

## THE BIG IDEAS

### The Rider & The Elephant

Learn to ride your elephant!

### Epiphanies

And lasting change.

### Meditation

The magic pill.

### Cognitive Therapy

It works.

### Pulling the Splinter

The joy of taking responsibility.

### Cruising for Love

Relationships are HUGE.

### Vertical Coherence

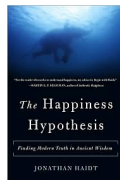
How's yours?

### Get Your Virtue On!

From Greeks to Benjamin Franklin.

### Avoiding Elephant Poop

Leave the herd!



# The Happiness Hypothesis

Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom

BY JONATHAN HAIDT · BASIC BOOKS © 2006 · 297 PAGES

“Where does happiness come from? There are several different “happiness hypotheses.” One is that happiness comes from getting what you want, but we all know (and research confirms) that such happiness is short-lived. A more promising hypothesis is that happiness comes from within and cannot be obtained by making the world conform to your desires. This idea was widespread in the ancient world: Buddha in India and the Stoic philosophers in ancient Greece and Rome all counseled people to break their emotional attachments to people and events, which are always unpredictable and uncontrollable, and to cultivate instead an attitude of acceptance. This ancient idea deserves respect, and it is certainly true that changing your mind is usually a more effective response to frustration than is changing the world. However, I will present evidence that this second version of the happiness hypothesis is wrong. Recent research shows that there are some things worth striving for; there are some external conditions of life that can make you lastingly happier. One of these conditions is relatedness—the bonds we form, and need to form, with others. I’ll present research showing where love comes from, why passionate love always cools, and what kind of love is “true” love. I’ll suggest that the happiness hypothesis offered by Buddha and the Stoics should be amended: Happiness comes from within, and happiness comes from without. We need the guidance of both ancient wisdom and modern science to get the balance right.”

~ Jonathan Haidt from *The Happiness Hypothesis*

That’s officially the longest intro quote of any of the Notes I’ve created so far but I love it. Makes you wanna read the whole book, eh?! :)

[Jonathan Haidt](#) is a leading positive psychology researcher/professor at the University of Virginia and this book is an incredible look at ten “Great Ideas” from ancient wisdom that he brilliantly analyzes in the light of modern science while helping us apply the super practical stuff to our 21st century lives. It’s a great blend of intellectual rigor, philosophical wisdom and nuts-and-bolts practicality that I highly recommend. (Get a copy [here](#).)

If this Note resonates with you, I \*definitely\* think you’ll love the book. I put it up there with [Sonja Lyubomirsky’s \*How of Happiness\*](#) and [Tal Ben-Shahar’s \*Pursuit of Perfect\*](#) and [Happier](#) as some must-read positive psychology goodness.

If you could see my copy of the book, you’d see that a \*lot\* of it is highlighted. It’s packed with goodness. Picking the gems to share was a bit of a challenge, but I hope you love my selections and here’s to rockin’ our happiness!

*“ In the positive psychology class I teach at the University of Virginia, the final project is to make yourself a better person, using all the tools of psychology, and then prove that you have done so.”*

~ Jonathan Haidt

## THE RIDER & THE ELEPHANT

“Freud said that the mind is divided into three parts: the ego (the conscious, rational self); the superego (the conscience, a sometimes too rigid commitment to the rules of society); and the id (the desire for pleasure, lots of it, sooner rather than later). The metaphor I use when I lecture on Freud is to think of the mind as a horse and buggy (a Victorian chariot) in which the driver (the ego) struggles frantically to control a hungry, lustful, and disobedient horse (the id) while the driver’s father (the superego) sits in the back seat lecturing the driver on what he’s doing wrong. For Freud, the goal of psychoanalysis was to escape this pitiful state by strengthening the ego, thus giving it more control over the id and more independence from the superego.”

The first chapter is all about “The Divided Self” where Haidt presents his model of “the rider and the elephant”—which is based on metaphors used by Buddha and Plato that compare our rational/conscious minds with the more animalistic instincts that tend to run the show.

The rider and the elephant appear throughout the book and there’s actually an entire book on it called *Switch* which I’ll prolly do a Note on as well. For now, let’s jump into some Big Ideas on how to ride that elephant skillfully! :)

## EPIPHANIES AND LASTING CHANGE

“... if you have ever achieved such dramatic insights into your own life and resolved to change your ways or your outlook, you probably found that, three months later, you were right back where you started. Epiphanies can be life-altering, but most fade in days or weeks. The rider can’t just decide to change and then order the elephant to go along with the program. Lasting change can come only by retraining the elephant, and that’s hard to do. When pop psychology programs are successful in helping people, which they sometimes are, they succeed not because of the initial moment of insight but because they find ways to alter people’s behavior over the following months. They keep people involved with the program long enough to retrain the elephant.”

As we know (and talked about in depth in the Note on Ken Wilber), it’s one thing to have a huge “Aha!!!” moment of inspiration and clarity. It’s an \*entirely\* different thing to actually translate that epiphany into lasting change—alchemizing an inspired “state” experience into a “trait” of who we are.

In Haidt’s language: We’ve gotta train the elephant. And that takes time. Which is why we always come back to the idea of working diligently, patiently, persistently and playfully!

## THE MAGIC PILL OF MEDITATION

“Suppose you read about a pill that you could take once a day to reduce anxiety and increase your contentment. Would you take it? Suppose further that the pill has a great variety of side effects, all of them good: increased self-esteem, empathy, and trust; it even improves memory. Suppose, finally, that the pill is all natural and costs nothing. Now would you take it?

The pill exists. It’s called meditation.”

Hah. LOVE. THAT. So, would you take that pill? And, more importantly, ARE you? :)

We talk about meditation in the Notes on [Eknath Easwaran’s \*Conquest of Mind\*](#), [Herbert Benson’s \*The Relaxation Revolution\*](#) and [Jon Kabat-Zinn’s \*Wherever You Go, There You Are\*](#) (+ many others) so check those out along with our [www.Blissitations.com](http://www.Blissitations.com) for more goodness on the specifics of meditation.

But know this: Meditation (along with cognitive therapy) is one of *the* most effective natural ways to change your mind.

*"If you are a pessimist, you are probably feeling gloomy right now. But despair not! The key to growth is not optimism per se; it is the sense making that optimists find easy. If you can find a way to make sense of adversity and draw constructive lessons from it, you can benefit, too."*

~ Jonathan Haidt

*"Adversity may be necessary for growth because it forces you to stop speeding along the road of life, allowing you to notice the paths that were branching off all along, and to think about where you really want to end up."*

~ Jonathan Haidt

## COGNITIVE THERAPY

"Meditation is a characteristically Eastern solution to the problems of life. Even before Buddha, the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu had said that the road to wisdom runs through calm inaction, desireless wanting. Western approaches to problems more typically involve pulling out a tool box and trying to fix what's broken. That was Lady Philosophy's approach with her many arguments and reframing techniques. The toolbox was thoroughly modernized in the 1960s by Aaron Beck."

After seeing that traditional Freudian psychotherapy was often making his patients feel \*worse,\* Aaron Beck created cognitive therapy, which is, according to Haidt, "one of the most effective treatments available for depression, anxiety, and many other problems."

Cool. So, what exactly is cognitive therapy?

"Depressed people are caught in a feedback loop in which distorted thoughts cause negative feelings, which then distort thinking further. Beck's discovery is that you can break the cycle by changing the thoughts. A big part of cognitive therapy is training clients to catch their thoughts, write them down, name the distortions, and then find alternative and more accurate ways of thinking. Over many weeks, the client's anxiety or depression abates. Cognitive therapy works because it teaches the rider how to train the elephant rather than how to defeat it directly in an argument."

Powerful stuff.

If you're currently (or ever) in a depressive funk, you probably noticed that you've got some renegade negative thoughts spiralling out of control in that little noggin of yours.

Rather than worrying about performing a Freudian-archeological dig on \*why\* those thoughts are there, cognitive therapy tells us to catch the negative thoughts, identify the distortions, and find more accurate and empowering ways of thinking.

The trick in retraining the elephant is to do this often! Whenever we're feeling funky, we want to train ourselves to stop and notice our thoughts, challenge them, and see if we can create alternative, more empowering ways of thinking. As we do this day in and day out, the elephant gets re-trained, our depression releases its grip on us and we've got another handy tool in the happiness tool box.

One more note: Cognitive therapy has been extended to what is now called "cognitive behavioral therapy"—where we not only challenge the thoughts, but we choose more empowering BEHAVIORS when we're feeling the funk.

So, for example, when you're feeling icky and just want to pull the covers over your head, Haidt tells us that you might want to check out your thoughts AND engage in simple tasks like going out and buying a newspaper rather than staying in bed ruminating all day long (which, we know from our Note on [The How of Happiness](#) is definitely not a good idea!).

## PULLING THE SPLINTER

"Try this now: Think of a recent interpersonal conflict with someone you care about and then find one way in which your behavior was not exemplary. Maybe you did something insensitive (even if you had a right to do it), or hurtful (even if you meant well), or inconsistent with your principles (even though you can readily justify it). When you first catch sight of a fault in yourself, you'll likely hear frantic arguments from your inner lawyer to find at least one thing that you did wrong. When you extract a splinter it hurts, briefly, but then you feel relief, even pleasure. When you find fault in yourself it will hurt, briefly, but if you keep going and acknowledge the fault, you are likely to be rewarded with a flash of pleasure that is mixed, oddly,

with a hint of pride. It is the pleasure of taking responsibility for your own behavior. It is the feeling of honor.”

Wow. Love that.

And, as it turns out, ahem, I read this passage this morning after my Love and I had a bit of a frustrating evening the night before. To put it in perspective, we usually end our nightly appreciations with a list of cool things we really appreciate about the other ending with “*And I appreciate that you’re my Wife/Husband. Amen.*” Last night’s entire appreciation sharing was:

Alexandra: “*I appreciate that you’re my husband. Amen.*”

Me: “*I appreciate that you’re my wife. Amen.*”

Hah!

So, anyhow, we started our morning a little distant and as I was flipping through this book preparing to write this Note I came across this (really!) Big Idea. Amazing. Within seconds I could see where I was at fault and went over and apologized and whabam, all good. :)

How about *you*? Do you have any relationships that could use this analysis?!?

Get on it! Pull the splinter, whince at the pain then feel the pleasure of taking responsibility for your life.

*“Seneca was right:” No one can live happily who has regard to himself alone and transforms everything into a question of his own utility.”*

~ Jonathan Haidt

*“You can increase your happiness if you use your strengths, particularly in the service of strengthening connections—helping friends, expressing gratitude to benefactors.”*

~ Jonathan Haidt

*“The big finding was that people experienced longer-lasting improvements in mood from the kindness and gratitude activities than from those in which they indulged themselves.”*

~ Jonathan Haidt

## CRUISING FOR LOVE

“If you want to predict how happy someone is, or how long she will live (and if you are not allowed to ask about her genes or personality), you should find out about her social relationships. Having strong social relationships strengthens the immune system, extends life (more than does quitting smoking), speeds recovery from surgery, and reduces the risks of depression and anxiety disorders. It’s not just that extroverts are naturally happier and healthier; when introverts are forced to be more outgoing, they usually enjoy it and find that it boosts their mood. Even people who think they don’t want a lot of social contact still benefit from it. And it’s not just that “We all need somebody to lean on”; recent work on *giving* support shows that caring for others is often more beneficial than is receiving help. We need to interact and intertwine with others; we need the give *and* the take; we need to belong. An ideology of extreme personal freedom can be dangerous because it encourages people to leave homes, jobs, cities, and marriages in search of personal and professional fulfillment, thereby breaking the relationships that were probably their best hope for such fulfillment.”

That puts things in perspective, eh?

I know for me that, in pursuit of certain ideals, it’s been easy to forget to invest energy into relationships. How ‘bout you?

How can you invest more of your time and love and energy into your family and friends and community?!

(I’ve got a big smile right now. My answer to that question, among many little things: Alexandra and I are surprising my mom on a cruise in a few weeks. Altho far from wealthy, my incredibly sweet and generous momma wanted to bring our entire family together for a special week-long cruise and paid for 19 (!! ) members of our family (I have three sisters and a brother and 9 nephews/nieces) to go. Other than my nephew who just started college, Alexandra and I were going to be the only two to miss the event as we were in Bali and well, just aren’t \*that\* into cruises. But... Re-defining what’s important to us and deciding that spending more time with our friends and family is a top priority, so we decided to come home early and surprise her. I get tears in my eyes as I type this imagining how cool it’s gonna be! :)

*"We get more pleasure from making progress toward our goals than we do from achieving them because, as Shakespeare said, "Joy's soul lies in the doing.""*

~ Jonathan Haidt

*"Work at its best, then, is about connection, engagement, and commitment. As the poet Kahlil Gibran said, "Work is love made visible.""*

~ Jonathan Haidt

Back to you: How are you going to invest more love and kindness and generosity and presence and goodness into *your* relationships?!

## HOW'S YOUR VERTICAL COHERENCE?

"The psychologists Ken Sheldon and Tim Kasser have found that people who are mentally healthy and happy have a higher degree of "vertical coherence" among their goals—that is, higher-level (long term) goals and lower-level (immediate) goals all fit together well so that pursuing one's short-term goals advances the pursuit of long-term goals."

Love this. I actually did a video on something similar to this earlier this year that shows how I do my planning/goal setting/etc. Gotta record another one going thru this process!

When I do goals journaling, I start with my uber-uber-big picture vision/intention—integrating the Eulogy Exercise we talk about in the Note on [Stephen Covey's 7 Habits](#) + "My Wishes" (based on [Gay Hendricks'](#) book *Five Wishes*).

The funeral/eulogy exercise is an awesome way for me to get clear on my highest virtues and how I want people to think of/remember me. Check out the Note for more on that. For the "My Wishes" exercise: Imagine you're on your death bed sometime in the distant future. Someone asks you "Do you have any regrets?" Think about what you "wish" you would have done that you have yet to do. Those are pretty important things, eh?!

For those curious souls, I hereby share my current "would-be-bummed-if-I-didn't-do-these-before-I-die wishes":

1. I want to have awesome kids and be an extraordinary father.
2. I want to continue to have an awesome relationship w/Alexandra and be an extraordinary husband.
3. I want to feel like I really lived and embodied my virtues and that I made a significant difference in the world.

(How 'bout you?)

From there, I have fun identifying my (rough) 1 decade goals then, with some more clarity I identify my 1 year goals and then laser in on my 1 quarter/1 month/1 week/1 day/today's #1 goal. Then I identify the key Blissiplines I need to rock in order to most powerfully show up in pursuit of those goals (stuff like daily meditation and exercise, eating well, appreciation, and creating consistently).

As I map these out in my journal, I can see that they're all integrated or, as researchers describe it, "vertically coherent." My near-term goals are congruent with my long-term goals.

How 'bout you!?!?

Here's to vertical coherence, yo!!! :)

## GET YOUR VIRTUE ON

"What was his [Benjamin Franklin's] secret? Virtue. Not the sort of uptight, pleasure-hating Puritanism that some people now associate with that word, but a broader kind of virtue that goes back to ancient Greece. The Greek word *areté* meant excellence, virtue, or goodness, especially of a functional sort... Thus in saying that well being or happiness (*eudaimonia*) is "an activity of soul in conformity with excellence or virtue," Aristotle wasn't saying that happiness comes from giving to the poor and suppressing your sexuality. He was saying that a good life is one where you develop your strengths, realize your potential, and become what it is in your nature to become."

Ah, the Greek ideal of virtue. I love it.

For the Greeks, it was quite simple. If we want happiness, we need to live with *areté*—striving to live at our highest potential moment to moment to moment. Good times! :)

“When Freud was asked what a normal person should be able to do well, he is reputed to have said, “Love and work.””  
~ Jonathan Haidt

## SIDE-STEPPING ELEPHANT POOP

“Aristotle asked about *areté* (excellence/virtue) and *telos* (purpose/goal), and he used the metaphor that people are like archers, who need a clear target at which to aim. Without a target or goal, one is left with the animal default: Just let the elephant graze or roam where he pleases. And because elephants live in herds, one ends up doing what everyone else is doing.”

So... What is *your* vision of your highest self? And, what are your goals to achieve that ideal?

Let’s get clear on our ultimate purpose and move toward it, lest we step in other people’s elephant poop, yo! :)

B

**Brian Johnson,**  
*Chief Philosopher*

P.S. Here’s Haidt’s final version of the happiness hypothesis: “I don’t believe there is an inspiring answer to the question, “What is the purpose of life?” Yet by drawing on ancient wisdom and modern science, we can find compelling answers to the question of purpose *within* life. The final version of the happiness hypothesis is that happiness comes from between. Happiness is not something you can find, acquire, or achieve directly. You have to get the conditions right and then wait. Some of those conditions are within you, such as coherence among the parts and levels of your personality. Other conditions require relationships to things beyond you: Just as plants need sun, water, and good soil to thrive, people need love, work, and a connection to something larger. It is worth striving to get the right relationships between yourself and others, between yourself and your work, and between yourself and something larger than yourself. If you get these relationships right, a sense of purpose and meaning will emerge.”

If you liked this Note, you’ll probably like...

[The How of Happiness](#)

[Happier](#)

[The Pursuit of Perfect](#)

[Flow](#)

[Authentic Happiness](#)

[Man’s Search for Meaning](#)

## About the Author of “The Happiness Hypothesis”

JONATHAN HAIDT



Jonathan Haidt is an Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of Virginia. His research examines the emotional basis of morality and the ways that morality varies across cultures, including the cultures of liberals and conservatives. He is the co-editor of *Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well-Lived*. He lives in Charlottesville, Virginia. For further information on topics discussed in this book, visit [www.happinesshypothesis.com](http://www.happinesshypothesis.com). (from the book)

## About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at [brianjohnson.me](http://brianjohnson.me).