

The Happiness Trap

STOP STRUGGLING, START LIVING

Dr Russ Harris has written an easy to read, practical book on how to manage the many challenges life presents us. A great read, with strategies galore.

Dr Rick Kausman
Author of *If Not Dieting, Then What?*

It seems so much easier to find the meaning in life and get on with living after reading Dr Russ Harris's book. Full of helpful strategies and common sense ideas, The Happiness Trap is a wonderful journey of reassurance for anyone who is troubled by worrying feelings, nagging anxiety and moods of despair. As a psychologist who works with such people, it is wonderful to be able to recommend this book. I use the strategies myself and they really do work!

Dr Mandy Deeks, Psychologist, The Jean Hailes Foundation for Women's Health
Author of *Life Begins at Menopause*

Dr Russ Harris skillfully leads the reader on a path along which we may pick up and embrace the tools for living a rich, full and authentically meaningful life - a life wherein real "happiness" truly resides. The Happiness Trap is a book for all - therapists and clients alike - it makes the skills of mindfulness accessible and applicable to everyday living.

Christine Burke, Psychologist BA Dip Ed, M Ed (Counselling Psychology)

Happiness is an elusive state. Highly valued, relentlessly perused, rarely experienced. Ironically, the harder we try to buy, seize, or closet happiness, the less likely we are to be happy. Indeed, even talking about "how we can be happy" often leaves us with a sense of dissatisfaction - the happiness trap. This is why Dr Russ Harris's book is so useful. This book is about practical and effective ways to understand, to accept, and to embrace the world as it is. Acceptance is the foundation from which happiness grows. The evidence-based techniques and skills taught in this book will strengthen your ability to accept, will help you develop the courage to change the things that can be changed, and will further develop the wisdom to know the difference. I highly recommend this to you.

Dr Anthony Grant, Psychologist, Director of Coaching Psychology at Sydney university, Author of *It's Your Life - What Are You Going To Do With It!*

This is a highly readable and original book. It goes against much of the cultural mainstream by arguing that directly trying to be happy may actually make you miserable. The book offers an alternative roadmap, one that helps you avoid emotional detours and guides you towards a life that is rich, full, and meaningful. If you feel like you are not living up to your full potential, this is the book for you.

Dr. Joseph Ciarrochi, School of Psychology , University of Wollongong

The
Happiness Trap

STOP STRUGGLING, START LIVING

Dr Russ Harris

EXISLE
PUBLISHING

The cases mentioned in this book are all based on real people, however their names and key distinguishing details have been changed to prevent identification.

First published 2007

Exisle Publishing Limited
'Moonrising', Narone Creek Road, Wollombi, NSW 2325, Australia
P.O. Box 60-490, Titirangi, Auckland 0642, New Zealand
www.exislepublishing.com

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National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Harris, Russell, 1966- .
The happiness trap: stop struggling, start living.

Bibliography.
Includes index.
ISBN 9780908988907.

1. Happiness. 2. Conduct of life. I. Title.

158.1

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Designed by Christabella Designs
Typeset in Sabon 11/15
Printed in China through Colorcraft Limited, Hong Kong

Dedication

To my mother and father, for four decades of love, support, inspiration and encouragement. And to my wife Carmel, whose love, wisdom, and generosity has enriched my life and opened my heart in ways I would never have dreamed possible.

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Foreword

There is a tremendous irony in happiness. It comes from a root word meaning ‘by chance’ or ‘an occurrence’, which in a positive sense connotes a sense of newness, wonder, and appreciation of chance occurrences. The irony is that people not only seek it, they try to hold on to it — especially to avoid any sense of ‘unhappiness’. Unfortunately, these very control efforts can become heavy, planned, closed, rigid and fixed.

Happiness is not just a matter of feeling good. If it were, drug abusers would be the happiest people on the planet. Indeed, feeling good can be a very unhappy pursuit. It is not by accident that drug users call their methods of doing so a ‘fix’ — because they are chemically trying to hold something in place. Like a butterfly pinned to a table, however, happiness dies unless it is held lightly. Drug abusers are not the only ones. In the name of producing an emotional result we call happiness, most of us tend to engage in behaviour that is the exact opposite and then feel awful and inadequate with the inevitable result. Until we wise up, we are all generally trying to get a ‘fix’ on happiness.

This book is based on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), which is an empirically supported approach that takes a new and unexpected tack in dealing with the issue of happiness and life satisfaction. Instead of teaching new techniques to pursue happiness, ACT teaches ways to undermine struggle, avoidance, and loss of the moment. Russ Harris has very carefully and creatively presented this approach in an accessible way. In 33 bite-sized chapters he systematically explores how we get into the ‘Happiness Trap’ and how mindfulness, acceptance, cognitive defusion, and values can release us from it.

The joyful message in these pages is that there is no reason to continue to wait for life to start. That waiting game can end. Now. Like a lion placed in a paper cage, human beings are generally most trapped by the illusions of their own mind. But despite the appearance the cage is not really a barrier that can contain the human spirit. There is another way forward, and with this book Dr Harris shines a powerful and loving beacon forward into the night, lighting that path.

Enjoy the journey. You are in excellent hands.

Steven C. Hayes
Originator of ACT
University of Nevada

Introduction:

I JUST WANT TO BE HAPPY!

Just suppose for a moment that almost everything you believed about finding happiness turned out to be inaccurate, misleading or false. And suppose that those very beliefs were making you miserable. What if your very efforts to find happiness were actually preventing you from achieving it? And what if almost everyone you knew turned out to be in the same boat — including all those psychologists, psychiatrists and self-help gurus who claim to have all the answers?

I'm not posing these questions just to grab your attention. This book is based on a growing body of scientific research that suggests we are all caught in a powerful psychological trap. We lead our lives ruled by many unhelpful and inaccurate beliefs about happiness — ideas widely accepted by society because 'everyone knows they are true'. On the surface, these beliefs seem to make good sense — that's why you encounter them again and again in nearly every self-help book you ever read. But these erroneous beliefs are both the cause of and the fuel for a vicious cycle, in which the more we try to find happiness, the more we suffer. And this psychological trap is so well hidden, we don't even have a clue that we're caught and controlled by it.

That's the bad news.

The good news is there's hope. You can learn how to recognise the 'happiness trap' and, more importantly, you can learn how to climb out of it — and stay out. This book will give you all the skills and knowledge you need to do it. It's based on a revolutionary new

development in human psychology: a powerful model for change known as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT).

ACT (pronounced as the word ‘act’) was created in the United States of America by psychologist Steven Hayes, and was further developed by a number of his colleagues, including Kelly Wilson and Kirk Stroschal. ACT has been astoundingly effective in helping patients with a wide range of problems: from depression and anxiety to chronic pain and even drug addiction. For example, in one remarkable study, psychologists Patty Bach and Steven Hayes used ACT with patients suffering from chronic schizophrenia and found that only four hours of therapy were sufficient to reduce hospital readmission rates by half! ACT has also proved highly effective for the less dramatic problems that millions of us encounter, such as quitting smoking and reducing stress in the workplace. Unlike the vast majority of other therapies, ACT has a firm basis in scientific research and, because of this, it is rapidly growing in popularity among psychologists all around the world.

The aim of ACT is to help you live a rich, full and meaningful life, while effectively handling the pain that inevitably comes your way. ACT achieves this through the use of six powerful principles, which are very different from the so-called commonsense strategies suggested in most self-help books.

Is Happiness Normal?

In the western world we now have a higher standard of living than humans have ever known before. We have better medical treatment, more and better food, better housing conditions, better sanitation, more money, more welfare services and more access to education, justice, travel, entertainment and career opportunities. Indeed, today’s middle class lives better than did the royalty of not so long ago, and yet, human misery is everywhere.

The psychology and personal development sections of bookstores are growing at a rate never seen before, and the bookshelves are groaning under the strain. The titles cover depression, anxiety, anorexia nervosa, overeating, anger management, divorce, relationship problems, sexual problems, drug addictions, alcoholism, low self-esteem, loneliness, grief,

gambling — if you can name it, there 's a book on it. Meanwhile, on the television and radio, and in magazines and newspapers, the 'experts' bombard us daily with advice on how to improve our lives. This is why the numbers of psychologists, psychiatrists, marriage and family counsellors, social workers and 'life coaches' are increasing with every year. And yet — now, think about this — with all this help and advice and worldly wisdom, human misery is not diminishing but growing by leaps and bounds! Isn't there something wrong with this picture?

The statistics are staggering: In any given year almost 30 per cent of the adult population will suffer from a recognised psychiatric disorder. The World Health Organization estimates that depression is currently the fourth biggest, costliest and most debilitating disease in the world, and by the year 2020 it will be the *second biggest*. In any given week, one-tenth of the adult population is suffering from clinical depression, and one in five people will suffer from it at some point in their lifetime. Furthermore, one in four adults, at some stage in their life, will suffer from drug or alcohol addiction, which is why there are now over twenty million alcoholics in the United States of America alone!

But more startling and more sobering than all those statistics is that almost one in two people will go through a stage in life when they seriously consider suicide and will struggle with it for a period of two weeks or more. Scarier still, one in ten people will at some point actually attempt to kill themselves.

Think about those numbers for a moment. Think of the people in your life: your friends, family and co-workers. Consider what those figures imply: that of all the people you know, almost half of them will at some point be so overwhelmed by misery that they seriously contemplate suicide. And one in ten will attempt it! In the past two centuries we have doubled the span of the average human life. But have we doubled the richness, the enjoyment, the *fulfilment* of that life? These statistics give us the answer, loud and clear: happiness is not normal!

Why Is It So Difficult To Be Happy?

To answer this question, we need to take a journey back in time. The modern human mind, with its amazing ability to analyse, plan, create and communicate, has largely evolved over the last hundred thousand years, since our species, *Homo sapiens*, first appeared on the planet. But our minds did not evolve to make us feel good, so we could tell great jokes, write sonnets and say 'I love you'. Our minds evolved to help us survive in a world fraught with danger. Imagine that you're an early human hunter-gatherer. What are your essential needs in order to survive and reproduce?

There are four of them: food, water, shelter and sex, but none of these things mean much if you're dead. So the number one priority of the primitive human mind was to look out for anything that might harm you and avoid it! In essence, the primitive mind was a 'Don't get killed' device, and it proved enormously useful. The better our ancestors became at anticipating and avoiding danger, the longer they lived and the more children they had.

With each generation the human mind became increasingly skilled at predicting and avoiding danger. And now, after a hundred thousand years of evolution, the modern mind is still constantly on the lookout for trouble. It assesses and judges almost everything we encounter: Is this good or bad? Safe or dangerous? Harmful or helpful? These days, though, it's not sabre-toothed cats or 200-kilogram wolves that our mind warns us about. Instead it's losing our job, being rejected, getting a speeding ticket, not being able to pay the bills, embarrassing ourselves in public, upsetting our loved ones, getting cancer, or any of a million and one other common worries. As a result we spend a lot of time worrying about things that, more often than not, never happen.

Another essential for the survival of any early human is to belong to a group. If your clan boots you out, it won't be long before the wolves find you. So how does the mind protect you from rejection by the group? By comparing you with other members of the clan: Am I fitting in? Am I doing the right thing? Am I contributing enough? Am I as good as the others? Am I doing anything that might get me rejected?

Sound familiar? Our modern-day minds are continually warning us of rejection and comparing us against the rest of society. No wonder we spend so much energy worrying whether people will like us! No wonder we're always looking for ways to improve ourselves or putting ourselves down because we don't 'measure up'. A hundred thousand years ago we had only the few members of our immediate clan to compare ourselves with. But these days we can open any newspaper or magazine, switch on any television, tune in to any radio, and instantly find a whole host of people who are smarter, richer, taller, slimmer, sexier, stronger, more powerful, more famous, more successful, or more admired than we are. What's the fastest way to make a teenage girl depressed? Show her a fashion magazine. When she compares herself to all those air-brushed, collagen-enhanced, digitally altered supermodels, she is guaranteed to feel inferior or downright unattractive. And the rest of us are not that different. Thanks to evolution, our minds are now so sophisticated they can even dream up a fantasy of the person we'd like to be — and then compare our 'real' self to that impossible standard. What chance have we got? We will always end up feeling not good enough!

Now, for any Stone Age person with ambition, the general rule for success is: the more, the better. The more sophisticated your weapons (and the more of them you have), the more food you can kill. The more plentiful your food stores, the better your chances are for living through times of scarcity. The more substantial your shelter, the safer you are from weather and wild animals. The more children you have, the better the chance that some of them will survive into adulthood. No surprise then, that our modern mind continually looks for more: more money, more status, more love, more job satisfaction, a newer car, a younger-looking body, a younger-looking partner, a bigger house. And if we succeed, if we actually get more money or a newer car or a better job, then we're satisfied — *for a while*. But sooner or later (and usually sooner), we end up wanting more.

Thus, evolution has shaped our minds so that we are almost inevitably destined to suffer psychologically: to compare, evaluate

and criticise ourselves; to focus on what we're lacking; to be dissatisfied with what we have; and to imagine all sorts of frightening scenarios, most of which will never happen. No wonder humans find it hard to be happy!

What Exactly Is 'Happiness'?

We all want it. We all crave it. We all strive for it. Even the Dalai Lama has said: 'The very purpose of life is to seek happiness.' But what exactly is this elusive thing we are looking for?

The word 'happiness' has two very different meanings. Usually it refers to a feeling: a sense of pleasure, gladness or gratification. We all enjoy happy feelings, so it's no surprise that we chase them. However, like all our other feelings, feelings of happiness don't last. No matter how hard we try to hold on to them, they slip away every time. And as we shall see, a life spent in pursuit of those feelings is, in the main, unsatisfying. In fact, the harder we pursue pleasurable feelings, the more we are likely to suffer from anxiety and depression.

The other meaning of happiness is 'a rich, full and meaningful life'. When we take action on the things that truly matter deep in our hearts, when we move in directions that we consider valuable and worthy, when we clarify what we stand for in life and act accordingly, then our lives become rich and full and meaningful, and we experience a powerful sense of vitality. This is not some fleeting feeling — it is a profound sense of a life well lived. And although such a life will undoubtedly give us many pleasurable feelings, it will also give us uncomfortable ones, such as sadness, fear and anger. This is only to be expected. If we live a full life, we will feel the full range of human emotions.

In this book, as you've probably guessed by now, we are far more interested in the second meaning of happiness than in the first. Of course, happy feelings are quite pleasant, and we should certainly make the most of them when they present themselves. But if we try to have them all the time, we are doomed to failure.

The reality is, life involves pain. There's no getting away from it. As human beings we are all faced with the fact that sooner or later we will grow infirm, get sick and die. Sooner or later we all will lose

valued relationships through rejection, separation or death. Sooner or later we all will come face-to-face with a crisis, disappointment and failure. This means that in one form or another, we are all going to experience painful thoughts and feelings.

The good news is that, although we can't avoid such pain, we can learn to handle it much better — to make room for it, rise above it and create a life worth living. This book will show you how to do so. There are three parts to this process.

In Part 1 you will learn how you create and get stuck in the happiness trap. This is an essential first step, so please don't skip it — you can't escape the trap if you don't know how it works.

In Part 2, rather than trying to avoid or eliminate painful thoughts and feelings, you will learn how to fundamentally transform your relationship with them. You will learn how to experience painful thoughts and feelings in a new way that will lessen their impact, drain away their power, and dramatically decrease their influence over your life.

Finally, in Part 3, instead of chasing happy thoughts and feelings, you will focus on creating a rich and meaningful life. This will give rise to a sense of vitality and fulfilment that is both deeply satisfying and long lasting.

The Journey Ahead

This book is like a trip through a foreign country: much will seem strange and new. Other things will seem familiar yet somehow subtly different. At times you may feel challenged or confronted, at other times excited or amused. Take your time on this journey. Instead of rushing ahead, savour it fully. Stop when you find something stimulating or unusual. Explore it in depth and learn as much as you can. To create a life worth living is a major undertaking, so please take the time to appreciate it.