

Living Well

Dr Russ Harris has bridged the chasm between traditional, professional therapy and self-help with his bestselling title *The Happiness Trap*. Dr Harris' work has gained international support as his work on mindfulness techniques has helped reshape the lives of people across the globe.

Your book *The Happiness Trap* talks about Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). What is it about?

ACT is a revolutionary and new scientifically based approach for reducing stress and increasing vitality. The aim of ACT is to create a rich, full and meaningful life while effectively handling the pain and suffering that life inevitably brings.

How did you come to practice ACT?

Throughout the early '90s when I practised as a GP, I became increasingly interested in psychological aspects of health and wellbeing, which lead me to explore many different therapies. When I finally discovered ACT in 2004, it was "love at first sight" and I immediately flew to the USA to train in it.

What is ACT best for treating? How successful is it in treating these problems?

Published studies show that ACT is effective for a wide range of issues including depression, anxiety, drug addiction, chronic pain and work stress. To give a dramatic example of how successful it can be, in two published studies, just four hours of ACT with severe schizophrenic patients was enough to reduce their rates of re-hospitalisation by almost 50 per cent!

How does it work?

ACT teaches people psychological skills called 'mindfulness skills' that rapidly reduce the impact and influence of difficult thoughts and feelings. At the same time, ACT helps people clarify and connect with their deepest core values for ongoing motivation, inspiration and guidance.

What is mindfulness? How is ACT mindfulness different from the traditional mindfulness teachings (that is, in Eastern philosophy)?

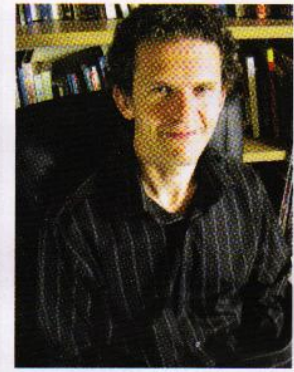
Mindfulness is a mental state of awareness, openness and focus. In traditional Eastern approaches, mindfulness is taught through intensive ongoing practices such as meditation, yoga, or martial arts. In ACT, mindfulness skills are taught in the space of a few minutes, using a scientific approach that does not involve meditation or exotic practices.

Do you practice mindfulness daily?

Absolutely. I aim to be mindful – fully engaged in whatever I am doing – all day long. Of course, being human, I don't always achieve it.

Can you share a simple mindfulness building exercise with our readers?

Take a raisin, a peanut, or a chocolate, and eat it in ultra-



slow motion, as if you've never eaten one before. Notice all the different flavours and textures, and everything your mouth does: the movement of your jaws, your teeth, your tongue, the salivation, the chewing, the swallowing. You'll be amazed at how much is involved.

What are the most common 'happiness traps'?

The two most common 'happiness traps' are the ideas that: a) happiness is the same as feeling good, and b) happiness is the "natural state" for humans. If you believe these ideas, you will struggle with reality, because the fact is the things that make life rich, full and meaningful give you both pleasant feelings and painful feelings. A good example would be having children. The 'natural state' for humans is to feel the full range of emotions, both painful and pleasurable.

How does our society perpetuate these myths?

Through folk wisdom, many self-help books, songs that tell us 'don't worry, be happy', and everything else that contributes to our current 'feel-good' society. NH



The Happiness Trap by Dr Russ Harris is published by Exisle Publishing, \$29.99. Visit www.exislepublishing.com

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