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THE HAPPINESS TRAP

What the Book is about in a Nutshell

The rationale of the book is that we are all caught in a powerful psychological trap which Harris calls the 'happiness trap'. This trap is made up of many unhelpful and inaccurate beliefs about happiness. While happiness commonly has 2 meanings (experiencing good feelings as well as living a rich, full and meaningful life), it is the second meaning that the book focuses on as it is believed that a life constantly in pursuit of pleasurable feelings is doomed to failure as life in reality involves pain.

The book is made up of 3 parts. In part 1 the reader learns how he/she creates and gets stuck in the happiness trap. In part 2, rather than trying to avoid or eliminate painful thoughts and feelings, the reader learns how to make room for them and experience them in a new way that will reduce their impact, drain away their power, and decrease their influence. Finally, in part 3, instead of chasing happy thoughts and feelings, the reader focuses on creating a rich and meaningful life.

The book is based on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). The aim of ACT is to help the reader live a rich, full, and meaningful life while effectively handling the pain that life inevitably brings. ACT proposes to achieve this through the use of 6 principles, which will allow the reader to develop 'psychological flexibility'.

PART 1: HOW YOU SET THE HAPPINESS TRAP

4 Underlying Myths Underlying the Happiness Trap

1. Happiness is the natural state for all human beings.
2. If you're not happy, you're defective.
3. To create a better life, we must get rid of negative feelings.
4. You should be able to control what you think and feel.

How do I escape the Happiness Trap?

The first step is to increase your self-awareness. Keep a journal and spend a few minutes each day reflecting on the little things you do each day to avoid or get rid of unpleasant thoughts and feelings as well as the consequences. The faster you can recognise you're stuck in the trap, the faster you can get yourself out of it.

PART 2: TRANSFORMING YOUR INNER WORLD

The 6 Core Principles of ACT

1. Defusion – relating to your thoughts in a new way so they have much less impact and influence over you. Unhelpful thoughts, like self-limiting beliefs and self-criticisms will have less influence over your behaviour.
2. Expansion – making room for unpleasant feelings and sensations instead of trying to suppress or push them away. Thus they will bother you much less and they will move on.
3. Connection – connecting fully with whatever is happening right here, right now, in the present, instead of dwelling on the past or worrying about the future.
4. The Observing Self – a powerful aspect of the mind.
5. Values – clarifying and connecting with your values for a more meaningful life. Your values (what things are most important to you) provide direction for your life and motivate you to make important changes.
6. Committed Action – a rich and meaningful life is created through taking effective action which is guided by and motivated by your values.

Note: The first 6 principles are known as Mindfulness skills

Note: Mindfulness + Values + Committed Action = Psychological Flexibility (the ability to adapt to a situation with awareness, openness, and focus and to take effective action, guided by your values).

Key ACT Exercises

1. The story is not the event – we react to words like “I’m useless” as if we actually are useless. This is fusion where we believe that our thoughts are the actual reality, the truth, are important and wise. When you have a thought “I am X”, insert in front of it “I notice I’m having the thought that I am X”.
2. Musical thoughts – bring to mind a negative self-judgement (“I’m such an idiot”), hold it in your mind, and sing it to yourself to the tune of Happy Birthday.
3. Name your stories – identify your mind’s favourite stories (“My life sucks” story or “I can’t do it” story) and when they come up in your mind acknowledge them by name (“Ah yes, I recognise this, it’s my old ‘My life sucks’ story”).
4. Is it helpful? – in ACT the focus is on whether a thought is useful or not. If so, pay attention to the thought, if not don’t bother. Ask yourself the following questions when you have a thought: Does it help me be the person I want to be? Does it help me build the type of relationships I want? Does it help me to connect with what I truly value? Does it help me in the long run to create a rich and meaningful life?
5. Ten deep breaths – take ten breaths as slowly as possible letting any thoughts and images come and go in the background. Notice the distinction between your observing self (it focuses on the breath) and your thinking self (it chatters away in the background).
6. Urge surfing – whenever an urge arises you have a choice to act upon it or not. Ask yourself, “Will acting on this urge take my life in the direction I want to go?” or “Will acting on this urge help me be the person I want to be?” or “Is the urge in alignment with my values?” Rather than suppress an urge the aim in ACT is to give them space to dissipate their energy. Do this by: observe the urge in your body, acknowledge the urge, breathe into it,

watch the urge as it rises and crests and falls again, check in with your values = A (accept your thoughts and feelings) + C (connect with your values) + T (take affective action)

7. Notice 5 things – a simple exercise to connect with your environment by listening, seeing, feeling five things around you.

8. The observing self – it is a viewpoint from which you can view thoughts and feelings or pure awareness. It is the source of true acceptance. All it does is observe without judgment. Experience this part of yourself by closing your eyes and notice sounds/the shape of your body/your thoughts/smells/your breathing and then *notice yourself noticing*.

PART 3: CREATING A LIFE WORTH LIVING

Values and their Benefits

Values are our heart's deepest desires: how we want to be, what we want to stand for, and how we want to relate with the world around us, as well as leading principles that can guide us and motivate us through life. When you go through life guided by your values, you will discover that life can be rich, full, and meaningful, even when bad things happen.

Values vs Goals

A value is a direction we desire to keep moving in, an ongoing process that never reaches an end. For example, the desire to be a loving and caring partner. A goal is a desired outcome that can be achieved or completed. For example, the desire to get married.

Finding Fulfilment through Life

In Western society the focus is on leading a goal-focused life where success is measured in material things, achievements, status, and power. However, this type of life is never fulfilling as there is always another goal to be achieved. The ACT approach emphasises a values-focused life where we enjoy the journey and live in the present and appreciate what we have.

Obstacles to Fulfilment

FEAR = fusion, excessive expectations, avoidance of discomfort, remoteness from values.



Dr Bruce Wells is a happiness expert and professional speaker with a PhD in psychology and degrees in health promotion and physical education.

He has over 20 years' experience in the health and wellness industry in Australia, Asia, and the Middle East. He is a former school teacher, university professor, international tour guide, personal fitness trainer, and is the author of *Happiness Anywhere Anytime*.

Bruce regularly appears on Channel 9's Today show, various radio programs and regularly contributes articles to syndicated papers across the country. He is also a professional speaker delivering presentations to corporate and community health groups. For further details of his programs go to www.brucewells.com.au