

the HAPPINESS trap

Tired of trying to turn negative thoughts into positive ones? Feel like old anxieties, tensions and dread return no matter how much you suppress them? A new self-help system – Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT) – suggests we should stop struggling with our negative emotions and start living with them instead.

By Dr Russ Harris Photography by Pamela Hanson

What exactly is happiness? We all want it. We all crave it. We all strive for it. Even the Dalai Lama has said: “The very purpose of life is to seek happiness.” But what exactly is this elusive thing we are looking for?

The word “happiness” has two very different meanings. Usually it refers to a feeling: a sense of pleasure, gladness or gratification. We all enjoy happy feelings, so it’s no surprise that we chase them. However, like all our other emotions, feelings of happiness don’t last. And as we shall see, a life spent in pursuit of those feelings is, in the main, unsatisfying. In fact, the harder we pursue pleasurable feelings, the more likely we are to suffer from consequent anxiety and depression.

The other meaning of happiness is “a rich, full and meaningful life”. When we take action on the things that truly matter deep in our hearts, when we move in directions that we consider worthy, when we clarify what we stand for in life and act accordingly, then our lives become rich and full and meaningful.

It’s then that we experience a powerful sense of vitality. This is not some fleeting feeling – it is a profound sense of a life well lived. And although such a life will undoubtedly give us many pleasurable feelings, it will also give us uncomfortable ones, such as sadness, fear and anger. This is to be expected. If we live a full life, we will feel the full range of human emotions.

The reality is, life involves pain. There’s no getting away from it. As human beings, we are all faced with the fact that sooner or later we will grow infirm, get sick and die. Sooner or later, we will lose valued relationships through rejection, separation or death. Eventually, we will all face crisis, disappointment and failure. This means that in one form or another, we are all going to experience painful feelings.

The good news is that although we can’t avoid such pain, we can learn to handle it much better – to make room for it, rise above it and create a life worth living.



ACCEPT THE
INEVITABLE
TOUGH TIMES
IN LIFE. IN
ORDER TO
DEAL WITH
THEM BETTER

THE reality
IS, LIFE
INVOLVES
pain.
THERE'S
NO getting
AWAY
FROM IT

THE CORE PRINCIPLES OF ACCEPTANCE COMMITMENT THERAPY (ACT)

Principle 1 – Defusion

Defusion means relating to your thoughts in a new way, so they have much less impact and influence over you. As you learn to defuse painful and unpleasant thoughts, they will lose their ability to frighten, disturb or depress you.

Principle 2 – Expansion

Expansion means making room for unpleasant feelings, sensations and urges instead of trying to suppress them or push them away. As you open up and make space for these feelings, you will find they bother you much less and move on much more rapidly instead of hanging around and disturbing you for days, months or years.

Principle 3 – Connection

Connection means living in the present, focusing on and engaging fully in whatever you’re doing. Instead of dwelling on the past, or worrying about the future, you are deeply connected with what →

is happening right here, right now. This is also known as "living in the moment".

Principle 4—The Observing Self

This is a powerful aspect of human consciousness, which has been largely ignored by Western psychology until now. As you learn how to distance yourself from negative emotions, it will enable you to transform your relationship with unwanted feelings.

Principle 5—Values

Clarifying and connecting with your values is an essential step for making life meaningful. Your values are reflections of what is most important in your heart: what sort of person you want to be; what is significant and meaningful to you; and what you want to stand for in this life. Your values provide direction for your life and motivate you to make important changes.

Some ways to start applying ACT to your life:

DEMONS ON THE BOAT

Imagine you're steering a ship far out at sea. Below the deck, out of sight, lies a vast horde of demons, all with enormous claws and razor-sharp teeth. These demons have many different forms. Some of them are emotions such as guilt, anger, fear or hopelessness. Others are negative thoughts or mental images.

Now, as long as you keep that ship drifting out to sea, the demons will stay beneath the surface. But

as soon as you start steering towards land, they clamber up from below deck, flapping their membranous wings, baring their fangs and generally threatening to tear you into little pieces. Not surprisingly, you don't like that very much so you cut a deal with these beasts: "If you demons stay out of sight, down below, I'll keep the ship drifting out at sea." The demons agree and everything seems okay—for a while.

The problem is eventually you get fed up of being at sea. You get bored, lonely, miserable, resentful and anxious. You see plenty of other ships heading into shore, but not yours. Then you think, "What sort of life is this? That land over there—that's where I want to be heading." But the moment you start heading for land, the demons swarm up onto the deck and start threatening you again.

As soon as we start to do something new, our mind will start warning us, "You might fail", "You might make a mistake", "You might get rejected". It warns us with negative thoughts, with disturbing images or bad memories and with uncomfortable feelings or sensations.

That's the bad news

Now here's the good news: If you keep steering your ship towards shore (no matter how much the demons threaten you), many of them will realise they're having no effect and leave you alone. As for the ones that remain, after a while you'll get used to them. Then, if you take a good, long look at them, you'll figure out they're not nearly as scary as they first appeared. You'll realise they've been using special effects to make themselves look a lot bigger than they really are. Sure, they'll still look ugly—they won't turn into cute, fluffy bunny rabbits—but you'll find them much less frightening. And more importantly, you'll find that you can let them hang around without being bothered by them. This is what's known as the Observing Self.

**SOME EASY EXERCISES TO HELP YOU STOP STRUGGLING
NEXT TIME YOU HAVE NEGATIVE THOUGHTS OR FEELINGS:**

OBSERVE This means bringing your awareness to the sensations in your body. Take a few seconds to scan yourself from head to toe. Notice what you're feeling and where. As you do this, you will probably notice several uncomfortable sensations. Look for the one that bothers you the most. For example, it may be a knot in your throat or a teary feeling in your eyes. Focus your attention on that sensation. Observe it with curiosity, like a scientist who has discovered some interesting new phenomenon. Notice where it starts and where it ends. If you had to draw a line around the sensation, what would it look like? Is it on the surface of your body or inside it? Is it light or heavy? Warm or cool?

BREATHE This means you breathe into and around the sensation, as if making extra space for it. Begin with a few deep breaths, the slower the better, and make sure you fully empty your lungs before breathing in again. 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 centre of calm within you.

ALLOW This means you allow the sensation to be there, even though you don't like it or want it. When your mind starts commenting on what's happening, just say, "Thanks, Mind!" and come back to observing. Of course, you may find this difficult. You may have a strong urge to fight it or push it away. If so, just acknowledge this urge without giving into it, and bring your attention back to the sensation itself.

You may need to focus on this sensation for anywhere from a few seconds to a few minutes, until you completely give up the struggle with it. Be patient; take as long as you need. You're learning a valuable skill. Once you've done this, scan your body again and see if there's another sensation that's bothering you. If so, repeat the procedure with this one, too. Keep going until you have a sense of no longer struggling with your feelings.

For more information, read *The Happiness Trap* by Dr Russ Harris, MD (\$29.95, Exisle).

**SLOW, DEEP
breathing IS
IMPORTANT
BECAUSE IT
LOWERS the
LEVEL OF
tension IN
YOUR BODY**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ©PAMELA HANSON/MAK & ASSOC/TRUNK ARCHIVE/SNAPPER MEDIA