Serendipity – how we make our own luck

serendipity: a chance encounter or accident that leads to a happy – sometimes life-changing – conclusion

(1) It would be a world in which nothing unexpected ever happened.

In truth, of course, we live in a world of lucky accidents, and it’s fortunate that we do so. Without the flukes, coincidences and accidents that make up our daily lives, the world would be dull and predictable. Suppose, also, that we lived in a world in which you could not make your own luck, a world in which we had to accept the hand dealt to us by chance. That would be a frightening and chaotic world. Fortunately, as we shall see, that isn’t true either. We live in a world of luck, but one that we can shape and change if we have the right mindset.
That’s because lucky accidents, or moments of ‘serendipity’, have given us hundreds of inventions and discoveries. If Alexander Fleming hadn’t accidentally allowed mould to grow in a dish in his laboratory, he wouldn’t have discovered penicillin, a cure for bacterial diseases. If Percy Spencer hadn’t noticed that a chocolate bar in his pocket melted when he stood next to a radar transmitter, he would have never invented the microwave oven. And if Dr Spencer Silver hadn’t failed to make the super strong glue he was trying to make, he wouldn’t have accidentally made the weak glue that was perfect for his invention – Post-it notes.

Consequently, they have been carrying out research into why some people seem to live charmed lives while others are unhappy with their lot in life. A research team at University College London recently asked people to post their own good luck stories on the team’s website, which they then investigated to find patterns amongst the stories. What they found was that while most of us experience moments of good fortune, not all of us recognize and act on the opportunities they give us. Lucky people, who always seem to be in the right place at the right time, are really good at seizing the moment. So, while Fleming, Spencer and Silver were lucky that accidents gave them ideas, what was important was that they took advantage of those ideas and turned them into important discoveries and inventions.
His studies show that luck is as much a state of mind as an uncontrollable quality. In other words, if we think we’re lucky, we are lucky. In one experiment, Professor Wiseman asked people to say whether they thought they were lucky or not. Then he asked them to count the number of photographs in a newspaper. About halfway through, an advertisement read: **Stop counting. There are 43 photographs in this newspaper!** Remarkably, people who thought they were lucky were much more likely to spot the advertisement and stop counting. What this revealed was that ‘lucky’ people have a different mindset from ‘unlucky’ people. In his book, Professor Wiseman argues that lucky people are very relaxed and open to new ideas whereas unlucky people are often stressed and concerned with failure. The personal attributes that lucky people have make them lucky. That’s because it’s only by trying new things and noticing the unexpected that luck comes your way, and it’s only by being outgoing and being optimistic that you find yourself in situations where lucky things happen.

So what should we do if we want to maximize our luck? Professor Wiseman suggests that we should, first of all, be open to new experiences; secondly, we should listen to our own hunches, as it is often our own intuition that tells us whether an opportunity is a good one or not; and thirdly, we should be positive and optimistic at all times. He also encourages people to make the best of their luck, good or bad. The power of positive thinking can transform the way we see our luck and our lives. So, be lucky, and remember that luck is everywhere, and you have the power to shape it.