

## **The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking - by Oliver Burkeman**

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### **Book Highlights ...**

The outcome we're seeking to avoid is exactly the one to which we seem magnetically lured. Like not thinking about a white bear.

Those who began the process with low self-esteem became appreciably less happy as a result of telling themselves that they were lovable. They didn't feel particularly lovable to begin with - and trying to convince themselves otherwise merely solidified their negativity. 'Positive thinking' had made them feel worse.

Stoicism, which was born in Greece and matured in Rome, should not be confused with 'stoicism' as the word is commonly used today - a weary, uncomplaining resignation.

Real Stoicism involves developing a kind of muscular calm in the face of trying circumstances.

Spending time and energy thinking about how well things could go actually reduces most people's motivation to achieve them. They confused visualising success with having already achieved it.

Switch to negative visualisation instead, and to start focusing on all the ways in which things could go wrong.

Tranquility was to be achieved not by strenuously chasing after enjoyable experiences, but by cultivating a kind of calm indifference towards one's circumstances. One way to do this, the Stoics argued, was by turning towards negative emotions and experiences; not shunning them, but examining them closely instead.

Most of us, the Stoics point out, go through life under the delusion that it is certain people, situations, or events

that make us sad, anxious, or angry. But nothing outside your own mind can properly be described as negative or positive at all. What actually causes suffering are the beliefs you hold about those things.

What makes the prospect of starvation or exposure distressing in the first place? The beliefs that you hold about the disadvantages of death.

One of the greatest enemies of human happiness is hedonic adaptation.

Thinking about the possibility of losing something you value shifts it from the backdrop of your life back to centre stage, where it can deliver pleasure once more.

Reassurance can actually exacerbate anxiety: when you reassure your friend that the worst-case scenario he fears probably won't occur, you inadvertently reinforce his belief that it would be catastrophic if it did.

If your strategy for happiness depends on bending circumstances to your will, this is terrible news: the best you can do is to pray that not all that much will go wrong and try to distract yourself when it does.

A Stoic who finds herself in an abusive relationship would not be expected to put up with it, and would almost certainly be best advised to take action to leave it.

It was all highly undesirable, but not horrific, and there was no point insisting that the entire universe fall in line with his wishes.

Meditation has little to do with achieving any specific desired state of mind, no matter whether blissful or calm.

To live non-attachedly is to feel impulses, think thoughts, and experience life without becoming hooked by mental narratives about how things 'should' be, or should never be, or should remain forever. The perfectly non-attached Buddhist would be simply, calmly present, and non-judgmentally aware.

Clinging to a particular version of a happy life, while fighting to eliminate all possibility of an unhappy one, was the cause of the problem, not its solution.

It wasn't about escaping into ecstasy - or even into calmness, as the word is normally understood; and it certainly wasn't about positive thinking. It was about the significantly greater challenge of declining to do any of that.

'Groundlessness' is actually everyone's situation, all the time, whether they like it or not. It's just that most of us can't relax in the presence of that truth; instead, we frantically scramble to deny it.

Sometimes you simply can't make yourself feel like acting. Taking a non-attached stance: Who says you need to wait until you 'feel like' doing something in order to start doing it? Note the procrastinatory feelings and act anyway.

Working routines of prolific authors and artists - people who really do get a lot done - very rarely include techniques for 'getting motivated'. Quite the opposite: they tend to emphasise the mechanics of the working process.

We can take action without changing our feeling-states.

The Everest climbers had been lured into destruction by their passion for goals. The more they fixated on the endpoint, the more that goal became not just an external target but a part of their own identities. Negative evidence would be reinterpreted as a reason to invest more effort and resources in pursuit of the goal. And so things would go even more wrong.

The Yale Study of Goals never took place.

Faced with the anxiety of not knowing what the future holds, we invest ever more fiercely in our preferred vision of that future - not because it will help us achieve it, but because it helps rid us of feelings of uncertainty in the present.

Consider any significant decision you've ever taken that you subsequently came to regret: you felt the gut-knotting ache of uncertainty; afterwards, having made a decision, did those feelings subside? If so, this points to the troubling possibility that your primary motivation in taking the decision wasn't any rational consideration of its rightness for you, but simply the urgent need to get rid of your feelings of uncertainty.

Like a frog: You should sun yourself on a lily-pad until you get bored; then, when the time is right, you should jump to a new lily-pad and hang out there for a while. Continue this over and over, moving in whatever direction feels right.

The Matrix is essentially a twentieth-century meditation on Descartes's seventeenth-century insights.

There is no centre in the brain where things do all come together.

We imagine that we are the chattering stream of thinking.

Try asking yourself if you have any problems right now. The answer, unless you're currently in physical pain, is very likely to be no. Most problems involve thoughts about how something might turn out badly in the future, or thoughts about things that happened in the past.

Helping other people is a far more reliable strategy for happiness than focusing solely on yourself.

For every outside, there is an inside, and that for every inside, there is an outside, and although they are different, they go together.

The self is best thought of as some kind of a fiction, albeit an extremely useful one.

A staggering proportion of human activity is motivated by the desire to feel safe and secure.

In turning towards insecurity we may come to understand that security itself is a kind of illusion - and that we were

mistaken, all along, about what it was we thought we were searching for.

People have always believed that they are living in times of unique insecurity.

Many of the ways in which we try to feel safe don't ultimately make us happy.

We protect ourselves from physical danger by moving to safer neighbourhoods, but the effects of such trends on community life have been demonstrated to have a negative effect on collective levels of happiness. We seek the fulfilment of strong romantic relationships and friendships, yet striving too hard to achieve security in such relationships stifles them.

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung, and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no-one.

The more you try to avoid suffering, the more you suffer, because smaller and more insignificant things begin to torture you.

Becoming a Buddhist is about becoming homeless.

People living in extremely fragile circumstances seem surprisingly high-functioning and non-depressed.

Money: if you don't have it, it's much harder to overinvest emotionally in it. The same goes for prestigious jobs, material possessions, or impressive educational qualifications.

To seek security is to try to remove yourself from change, and thus from the thing that defines life.

We build castle walls to keep out the enemy, but it is the building of the walls that causes the enemy to spring into existence in the first place.

There is no security until we realize that this 'I' does not exist.

Insecurity: it is another word for life.

We will do anything to tell a success-based story of our lives.

Successful entrepreneurs possess perseverance and leadership skills, of course. What is less obvious – and much less boring – is what the speaker neglected to mention: that those traits are likely to be the characteristics of extremely unsuccessful people, too.

Our conversations about success are always falling foul of the undersampling of failure. You don't hear speeches or read autobiographies by people who were unafraid of failure and then did indeed simply fail.

The vulnerability revealed by failure can nurture empathy and communality.

Reduce the terror induced by the mere thought of death. Fearing being dead yourself makes no sense. You don't look back with horror at the eternal oblivion before you were born.

Live a life suffused with the awareness of its own finitude, and you can hope to finish it in something like the fashion that Jean-Paul Sartre hoped to die: 'quietly ... certain that the last burst of my heart would be inscribed on the last page of my work, and that death would be taking only a dead man'.

Imagine you are eighty. Complete the sentences 'I wish I'd spent more time on...' and 'I wish I'd spent less time on...'.

Imagining worst-case scenarios is one of my greatest sources of solace in life.