

THE BIG IDEAS

The Myths of Happiness

Set the trap.

ACT

6 core principles.

The Struggle Switch

Keep it in OFF position.

Values

Let's get clear on yours.

How NOT to Visualize

Do this instead.

Life Gives Most to Those

Who make the most of what life gives.



The Happiness Trap

How to Stop Struggling and Start Living

BY RUSS HARRIS · TRUMPETER © 2008 · 240 PAGES

“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 because ‘everyone knows they are true.’ These beliefs seem to make good sense—that’s why you encounter them in nearly every self-help book you ever read. But unfortunately, these misleading ideas create 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 in it.

That’s the bad news.

The good news is that there’s hope. You can learn how to recognize the ‘happiness trap’ and, more importantly, you can learn how to escape. And this book will give you the skills and knowledge to do so. It’s based on a revolutionary new development in human psychology, a powerful model for change known as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, or ACT. ...

The aim of ACT [pronounced like the word ‘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 will enable you to develop a life-enhancing ability known as ‘psychological flexibility.’”

~ Russ Harris from *The Happiness Trap*

“So here is the happiness trap in a nutshell: to find happiness, we try to avoid or get rid of bad feelings, but the harder we try, the more bad feelings we create.”

~ Russ Harris

ACT.

<— That’s where it’s at.

This is our second Note on [Russ Harris](#) and his great introduction to Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. (Check out the Notes on [The Confidence Gap](#) as well.)

In this book, Russ walks us through how we get caught in the happiness trap and, more importantly, how to free ourselves. (Get a copy of the book [here](#).)

In this Note, we’ll take a quick look at the myths of happiness most of us are influenced by along with the six principles of ACT and a few of my other favorite Big Ideas.

I hope you enjoy and I’m excited to share so let’s jump straight in!

THE MYTHS OF HAPPINESS

“What’s the last line of every fairy tale? You got it: ‘... and they lived happily ever after.’ And it’s not just fairy tales that have happy endings. How about Hollywood movies? Don’t they nearly always have some sort of feel-good ending where good triumphs evil, love conquers all, and the hero defeats the bad guy? And doesn’t the same hold true for most popular novels and television programs? We love happy endings because society tells us that’s how life should be: all joy and

"A= Accept your thoughts
and feelings and be present.
C= Connect with your values.
T= Take effective action."

~ Russ Harris

fun, peace and contentment, living happily ever after. But does that sound realistic? Does it fit with your experience of life? This is one of the four major myths that make up the basic blueprint for the happiness trap. Let's take a look at these myths, one by one."

Welcome to Chapter 1: "Fairy Tales."

The myths of happiness that get us caught in the happiness trap. Let's take a quick look:

"Myth 1: Happiness Is the Natural State for All Human Beings."

Russ makes the point throughout the book that our minds evolved over the last 100,000 years (and millions before it) as a "Don't get killed" device—in charge of finding every little thing in our environment that may threaten our lives. We aren't hardwired to write poetry and giggle as much as we are to stay alive. When we think it should all be sunshine and roses and eternal bliss, we're in for challenges.

"Myth 2: If You're Not Happy, You're Defective."

By extension of the first myth, we tend to think that if we're not happy all the time something is inherently wrong with us. But that's just not accurate. We evolved to be highly sensitive to the negative. If you're not happy, nothing is wrong with you per se. Your psychological pain is an inherent facet of being human. Of course, there are ways to navigate the negative with more grace (which is what this book is all about), but telling yourself that something is wrong with you because you're not happy every.single.moment is not helpful.

"Myth 3: To Create a Better Life, We Must Get Rid of Negative Feelings."

Good luck with that! To function as flourishing human beings pursuing meaningful goals, we need to embrace the full spectrum of emotions. Big goals—whether that's having a thriving long-term relationship, raising healthy kids, or creating a business—bring feelings of excitement and enthusiasm AND feelings of stress, anxiety, doubt and frustration. It's not about *getting rid* of those negative feelings, it's about being able to expand to make space for them while living in integrity with your values. More on that in a moment.

"Myth 4: You Should Be Able to Control What You Think and Feel."

Although we can *influence* our thoughts and feelings, we cannot (!) CONTROL them. There's a big difference there. Most self-help books tell us that if we just think enough positive thoughts, we can control how we think and feel. That's an unhelpful happiness trap. Again, we evolved over a very long period of time to automatically think and feel negative stuff.

Those are the four myths of happiness that form the foundation of The Happiness Trap. We need to quit struggling against human nature—making ourselves wrong for failing to be happy all the time and for not controlling every thought and emotion.

It's time to learn how to Accept and Commit. It's time to ACT.

THE SIX CORE PRINCIPLES OF ACT

"Acceptance and Commitment Therapy is based upon six core principles that work together to help you develop a life-changing mind-set known as 'psychological flexibility.' The greater your psychological flexibility, the better you can handle painful thoughts and feelings and the more effectively you can take action to make your life rich and meaningful. As we progress throughout the book, we will work through these six core principles, one by one, but first let's take a very brief look at all of them."

There are six core principles to ACT.

Russ systematically walks us through each of them in mini-chapters throughout the book. Here's a quick look at each of them:

"The bottom line is not whether a thought is positive or negative, true or false, pleasant or unpleasant, optimistic or pessimistic, but whether it helps you create a fulfilling life."

~ Russ Harris

1. DEFUSION.

This is step #1. We talked about defusion in [The Confidence Gap](#). Basic idea: We will have negative thoughts. That's not the problem. The problem is FUSING with those negative thoughts—when we can't separate ourselves from the negative chatter and, instead, allow those thoughts to run our lives.

For example, you may have a voice in your head that says, "Gah! I'm an idiot. I can't do this." Or something equally unhelpful. If you're *fused* with that voice, it's under the radar and runs way more of the show than you'd like (and that you may be aware of). We need to get in the habit of noticing the negative thought and stepping back from it.

We can defuse by saying things like, "I notice I am thinking 'I'm an idiot!'" or "There's the 'I'm an idiot!'" story again or, my personal favorite, simply saying, "Thanks, mind! I appreciate the story." <— DEFUSING. Step 1.

2. EXPANSION.

Just as we will have negative thoughts, we will also have negative FEELINGS. You deal with negative thoughts by defusion. You deal with negative feelings via expansion.

For example, let's say you're feeling anxious before giving a public talk. (An example Russ experiences and shares often.) The anxious feelings and increased heart rate, sweaty palms, etc. aren't the problem. The problem is your RESISTANCE to those things and the story that they shouldn't be happening.

You want to observe and make room for those feelings rather than try to suppress them. EXPANSION. That's step 2.

3. CONNECTION.

We've defused and expanded, now we want to make sure we CONNECT with the present moment. We want to be fully engaged with whatever we're doing.

4. THE OBSERVING SELF.

Russ tells us we have three selves: The Thinking Self + The Physical Self + The Observing Self. The Thinking Self is the part of you that's always (but only ALWAYS) going on and on about everything in your world. Of course, this is a very important facet of our minds when used wisely (not so much when swinging like a drunk, crazy monkey).

The Observing Self is the part of us that actually SEES all that thinking. It's a super-powerful and equally underutilized facet of ourselves. Cultivating this is a key aspect of mindfulness and ACT.

5. VALUES.

So, the first four principles are all about optimizing our "Acceptance." Then? Then it's time for us to get clear on what REALLY matters to us. What are your deepest, most important values?

6. COMMITTED ACTION.

With clarity on our values, we're ready for the most important principle—we're ready to take COMMITTED ACTION in line with our deepest values.

Note: We DID NOT get rid of the negative thoughts and emotions. Those still play in the background like a radio that's always on. What we did was learn how to Accept those thoughts + feelings while taking Committed action.

Enter: ACT.

Which, Russ tells us = **"Mindfulness + Values + Action = Psychological Flexibility"**

<— which, science says = a very good thing! :)

"There is only one time that is important: NOW! It is the most important time because it is the only time when we have any power."

~ Leo Tolstoy

THE STRUGGLE SWITCH (CLEAN VS. DIRTY DISCOMFORT)

“Without struggle, what we get is a natural level of physical and emotional discomfort, depending on who we are and the situation we’re in. In ACT, we call this ‘clean discomfort.’ There’s no avoiding ‘clean discomfort’; life serves it up to all of us in one way or another. But once we start struggling with it, our discomfort levels increase rapidly. And all that additional suffering we call ‘dirty discomfort.’”

Our struggle switch is like an emotional amplifier—switch it ON, and we can have anger about our anxiety, anxiety about our anger, depression about our depression, or guilt about our guilt. We could even have guilt about our anger about our anxiety—and then depression about that!”

As a function of being human and alive, we will ALL experience discomfort. Period.

What we do when we experience that discomfort will determine the quality of our lives.

If we flip the “struggle switch” ON, we will amplify all the negative emotions. Keep that struggle switch in the OFF position via defusion + expansion followed by values-driven committed action and we’ll minimize the negative—our discomfort will be clean rather than dirty.

[Kristin Neff](#) echoes this wisdom in [Self-Compassion](#) where she tells us: “I once went on a meditation retreat with a wonderful teacher named Shinzen Young, who gave me words of wisdom that I’ll never forget. He said that the key to happiness was understanding that suffering is caused by resisting pain. We can’t avoid pain in life, he said, but we don’t necessarily have to suffer because of that pain... he chose to express these words of wisdom with an equation: ‘Suffering = Pain x Resistance.’ He then added, ‘Actually, it’s an exponential rather than a multiplicative relationship.’ His point was that we can distinguish between the normal pain of life—difficult emotions, physical discomfort, and so on—and actual suffering, which is the mental anguish caused by fighting against the fact that life is sometimes painful.”

In short: “Our emotional suffering is caused by our desire for things to be other than they are.”

Solution? ACCEPT that pain is an inevitable part of life. (And, remember that, as the Dalai Lama says, although *pain* is inevitable, *suffering* is optional.)

Russ brings this wisdom home with another metaphor: It’s kinda like those old Westerns where the bad guy would get swallowed up in the quicksand. The more he struggled, the faster he sank.

(Pro tip: If you’re ever caught in quicksand, remember you gotta calm down and just lie flat until help comes. :)

Notice the happiness trap myths at work: You think you shouldn’t be having this challenge/pain. THAT is the real problem. Allow the pain/negative thought/negative feeling/etc. to be present and just do what needs to get done.

Let’s get comfortable being uncomfortable. Keep the struggle switch in the OFF position.

Then your discomfort is clean. Not dirty.

LET’S GET CLEAR ON YOUR VALUES

“What’s it all about? What are you here for? What makes your life worth living? It’s amazing how many of us have never deeply considered these questions. We go through life following the same routine, day after day. But in order to create a rich, full, and meaningful life, we need to stop to reflect on what we’re doing and why we’re doing it. So it’s time to ask yourself:

- Deep down inside, what is important to you?
- What do you want your life to be about?
- What sort of person do you want to be?

“Slow, deep breathing is important because it lowers the level of tension in your body. It won’t get rid of your feelings, but it will provide a center of calm within you. It’s like an anchor in the midst of an emotional storm: the anchor won’t get rid of the storm, but it will hold you steady until it passes.”

~ Russ Harris

"He who has a why to live for, can bear almost any how."

~ Friedrich Nietzsche

- What sort of relationships do you want to build?
- If you weren't struggling with your feelings or avoiding your fears, what would you channel your time and energy into doing?"

Those are some VERY good questions to help us clarify our values.

They're so good that they're worth slowing down and reflecting on.

btw: Russ has a ton of exercises like this and he a.l.w.a.y.s. challenges us to slow down and do them—CONSTANTLY reminding us that a) Ideas are only useful if they're applied and b) research shows *writing down* your goals + values, etc. is hugely helpful in actually living them. So, WRITE DOWN YOUR ANSWERS to these questions! (Then, of course, live them!)

Deep down inside, what is important to you?

What do you want your life to be about?

What sort of person do you want to be?

What sort of relationships do you want to build?

If you weren't struggling with your feelings or avoiding your fears, what would you channel your time and energy into doing?

<— Let's do those things.

HOW *NOT* TO VISUALIZE (+ WHAT TO DO INSTEAD)

"Most books on visualization or mental rehearsal will encourage you to imagine yourself feeling relaxed and confident as you take action. I strongly advise against this because those are feelings over which you have very little control, and if your goal is particularly challenging, it's very unlikely that you will feel relaxed and confident. You're far more likely to have feelings of anxiety and self-doubt. So I suggest that in your mental rehearsals, focus on what is most in your control: your actions. Imagine yourself taking action to the very best of your ability, saying and doing the things that are most likely to be effective. And also imagine yourself making room for whatever thoughts and feelings show up in the moment and continuing to take effective action, no matter how you feel."

In our Notes on [Rethinking Positive Thinking](#), we chatted about the fact that you don't just want to fantasize about the ideal outcome—you want to WOOP it. In [The Upside of Stress](#), we learned to quit trying to calm down and, rather, channel your high arousal state into "I'm excited!"

Now, we can take the good doctor's advice and quit visualizing ourselves as calm and confident.

Why? Because you probably *won't* feel calm and/or confident when the pressure's on and you're trying to do your best in a super challenging situation.

BUT THAT DOESN'T MATTER for you because you know how to defuse, expand and take committed action. Visualize *that*.

LIFE GIVES MOST TO THOSE WHO...

"Until you try, you don't know what you can't do."

~ Henry James

"There's an ancient Eastern saying: 'If you don't decide where you're going, you'll end up wherever you're heading.' To live a meaningful life, you need direction, and your values are there, deep in your heart, to provide it. So connect with those values; use them for guidance. Cultivate a sense of purpose. Keep setting meaningful goals and pursue them vigorously. At the same time, appreciate what you have in your life right now. This is important, because now is the only time you ever have. The past doesn't exist; it's nothing more than memories in the present. And the future doesn't exist; it's nothing more than thoughts and images in the present. The only time you ever have is this moment. So make the most of it. Notice what is happening. Appreciate it in its fullness.

And remember: *life gives most to those who make the most of what life gives.*"

Those are the final words of the book.

What's important to you? Where are you going? How can you appreciate the moments?

Let's remember that life gives most to those who make the most of what life gives as we ACT in integrity with our highest selves more and more consistently: Accepting our thoughts and feelings and be present + Connect with our values + Take effective action!!

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

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About the Author of "The Happiness Trap"

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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.