringing. There can be little doubt that the work has yielded considerable insight into the human condition. Yet, despite the immensity of the effort, very little work has examined good and bad luck. I suspect that psychologists have avoided the topic because they prefer, quite understandably, to examine factors they can measure and control more easily. Measuring intelligence and categorising people's personalities is

relatively straightforward, but how do you quantify luck and control chance?

EXERCISE 2: The role of luck in your life

On a new page in your luck journal, write down a number between 1 and 7 to indicate the degree to which you think luck has influenced your life, using the following scale:

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A great deal

Now, underneath, jot down a few brief sentences describing ...

... how you met your partner.

... how you came to know your closest friend.

... the main factors that have influenced your choice of career.

... a major event that had a positive effect on your life.

Next, think about how good luck influenced these events. Think about how tiny changes – such as you not going to a certain party or reunion, turning left instead of right, or not opening a magazine at a certain page – could have affected these events and perhaps even changed the whole course of your life.

Finally, return to the question about the role that luck has played in your life in regard to these events and answer it a second time. Write down a number between 1 and 7 to indicate the degree to which you *now* think that luck has influenced your life.

When most people carry out this exercise they realise the important role that luck plays in their life,

and write down a larger number the second time they answer the question.

The situation is akin to the old story of the man who knows he dropped some treasure in one part of the street, but searches in another part because the light is better there. Psychologists have chosen not to investigate luck because it is much easier to examine other topics, but I have always been interested in trying to examine unusual areas of psychology, areas that other researchers tend to avoid. The result is that I have often found treasure in places that other people have ignored.

In the Introduction to this book I described how I became interested in luck after hearing about the important and different roles that it played in the lives of people who attended one of my talks. Soon after that talk I decided to conduct some initial research into the topic. I began by carrying out a survey to discover the percentage of people who considered themselves lucky or unlucky, and whether people's luck tended to be concentrated in one or two areas of their lives, or spread across many different areas. Together with a group of my students, I visited the centre of London at different times over the course of a week, and asked a large number of randomly chosen shoppers about the role of luck in their lives. There were two parts to the survey. First, we asked them whether they considered themselves lucky or unlucky – that is, whether seemingly chance events in their lives had consistently tended to work out in their favour or against them. Second, we asked them whether they had been lucky or unlucky in eight different areas of their lives, including their careers, relationships, home life, health and financial matters.

Percentages of people who considered themselves unlucky, lucky, and neither lucky nor unlucky in my initial survey.