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THE HAPPINESS TRAP

**Stop struggling,
start living**

DR RUSS HARRIS

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WHAT'S NEW IN EDITION TWO?

When I set out to write the second edition of this book (sixteen years after the first one), I was expecting it to be a quick job; just a few minor changes here and there. But I quickly realised the book needed a major overhaul from start to end. When I eventually finished the task, I was surprised to find over 50 per cent of the book was new material! I guess that reflects just how much has changed over the years in the way I think about, talk about and practise this stuff.

Among many other changes, I've added in a lot of new tools, techniques and exercises; new information about the nature and purpose of emotions (and how to overcome emotional numbness); many new topics and chapters, including how to break bad habits, push through procrastination, stop panic attacks, disrupt worrying and obsessing, deal with values conflicts and difficult dilemmas, overcome 'people-pleasing' and perfectionism; practical tips for those suffering from trauma; and last, but definitely not least, a stack of new material on self-compassion.

On top of all that, I've chopped out a whole lot of waffle, repetition and technical jargon. So if you liked the first edition, I hope and trust you'll get a whole lot more out of this one.

Happy reading,
All the best,
Russ Harris

PART 1

WHY IS IT HARD TO
BE HAPPY?

1

LIFE IS DIFFICULT



Being human hurts. In our short time on this planet we'll have many moments of marvel, wonder and joy — but also many of angst, dread and despair. We'll know the highs of love, connection and friendship — but also the lows of loneliness, rejection and loss. We'll experience the delights of success, victory and achievement — but also the miseries of failure, defeat and disappointment.

In other words: life is difficult. And if we live long enough, we're all going to experience pain, stress and suffering in many different forms. The problem is, most of us don't know how to deal effectively with this reality. We work hard to find happiness — but all too often, we fail; and even when we succeed, it's usually short-lived, leaving us dissatisfied and wanting more.

So why is it so hard to be happy? I'm glad you asked. This book is based on a huge body of scientific research which shows we all easily get caught in a powerful psychological trap. We go through life holding on tightly to many unhelpful beliefs about happiness — ideas widely accepted because 'everyone knows they are true'. And these beliefs seem to make good sense — which is why you encounter them in so many self-help books and articles. But unfortunately, these misleading ideas tend to create a vicious cycle, in which the more we pursue happiness, the more we suffer. And this psychological trap is so well hidden, we don't even realise we're caught in it.

That's the bad news.

The good news is, there's hope. We can learn how to quickly recognise we're stuck in 'the happiness trap' — and, more importantly, how to escape it. This book will give you the skills and knowledge to do so. It's based on a powerful psychological model known as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), a science-based approach with over 3000 published studies that show its effectiveness.

ACT (pronounced as the word 'act') was developed in the United States in the mid-1980s by psychologist Steven C. Hayes and his colleagues, Kelly Wilson and Kirk Strosahl. Since that time, it has spread around the globe. Today there are hundreds of thousands of psychologists, therapists, counsellors, coaches and doctors practising ACT in dozens of different countries — from the United States, United Kingdom and Uganda to India, Indonesia and Iran.

One reason for the growing popularity of ACT is that it's astoundingly effective in helping people with a wide range of problems. Those 3000 scientific studies I mentioned earlier cover everything from depression, addiction and anxiety disorders to psychosis, chronic pain and trauma. However, ACT is not just a treatment for psychological disorders; it is also used to help people adjust well to chronic illness and disability, and build meaningful, rewarding lives even in the face of serious ongoing health issues. And on top of all that, it's widely used by the armed forces, emergency services, government departments, professional sports teams and Olympic athletes, businesses, hospitals and schools — to enhance health and wellbeing, reduce stress, improve performance and increase resilience.

Last but not least, we all know about the importance of eating healthy food, exercising regularly and cultivating good relationships with others; these are foundational building blocks for health, happiness and wellbeing. But how hard is it to *actually do* these things on an ongoing basis? Easy in theory, hard in practice, for most of us. Fortunately, ACT gives us all the tools and strategies we need to break bad habits, overcome procrastination, motivate ourselves to start and maintain healthy new behaviours, and build better relationships with the people in our lives. Shortly we'll look at how ACT achieves this, but first let's consider ...

Is happiness normal?

Life is not fair. Some people have horrific childhoods where they've been abused, neglected or abandoned by their caregivers; whereas others grow up in loving, supportive families. Some live in extreme poverty or areas rife with violent crime; or in war zones, prisons or refugee camps. Others live in good housing conditions with excellent amenities. Some have serious illnesses, injuries or disabilities, whereas others have glowing health. Some have access to good quality food, education, justice, medical treatment, welfare, travel, entertainment and career opportunities, whereas others are deprived of most or all of these things. And some people, because of their skin colour, religion, gender, politics or sexual orientation are continually subjected to prejudice, discrimination or victimisation. In any country in the world, there's a vast gulf between the least and most privileged members of society. And yet ... people on both sides of that gulf are human, and therefore have many things in common, including the fact that no matter how privileged or disadvantaged we may be, we are all naturally predisposed to psychological suffering.

Perhaps you've noticed how the self-help sections of bookstores keep growing larger. Depression, anxiety, anger, divorce, relationship issues, addictions, trauma, low self-esteem, loneliness, grief, stress, lack of confidence; if you can name it, there's a book on it. And with every passing year, psychologists, coaches, counsellors and therapists steadily increase in number — as do prescriptions for medication. Meanwhile, on the television and radio, in magazines and newspapers, in podcasts and social media, the 'experts' bombard us with non-stop advice on how to improve our lives. And yet — even with all this support and advice, human misery is growing, not reducing!

The statistics are staggering. The World Health Organization identifies depression as one of the biggest, most costly and most debilitating diseases in the world. In any given year, one-tenth of the adult population suffers from clinical depression, and one in five will suffer from it at some point in their life. And more than one third of the adult population will, at some point in their life, suffer from an anxiety disorder. Furthermore, one in four adults,

will at some stage suffer from drug or alcohol addiction. (In the United States alone, there are currently over 14 million people suffering from alcoholism!)

But here's the most shocking statistic of all: almost one in two people will at some point seriously consider suicide — and struggle with it for two weeks or more. Scarier still, one in ten people will at some point actually attempt to kill themselves. (Fortunately, very few succeed.)

Think about those numbers for a moment. Think of your friends, family and co-workers. Almost half of them will at some point be so overwhelmed by misery that they seriously contemplate suicide — and one in ten will try it!

Now, think about all those common forms of suffering that are not considered to be 'psychological disorders' but nonetheless make us miserable: work stress, performance anxiety, loneliness, relationship conflicts, sickness, divorce, bereavement, injury, ageing, poverty, racism, sexism, bullying, existential angst, self-doubt, insecurity, fear of failure, perfectionism, low self-esteem, 'midlife crisis', 'impostor syndrome', jealousy, fear of missing out, a lack of direction in life ... and the list goes on.

Clearly, lasting happiness is not normal! Which naturally begs the question ...

Why is it so hard to be happy?

To answer this question, let's journey back in time, 300,000 years. Life was pretty dangerous for our Stone Age ancestors: huge wolves, sabre-toothed tigers, woolly mammoths, rival clans, harsh weather, food shortages and cave bears, to name but a few of the perils. So if a Stone Age person wanted to survive, their mind had to be constantly on the lookout for things that might hurt or harm them! And if their mind wasn't good at this job ... they died young. Therefore, the better our ancestors became at anticipating and avoiding danger, the longer they lived and the more children they had.

With each passing generation, the human mind became increasingly skilled at noticing, predicting and avoiding danger. So now, 300,000 years later, our modern minds are constantly on the lookout, assessing and judging everything we encounter: Is this good or bad? Safe or dangerous? Harmful or helpful? These days, though, it's not tigers, bears and wolves that our

mind warns us about — it's losing our job, being rejected, getting a speeding ticket, embarrassing ourselves in public, getting cancer, or a million and one other common worries. As a result we all spend a lot of time worrying about things that, more often than not, never happen.

Another essential for survival is belonging to a group. Our ancient ancestors knew this all too well. If your tribe boots you out, it won't be long before the wolves find you. So how does the mind protect you from rejection by the group? By comparing you with other members: Am I fitting in? Am I doing the right thing? Am I contributing enough? Am I as good as the others? Am I doing anything that might get me rejected?

Sound familiar? Our minds are continually warning us of rejection and comparing us against the rest of society. No wonder we spend so much energy worrying whether people will like us! No wonder we're always looking for ways to improve ourselves or putting ourselves down because we don't 'measure up'. We only need to glance at a magazine, television or social media to instantly find a whole host of people who appear to be smarter, richer, slimmer, sexier, more famous, more powerful or more successful than us. We then compare ourselves to these glamorous media creations and feel inferior or disappointed with our lives. To make matters worse, our minds can conjure up a fantasy image of the person we'd ideally like to be — and then compare us to that! What chance have we got? We will always end up feeling not good enough.

Now, in pretty much any society throughout the world in any period of history, the general rule for success is: get more and get better. The better your weapons, the more food you can kill. The larger your food stores, the greater your chances for survival in times of scarcity. The better your shelter, the safer you are from danger. The more children you have, the greater the chance that some will survive into adulthood. No surprise, then, that our minds continually look for 'more and better': more money, a better job, more status, a better body, more love, a better partner. And if we succeed, if we do get more money or a better car or a better-looking body, then we're satisfied — for a while. But sooner or later (and usually sooner), we end up wanting more.

In summary then, we are all hardwired to suffer psychologically: to compare, evaluate and criticise ourselves; to focus on what we're lacking; to rapidly become dissatisfied with what we have; and to imagine all sorts of frightening scenarios, most of which will never happen. No wonder humans find it hard to be happy!

But to make matters worse, many popular beliefs about happiness are inaccurate, misleading or false, and will actually make you miserable if you buy into them. Let's look at two of the most common ones.

Myth no. 1: Happiness is our natural state

Many people believe happiness is 'our natural state'. But the statistics above show very clearly, this is not the case. What is natural for human beings is to experience an everchanging flow of emotions — both pleasant and painful — varying throughout the day depending on where we are, what we're doing and what is happening. Our emotions, feelings and sensations are like the weather: continually changing from moment to moment. We don't expect it to be warm and sunny all day long, all year round. Nor should we expect to be happy and joyful all day long. If we live a full human life, we will feel the full range of human emotions: the pleasant ones, like love and joy and curiosity; and the painful ones, like sadness, anger and fear. All these feelings are a normal, natural part of being human.

Myth no. 2: If you're not happy, you're defective

Following logically from myth 1, Western society assumes that psychological suffering is abnormal. It is seen as a weakness or illness, a product of a mind that is somehow faulty or defective. This means that when we do inevitably experience painful thoughts and feelings, we are often ashamed or embarrassed about it, or we criticise ourselves for being weak, silly or immature.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy is based on a radically different assumption: *if you're not happy, you're normal*. Let's face it: life is tough and full of challenges; it would be weird if we felt happy all the time. The things that make life meaningful come with a whole range of feelings — both pleasant and painful. For example, consider a close relationship. When it's

going well, we will experience wonderful feelings such as love and joy. But sooner or later, in even the best relationships, we will experience conflict, disappointment and frustration. (There is no such thing as the perfect relationship.)

The same holds true for every meaningful project we embark on — from building a career or raising a family, to looking after our physical health and fitness. Although meaningful projects often bring feelings of excitement and enthusiasm, they also inevitably bring stress and anxiety. So if you believe myth 2 you're in big trouble, because it's virtually impossible to create a better life if you're not prepared to have some uncomfortable feelings. (The good news is, you will soon learn how to handle such feelings differently, to respond to them in a radically different way, so they have much less impact and influence over you.)

What exactly is 'happiness'?

Happiness. We want it. We crave it. We strive for it. But what exactly is it?

If you ask most people this question, they're likely to describe happiness as a 'good feeling': a pleasurable feeling of joy, gladness or contentment. The ancient Greeks had a special word for a life based on the pursuit of happy feelings: 'hedemonia', from which we get the word 'hedonism' (seeking pleasure). We all enjoy pleasurable feelings, so it's hardly surprising that we chase them. However, like all human emotions, feelings of happiness are fleeting; they come and they go. No matter how hard we try to hold on to them, they never hang around for long. And as we shall see, a life spent in pursuit of 'feeling good' is, in the long term, deeply unsatisfying. Indeed, research shows that the harder we chase after pleasurable feelings, and try to avoid the uncomfortable ones, the more likely we are to suffer from depression and anxiety.

But there's another meaning of happiness that's radically different: the experience of living a rich and meaningful life. When we clarify what we stand for in life and start acting accordingly — behaving like the sort of person we really want to be, doing the things that matter deep in our hearts, moving in life directions we consider worthy — then our lives become infused with

meaning and purpose, and we experience a profound sense of vitality. This is not some fleeting feeling — it is a powerful sense of a life well lived. The ancient Greek word for this type of happiness is 'eudemonia', these days often translated as 'flourishing'. When we live our lives in this way, we will, for sure, have many pleasurable feelings; and we'll also have many difficult ones, like sorrow, anxiety and guilt. (As I said before, if we live a full human life, we will feel the full range of human emotions.)

This book, as you've no doubt guessed, focuses on this second meaning of happiness, rather than the first. Of course, we all like to feel good, and it makes sense to appreciate and enjoy pleasant feelings when they appear. But if we try to have them all the time, we're doomed to failure.

The reality is: life is difficult. There's no escaping this fact. Sooner or later we will all grow infirm, get sick and die. Sooner or later we will all lose important relationships through rejection, separation or death. Sooner or later we will all come face to face with crisis, disappointment and failure. This means that, in one form or another, we are all going to experience plenty of painful thoughts and feelings.

But the good news is that, although we can't avoid such pain, we can learn to handle it much better — to 'unhook' from it, rise above it and create a life worth living. This book will teach you some simple but effective skills to rapidly take the impact out of painful thoughts, feelings, emotions, sensations and memories. You'll learn how to drain away their power, so they no longer hold you back or bring you down; how to let them come and go, without getting swept away by them. And you'll also learn how to build yourself a rich and meaningful life — no matter what you've been through in the past, or what you're facing right now — which will give rise to a deep sense of vitality and fulfilment.

Now pause for a moment and notice how your mind is reacting to this.

Is it positive, enthusiastic, excited, hopeful, optimistic? If so, enjoy that while it lasts — but please don't cling to it; because, as we'll see later, trying to hold on tightly to pleasant thoughts and feelings creates all sorts of problems.

On the other hand, perhaps your mind is doubtful or pessimistic, saying things like, 'This won't work for me' or 'I don't believe this; it's bullshit'. If so,

recognise such thoughts are completely natural; this is your mind doing its job, trying to save you from something that might be unpleasant or painful. How so? Well, suppose you invest lots of time, effort and energy in reading this book and applying it in your life; suppose you do all that and *it doesn't work!* That would be pretty painful, right? So your mind is trying to save you from that painful possibility. And throughout this book, you can expect your mind to do this in many ways. So each time that happens, I hope you'll remember two things:

- a) This is completely normal; all minds do this.
- b) Your mind isn't trying to make your life harder; it's just trying to keep you safe, protect you from pain.

The journey ahead

This book is like a trip through a foreign country: much will seem strange and new. Other things will seem familiar yet somehow subtly different. At times you may feel challenged or confronted, at other times excited or amused. Take your time on this journey. Instead of rushing ahead, savour it fully. Pause when you find something stimulating, curious or unusual. Explore it in depth and learn as much as you can. To create a life worth living is a major undertaking, so please take the time to appreciate it.

2 THE CHOICE POINT



Have you ever wondered why we're called 'human beings'? I think a better name would be 'human doings', because whether it's eating, drinking, cooking, cleaning, talking, walking, playing or reading, we're always doing something (even if it's just sleeping).

At times, we do things we that help us move towards the sort of life we want; let's call these behaviours 'towards moves'. And at other times, we do things that take us *away* from the sort of life we want; let's call these behaviours 'away moves'.

The diagram below illustrates this.

