



The hit and myth of pleasure

Happiness is a right, right?
 Karen Tay talks to an author who says
 we are obsessed with feeling good.

WHEN YOU rolled out of bed this morning, did you automatically put on a smiley face despite feeling grumpy? Do you have a stockpile of self-help books at home telling you how to be happy? Do you go to yoga and meditation classes in a quest for the perfect state of bliss? How about chanting affirmations in the mirror before bedtime?

If so, you may be caught in what Dr Russ Harris, an Australian medical GP turned therapist and author, calls the “happiness trap” – also the title of his new book.

Harris practises a form of therapy called ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy), a concept that has been gaining ground overseas.

“Happiness is such a loaded term. If it’s defined as pleasure and contentment, then there’s no such thing as lasting happiness. Think about the happiest day in your life. How long did the

state of pleasure last before there was some frustration or anxiety?”

The ubiquitous smiley face has long been the symbol of happiness.

It implies that happiness is constant joy, unaffected by

the forces of everyday life. Harris says this is a symptom of our times.

“For the first time in human history, we’re living in a society that’s obsessed with feeling good. Throughout most of human history, happiness has been defined as doing good, not feeling good. I say to my clients that if you’re going to live a full human life, you’re going to feel a full range of human emotions. This book [*The Happiness Trap*] is partly about clarifying what’s important, what matters and what’s meaningful in your life.”

How would Harris define happiness?

“If you really need to define it, then it would be living a rich and meaningful

life. It means doing what you consider personally meaningful, whether it means taking care of your children, contributing to the world, taking care of your health or exploring your creativity. Acting on your values is a concept that goes back to the Greek philosophers.”

Harris came across ACT in America in 2003 and confesses that his years as a GP had made him interested in the connection between mind and body when it came to

wellbeing. He talks about mindfulness, an ancient Eastern concept bandied about in Hinduism and Buddhism, which refers to being aware of one’s bodily functions and feelings at all times.

In fact, American author Nathaniel Hawthorne, who wrote the 1850 novel *The Scarlet Letter*, once likened happiness to a butterfly, “which when pursued, is always beyond our grasp but which, if you will sit down

quietly, may alight upon you”.

It all sounds very Zen, so does Harris think the concept might be a bit too esoteric for the average person to apply to real life?

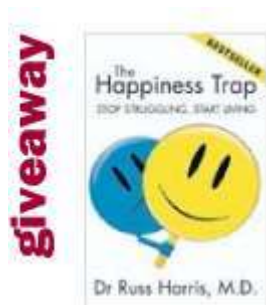
He points out that most

pain and suffering comes from battling our own emotions and perceptions.

“ACT is exciting because you can learn mindfulness skills in the space of a few minutes, without following any exotic ancient tradition. Meditation, for example, is like the gym. You do it for a while then stop.

“With ACT, you’re encouraged to be fully in the moment and open to your experience. I discovered that my most painful thoughts and feelings could float by, without creating any struggle.”

In the book, Harris talks about a young female patient who had recently lost her husband and baby in a



We have five copies of Russ Harris’ book, *The Happiness Trap*, to give away.

Email escape@star-times.co.nz with Happiness in the subject line by Friday, November 6.



are you happy?

If you would like to participate in a scientific study about happiness and wellbeing at the University of Canterbury, register your interest at www.tinyurl.com/happyproject. The study takes place entirely by email and includes getting involved in happiness-building exercises and completing short surveys.



Blissed out: But we know the moment passes says Dr Russ Harris, below.

Main photo: Simon Schluter



tragedy. She was in a deep depression and couldn't see any reason to go on living.

Harris reminded her of the reason she felt so much pain in the first place – because she had loved her family dearly – and asked if she would prefer to have never fallen in love, married and given birth in the first place, to feeling the current pain.

There are two messages he ultimately wants to impart: That it's impossible to avoid painful or negative feelings and that instead of struggling against them, you should

learn to live with them.

“A difficult childhood doesn't decide your happiness. I know people who have had horrific childhoods who have gone on to live rich and meaningful lives and people who have had wonderful childhoods who have gone on to live lives full of misery. It certainly has an influence over thoughts and your actions but you have the capacity to change.”

■ *The Happiness Trap* by Russ Harris (Exisle), \$34.99