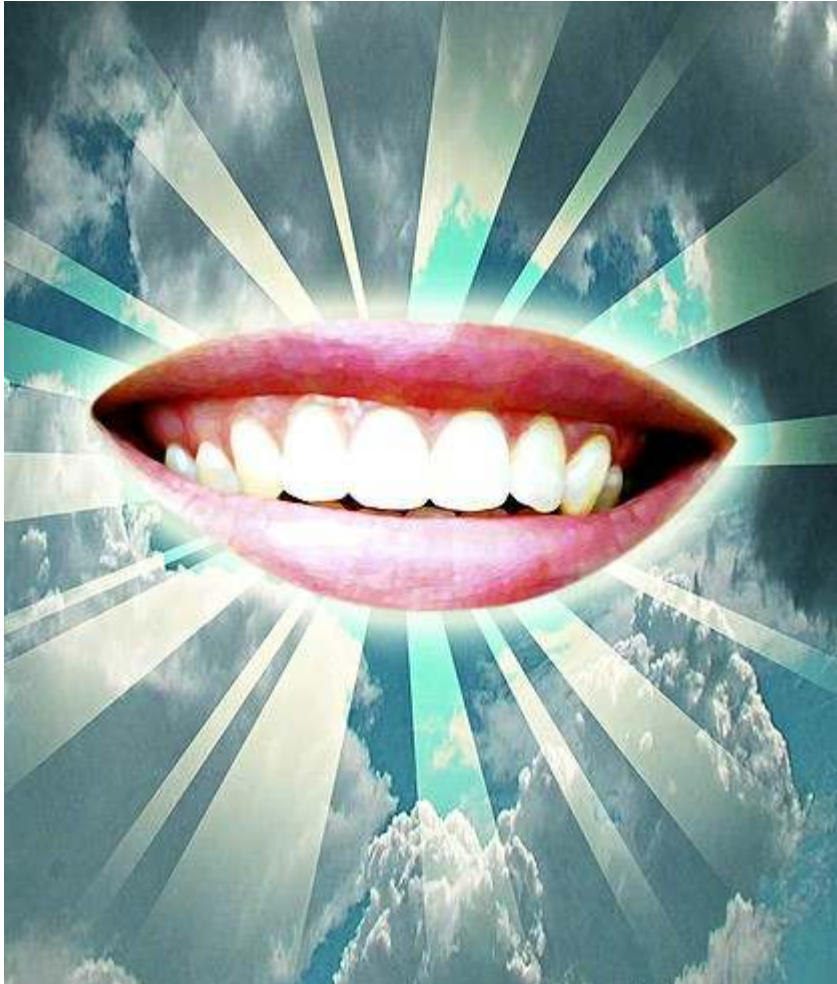


I'm not okay, neither are you

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Actions speak louder than affirmations ... live by your values for true happiness, says Russ Harris.

Photo: Michael Mucci

From *Sunday Life*

Self-esteem is big business. Peruse the self-help section of any bookshop and you'll find row after row of books dedicated to feeling good, getting happy and making the most out of you. But despite all these apparent solutions, a recent survey by health insurer Bupa found that Australia is the world's most depressed nation. (To make matters worse, the survey also helpfully pointed out that we're rather fat.)

Being positive may seem like a good idea - but it's not guaranteed to make our lives more fulfilled. In fact, positive thinking can create an "empathy deficit", argues Barbara Ehrenreich in *Smile or Die: How Positive Thinking Fooled America and the World*. Staying upbeat becomes such a prized goal that we end up ostracising those who might bring us down - the elderly, for example, or the unwell. Meanwhile, our own self-esteem swings between telling us that we are fabulous and that we are rubbish. Neither statement is particularly useful for a life well lived.

The problem with self-esteem, explains Russ Harris in his best seller *The Happiness Trap*, is that it is focused on thoughts - both positive and negative - rather than meaningful actions. Harris knows this statement might seem startling, coming from a psychotherapist and life coach (his approach is known as acceptance and commitment therapy, or ACT): "There is so much emphasis on positive thinking and challenging negative thoughts that the idea that negative thoughts are not dangerous or harmful is a major revelation for some people."

It's a sentiment with which Oliver Burkeman, *Guardian* columnist and author of *Help! How to Become Slightly Happier and Get a Bit More Done*, agrees. "The problem I see with positive thinking is that it can all too easily become a barrier to action, because it's based on the premise that you need to get yourself into 'the right frame of mind' - positive, or motivated, raring to go, or whatever - before you can start acting," he explains. "In fact, it can be tremendously liberating to realise that you don't need to feel like doing something in order to do it. You can just notice the negative feelings, and act anyway."

Harris believes the positive-thinking industry - with its culture of affirmations and relentless optimism - causes more problems than it can ever solve. "In books like *The Secret*, this idea that your thoughts manifest in reality is what gets dangerous ... this kind of thinking is what underlies obsessive-compulsive disorder," says Harris. "It's kind of frustrating and disappointing for people when they practise positive affirmations and it doesn't work."

He's not the only one who thinks so: in 2009, the American journal *Psychological Science* published research undertaken by Joanne Wood, professor of psychology at the University of Waterloo, that found that repeating positive self-affirmations made people feel worse. And in a further win for the world's curmudgeons, another study found that high self-esteem correlates with traits such as egotism, narcissism and arrogance. Over-inflated self-esteem could lead to self-deception, intolerance and prejudice, not qualities generally associated with a valued and enriched life.

The results were no surprise to Burkeman. "It was an ingenious experiment and it totally makes sense to me. Part of her argument was that we have this strong drive to preserve our sense of who we are, so we respond negatively to being told we're loveable if we actually think we're awful - even if it's ourselves who are doing the telling! So there's an unexpected reaction to affirmations: you start arguing back.

'I'm loveable ... Wait, no I'm not. Or at least not as loveable as this or that person ...'"

But it's easy to see the appeal of positive thinking and great self-esteem - especially, as Ehrenreich notes in *Smile or Die*, when they are supposed to allow you to "attract" whatever you fancy (a mate, money, a good job). But at the conferences she attended for research, she found a recurring theme among the self-declared gurus - the only barrier to happiness, love and material success is, well, you. You and your sad-sack thoughts.

A more realistic approach to improving your sense of self-worth and your life, says Harris, is compassionate self-talk and self-acceptance. "Compassionate self-talk is often very helpful," he explains. "Lots of research on self-compassion suggests that it is much better to think, 'Can I be kind to myself? Can I be supportive, encouraging, caring and considerate to myself, recognising that I am a human being with good points and bad points like everybody else? I don't have to boost my self and pretend that I'm fantastic or pump up my self-image.'"

This idea of "mindfulness" is an important part of ACT - acknowledging both negative and positive thoughts, but allowing the "observing" rather than the "thinking" self to take the reins. It's a state of focus and observation.

Defusing negative or unpleasant thoughts, rather than trying to get rid of them, is one part of the approach. The idea is to acknowledge the bad feelings resulting from, say, a broken heart, and take them for what they are: thoughts and stories. It's more or less the opposite of the advice women's magazines and well-meaning friends tend to give: distract yourself with a hot bath or a soppy film, make like *South Pacific's* Nellie Forbush and *Wash That Man Right Out Of Your Hair*. There's merit in all of it, but they won't make you feel better in the long term.

More helpful are techniques such as meditation, and there's solid psychological evidence that writing things down, often referred to as "journaling", is powerful, too. There's something

extraordinarily helpful about putting your problems on paper - not necessarily to find a solution but to put things in perspective. Seeing them on the page helps to emphasise the fact that the problems aren't "you".

Mindfulness, then, espouses dealing with sadness, pain and low self-worth - all things we have long been told are not conducive to a fulfilled and happy life - rather than trying to banish negativity or smother it with self-affirmations. The idea is that by facing these thoughts with openness and curiosity you will, in time, loosen their grip.

Plus, as Burkeman points out, while erring towards positivity may be good for you, staying positive all the time is more or less impossible. As Harris relates in *The Happiness Trap*, defining happiness as a complete absence of negative thoughts, or a life filled only with pleasant feelings, is a falsehood. A truly happy, fulfilled and enriched life should acknowledge that in life there is pain and disappointment - and that it's all part of the human experience.

The other enduring myth is that to be happy you need high self-esteem. Harris says this is simply not true.

"You can definitely be happy without high self-esteem," he insists. "Self-acceptance and self-compassion are much more liberating, and allow for fuller relationships, which are much more likely to lead to greater happiness."

Above all, not being ruled by your thoughts - positive or negative - is vital to achieving true fulfilment. "What's important is what you do, not your thoughts about who you are. If you get in touch with your values and let them guide you, and engage fully with what you're doing, what you will find is that you will attain a deep sense of self-worth and self-appreciation, rather than just trying to change the self-talk inside your head," says Harris.

Funnily enough, the plus to all of this mindful living is that generally the self-talk will then change on its own account. "It's a bonus, but it's not what we're aiming for," says Harris. "Positive or negative thoughts shouldn't be taken too seriously. There are equal problems with high and low self-esteem. What's important is being the person you want to be and living by your values."

Russ Harris's new book, *The Reality Slap: How to Find Fulfilment When Life Hurts* (\$30, Exisle Publishing), is out now.

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