



The Happiness Trap: How to Stop Struggling and Start Living: A Guide to ACT

Russ Harris , Steven C. Hayes (Forward)

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Are you, like millions of Americans, caught in the happiness trap? Russ Harris explains that the way most of us go about trying to find happiness ends up making us miserable, driving the epidemics of stress, anxiety, and depression. This empowering book presents the insights and techniques of ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy) a revolutionary new psychotherapy based on cutting-edge research in behavioral psychology. By clarifying your values and developing mindfulness (a technique for living fully in the present moment), ACT helps you escape the happiness trap and find true satisfaction in life.

The techniques presented in *The Happiness Trap* will help readers to:

- Reduce stress and worry
- Handle painful feelings and thoughts more effectively
- Break self-defeating habits
- Overcome insecurity and self-doubt
- Create a rich, full, and meaningful life

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Date : Published June 3rd 2008 by Trumpeter (first published January 1st 2007)

ISBN : 9781590305843

Author : Russ Harris , Steven C. Hayes (Forward)

Format : Paperback 240 pages

Genre : Psychology, Self Help, Nonfiction, Personal Development, Health, Mental Health

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From Reader Review The Happiness Trap: How to Stop Struggling and Start Living: A Guide to ACT for online ebook

Matt says

It's worth it in the end. - That is my first thought that describes this book. When I began this book I did not enjoy it. Honestly, it annoyed me.

By the time I finished it I realized ways I could make substantial improvements in my life.

First: The annoying part.

The author (Dr. Harris) seems to assume that all his readers have the same thought processes, make the same mistakes, and can be fixed the same way.

He begins by telling us we likely believe four myths.

Myth 1: Happiness Is the Natural State for All Human Beings

Myth 2: If You're Not Happy, You're Defective

Myth 3: To Create a Better Life, We Must Get Rid of Negative Feelings

Myth 4: You Should Be Able to Control What You Think and Feel

I don't think most people believe THESE myths. I think they believe truths that are very closely related to these that get twisted.

1: Happiness is a possible natural state for all human beings (happiness, not pleasure)

2: You can learn to be happier by fixing your defective habits

3: You can create a better life, and you will have less negative feelings.

4: You should gain better control of your thoughts and feelings as you progress.

Doctor Harris spends half the book teaching a useful but difficult lesson. We have two ways of thinking or two minds. We have the "observing" and the "thinking" mind. The observing mind is always observing and recording. It doesn't interpret or judge, it just observes what's there. Then our thinking mind can interpret that information if need be, or think about something else entirely. That's why you can drive your car on the interstate and not remember the last 15 miles because you've been thinking about something. Your observing mind always observed you were driving in your lane, so your thinking mind left it alone and pondered something else.

He teaches us how to stop beating ourselves up for the constant flow of thoughts we can't really control. Thoughts will come that we never wanted. When we dwell on them or try to drive them out, we always seem to make things worse and end up angry or upset at ourselves. He teaches us to simply accept the thought, and then move on. Don't dwell on it, not try to avoid it. Acknowledge it – it's just a thought. It's not an action, it's not a destiny. It's a thought, you had it, it was there, and you can't change that. Accept it, then move on.

The end of the book is great. It teaches how to make real change that brings real happiness. Happiness comes from living according to your values. He urges us to spend REAL time discovering our values. Not our goals, or what society tells us to care about, but what we REALLY care about. Figure those values out, then set immediate, short medium, and long term goals that are congruent with your values.

I'm using what I've learned, and my life is getting better. What more can I say?

Here are some of my favorite quotes from the book:

"Today's middle class lives better than did the Royalty of not so long ago, and yet humans today don't seem very happy." – p. 2

"You won't change your life simply by reading this book." – p. 35

"We have many thousands of useless or unhelpful thoughts every day." – p. 49

"Letting the radio play on without giving it much attention is very different from actively trying to ignore it." – p. 66

"Despite everything you've tried over the years, isn't it a fact that your mind still produces unpleasant pictures?" – p. 75

"What would I attempt if thoughts of failure didn't deter me?" – p. 79

"The fight-or-flight is often triggered in situations where it is of little or no use to us." – p. 85

"Any search for a Pain-free existence is doomed to failure." – p. 137

"What do you want your life to be about?" – P. 167

"He who has the why to live for, can bear almost any how." – F. Nietzsche – p. 170

"Never set as your goal something that a dead person can do better than you." – p. 186

"If you're living a goal-focused life, then no matter what you have, it's never enough...find the values underlying your goals." – p. 198

"Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover." – Mark Twain – p. 216

"Commitment isn't about being perfect, always following through, or never going astray. Commitment means that when you (inevitably) stumble or get off track, you pick yourself up, find your bearings, and carry on." – p. 219

"Success in life means living by your values." – p. 221

"If you don't decide where you're going, you'll end up wherever you're heading." – p. 232

Sara says

The Happiness Trap is one of the best self help books I've read. Definitely recommend it if you want to learn more about ACT.

Philip Glennie says

I'm a little at a loss about this one. But I'd like to start by saying that this book has made a significant impact on my motivation and overall quality of life. It's been months since I read it, but its message is still paying dividends. I've always been skeptical of the self-help genre, but this book came at the recommendation of a trusted friend, and I can honestly say that it's one of the most important things I've ever read. My approach to my own mind has always come from a psychoanalytic perspective, in which I have believed that unearthing traumatic elements in my personal history might somehow help me to banish bad thoughts forever. But this book gave me my first exposure to Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, and more specifically, the branch of it known as Acceptance Commitment Therapy. This approach to the mind is based on the acceptance that no matter what you do, a massive portion of your thoughts and self-talk will be negative. These thoughts can't

be overpowered by positive visualization or a talking cure, but only by accepting them for the negative thoughts they are and moving on. Bad thoughts are not YOU; they are simply "things" being secreted by your brain and need to be treated as such.

I strongly recommend this book for anyone looking to feel more motivated and fulfilled in their day-to-day lives. You might notice that I leave the word "happy" out of this description, and if you read the book, you'll know why...

Zahra says

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Thomas says

4.5 stars

An excellent book I would recommend to anyone interested in mental health, either their own or those around them, or the concept at large. In *The Happiness Trap*, Russ Harris crafts a persuasive, intelligent argument for why we should stop aiming for happiness and instead aim for a mindful, values-driven life. His ideas in this book come from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), a newer, third-wave cognitive behavioral therapy that has shown promising effectiveness in research studies. He starts the book by dispelling “happiness myths,” such as how happiness is the natural state for all humans, or how to live a better life we have to get rid of negative feelings. After this first section, he goes on to provide several strategies for increasing psychological flexibility, core principles that help us cultivate a rich and meaningful life. I will provide a super brief synopsis of each one:

- 1) Defusion: Recognizing thoughts, images, memories, and feelings as what they are – just words and pictures – without fighting them, running from them, or staying too focused on them
- 2) Expansion: Making additional room for these thoughts, images, memories, and feelings while allowing them to come and go as they please, without fighting them
- 3) Connection: Staying fully aware of the present moment and letting yourself experience the present moment with openness, interest, and receptiveness
- 4) The Observing Self: Bringing a pure awareness in which you observe your challenging, unpleasant thoughts and feelings without being hurt by them or subsumed by them
- 5) Values: Clarifying what is most important to you in your life, what sort of person you want to be, and not just focusing on external goals – focusing more on the expression of those values (e.g., “I want to practice connection with people” instead of “I want to be married to a romantic partner”)
- 6) Committed Action: Taking effective action in line with your values, no matter what the outcome and even

if it is hard

As a therapist and has someone who has been in therapy, I love ACT. I find it so effective for myself and for clients, and I appreciate its emphasis on both sitting with and honoring difficult emotions while also taking action to change your situation for the better. In a capitalist, often external and outward focused society, ACT's commitment to internal awareness and values makes me so happy (and I recognize happiness is not the goal, ha). Harris also provides several relevant, clear, and applied examples of his theories which aids in this book's appeal to a mass audience. In some ways it reads like a more accessible version of this Acceptance and Commitment Therapy book, though I would recommend that book too without a doubt. My only critique is that I wish Harris had addressed how these theories may or may not apply to various minorities, as the studies examining ACT's efficacy has mostly focused on white samples (though that is changing slowly, very slowly). Even a nod toward how we need a more culturally-relevant understanding of ACT would have helped, just to acknowledge that not all people are the same and thus we should make sure our therapies apply to folks of different backgrounds. Also, I think he could have done a better job of more thoroughly giving credit to the Buddhist/non-western roots of where some of his ideas came from. Still, a highly recommended read for those interested in Psychology and mental health.

Daniel Taylor says

When I got into self-help books, I had two problems I wanted to solve: how to become likable and how to solve an addiction I'd had since I was 13-years-old. The books were able to help with the first, but nothing I tried worked with the addiction. That was until I started seeing a psychologist trained in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT).

After our first session, I got instant results. Over the weekend that followed I had many changes to indulge my addiction and I had the desire, but I was able to use ACT to make values-based choices. At that point, my knowledge of the principles of ACT was rudimentary.

My psychologist loaned me his copy of this book and I read it swiftly picking up a number of tools that strengthened my practice of ACT. With a gift voucher for Christmas, I bought my own copy.

What is ACT? The acronym also stands for the process Accept your internal experience; Choose a values-based direction; Take action! It has proven effective with depression and addiction.

The book explores a number of tools you can use to accept your experience of those things and make choices that will make you feel good long-term.

It's a groundbreaking book that's simple to understand and easy to apply. If you're having problems in life because of negative feelings or self-talk, this book would be my first recommendation.

Sarah says

I don't know how I feel about this book. It's basically a client-friendly overview of Acceptance & Commitment Therapy (ACT) and offers instructions on how to implement associated techniques and interventions.

Essentially, ACT suggests that there is no way to eliminate pain in life, so learning to accept it and channel your energy into activities that have value to you leaves you more prepared to live effectively and without a lot of wasted time fighting reality.

I agree with the central theory. Humans naturally and inevitably experience a whole range of emotion, including distressing emotion, and it's much healthier to remain in a non-judgmental, accepting place as opposed to getting all wrapped up in futile attempts to push unpleasant emotion away (bottling) or simply letting it consume and paralyze you (dwelling).

I also agree that the majority of the suggested techniques associated with ACT are beneficial for many people. There's a lot of really easy-to-try (sometimes oversimplified) techniques that make sitting with unpleasant emotion a little easier and more accessible to folks who have spent a lot of time and energy trying to control emotion rather than accept it.

I take issue with two things in relation to this book. First, there were a few times as I was reading that the tone felt condescending. I felt very little empathy or understanding in relation to how difficult it can be to endure the kinds of things that go beyond the basic, universal aches and pains of life. I found this particularly weird given that the author is a therapist himself...

Sure, with practice these little exercises get easier, but not everyone can immediately turn their crippling grief or rage or trauma into "demons on the boat" that simply need to be acknowledged and dismissed in order to "turn the ship toward shore." Emotions can't physically hurt you, that's true, and we're absolutely strong enough to process even our most upsetting emotions, but sometimes worksheets and values clarification just aren't enough, or at the very least come off as remarkably naive and simplistic.

Try telling a victim of rape or severe domestic violence, for instance, to "just make space" for their anger and shame and trauma. Or telling a grieving wife who lost her husband of 60 years and is now potentially homeless with no support that she should "accept" her fear and heartache and helplessness. I suppose that ACT might be appropriate after some time has passed and folks like this are experiencing more stability, but I also think that there are some things that need deeper exploration than ACT can offer.

Harris did mention several times throughout the book to take what works and leave the rest. I just hope he meant that we could leave the whole thing if necessary and determined to be clinically appropriate. As a therapist, I can't imagine he meant anything else so I'm just going to give him the benefit of the doubt on this one.

Secondly, I also find it problematic how ACT (as presented in this book) hijacks Eastern philosophies that have been around for thousands of years, repackages them, and sells them as a new, primarily Western therapeutic modality. Harris was explicit about the fact that none of what he was describing was related to religion, meditation, spirituality, etc. and yet the primary technique (breathe, accept, remain mindful and non-judgmental) is nearly a word-for-word definition of many Eastern meditative practices, stripped of their cultural and spiritual context.

Additionally, the way that Harris describes the underlying theory of ACT sure sounds a lot like Buddhist philosophy, even though it hasn't been labeled as such. Life is pain; non-attachment is the solution; the importance of mindfulness; the benefit of breath work... This all starts to feel a lot like cultural appropriation and philosophical plagiarism.

I'm not saying ACT is worthless, that all of it is stolen, or that it should be discarded in favor of more

religiously and culturally traditional practices. I *am* saying that instead of distancing ACT from obvious Eastern connections, it would seem more appropriate to deliberately and respectfully highlight the connections, give credit where credit is due, and *then* point out that it's possible to utilize some of these ancient practices with modern Western cues, in a non-religious way in service of our mental health (as Easterners figured out, like, forever ago).

Anyway. This review has gotten long and rambling. In sum, I think Harris and ACT have a lot to offer, I just have some personal beef with the way it was presented in this particular book.

Josh says

It must reveal something if I feel cagy about advertising that I've read a book subtitled "How to Stop Struggling and Start Living." Who doesn't imagine people are paying way more attention to your insecurities than they really are? "Gracious, I didn't know Josh was struggling! The poor dear. Let's make him some soup."

Well, okay, I'm not actually struggling. Life's mostly all peach these days, but I'm (almost) always interested in self-improvement. We get one go on this globe and studying ways of living well is a worthy endeavor, no matter where we fall on the struggle/succeed scale. So let's say you're not struggling either. Or maybe struggling just in like this one area or two. Let's assume we're all arrayed somewhere along the fat median part of the continuum's arc and doing okay or pretty good or I'm-too-busy-to-even-tell, but maybe sometimes find ourselves on the far downslope, anxious or discouraged or frustrated with ourselves. Does Russ Harris's *The Happiness Trap* have anything to offer?

Absolutely. The tenets of the book are solid and its suggestions useful. It's based on something called Acceptance and Commitment Therapy -- hey, ACT, get it? -- and while I won't unpack it all here, I can endorse it. I can endorse it though because many of the practices are ones I've already incorporated to some extent (or, yes, have thought about incorporating because it sounds like a good idea and once I'm done with the dishes and today's heaping inbox and had a nap and watched an episode of *Homeland* I intend to think very seriously about maybe doing it sometime). Anyhow, I'm particularly a fan of defusing from thoughts -- basically a Don't Believe Everything You Think approach -- and the practice of returning regularly to your values to make sure you're staying on course. I also liked his suggestion, Don't set goals a dead person can do better than you. E.g., "As God is my witness, I'll never waste time playing Freecell again!" isn't the most usefully formulated goal one might hope for.

I did heave a few impatient sighs in the beginning, where -- like in all self-help books, it seems -- Harris spends a good deal of time declaring how *This Book is Different*. Not to mention going over stuff that's as elementary as the Alphabet Song to anyone who's read anything even remotely self-helpy. (Lowest moment is when he explains that the acronym ACT is pronounced like the word "act": I think we might've guessed.) He takes pains midway through to explain *again* how his method differs from previous methods, but it's not difficult to spot his ancestors (most notably Richard Carlson, the Don't Sweat the Small Stuff guy, whose earliest books are owed such a great debt that Harris doesn't even whisper his name). His insistence on his own originality sounds hollownest when he declares that his take on mindfulness is different from other versions of mindfulness, or that his "living in the present" is somehow a new idea. The "Further Readings and Resources" is woefully slim: it lists only three other books, followed by a paragraph directing the reader to Harris's website for more materials. You don't say.

So you have to slog through those parts to get to the good stuff. But the good stuff *is* good. It's not terribly new but it's exceptionally well-organized, which alone makes it worth checking out. Judging by other reviews, it's been a boon for a lot of folks and I can't quibble with that. Even though I found much of it familiar, I appreciated the reminders and like how the program's laid out a lot. Consider the book recommended.

Hayley Waterhouse says

I don't really know how to summarise this book. When I first started reading it I thought I would read the whole thing through, just to see what it is like, without doing the exercises. If I thought it had some merit I would read it a second time doing all the exercises and taking my time with it. As it happens some of the exercises really got stuck in my head and I found myself doing them anyway! This book felt like it was written just for me. I think I have so much to learn from it and that it could really make a difference in my life. It is probably the most helpful self-help book I have ever read. I look forward to reading this again, putting into practice what I learn and changing the way I view life. I'm going to buy a paper copy so it's easier to flick through and refer to. I think this book would be most helpful for people who have tried a few different things to manage their head space but continue to find that negative thoughts/feelings keep arising. This book basically says stop trying to argue your 'negative' thoughts and emotions, stop trying to avoid them, suppress them or change them. Just let them come and go without paying them any attention. A very interesting read.

ps. I wanted to give it 5 stars but I will wait six months and see!

Bronwyn says

(Dr) Harris uses a great story of 2 kids in the car with mum on their way to the zoo. Both have been looking forward to the visit for weeks. Johnny is looking out the window playing "I spy" with mum, looking at the cars passing by, waving at the trains and the truck drivers. Counting cows and sheep along the road side. Billy is slumped in the back, anxious and irritated "when are we going to get there" he keeps asking. A few kilometers from the zoo the car breaks down and has to be towed back to their home. They never did make it to the zoo. Which of the boys had the better day out? The Happiness traps is about the lives we lead chasing "happiness" - we will only be happy when... - and in our obsession to be happy we miss what is happening right now. It gives us the tools to really appreciate "the journey" and live a more fulfilled life. I highly recommend it.

Alice says

I want to hate this book. It's so patronising and at times seriously flawed, logic-wise. It explains things with lots of exclamation marks! And drawn-out metaphors! And basically it's just the author going on, without drawing on any examples from the real world!

Despite all this, I'm persisting because, in amongst all the guff, there are some strategies in here that bloody well work. And they work fast. This pains me because I, like the people Harris loves to patronise in the book, am one of those that spent a lot of time working through Cognitive Behavioural Therapy strategies. To have

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy boy come in, sit down and go "Here's some things that will work for you. Got any biscuits?" is just plain annoying.

But I guess I just have to recognise that that's just a thought I'm having, don't I Russ?

Grr.

Update: I'm much less "grr" about this book now since I've been through all of it. I think I actually want to read it again and do the exercises more meticulously. The bottom line is, while the writing style isn't great, the strategies he's promoting are actually really good. Now it's just a matter of actually following through on them.

Brad says

I found this book extremely helpful--I had previously read about Acceptance and Commitment Therapy on the website PsychologyToday.com. Apparently it is a successful and empirically proven therapy, so I was very much intrigued. I ended up going pretty slowly through the book, which allowed me to think about the principles it contains on a daily basis for a couple of weeks.

From what I understand, ACT takes a lot from Buddhist philosophy, and I can totally dig it. Some of the important things ACT teaches are that sometimes life is painful, and we need to accept that fact; our thoughts do not control our actions, particularly when we step back and observe what our thoughts are and decide whether they are in line with our values; if yes, act on them, if no, don't try to force the thoughts away, but choose an action that is in line with your values.

I've been thinking a lot about these things for both the big and little challenges that I face each day, and I have found them useful. This isn't a book that tells you how to be happy all the time, because that is not possible. But it does help you live a life of fulfillment, which I think is what matters most. I also believe that a fulfilling life is a joyful life--note that I do not say a "happy" or "ever-pleasant" life, as I think there is an important distinction.

I highly recommend this book.

Rating: PG, probably, for some mild language?

Things that seem like they might be useful for me:
(view spoiler)

Chanel J says

While the ideas and techniques discussed in this book are interesting, the way it is written is insultingly patronising and alternates between speaking to you like a child and yelling at you like an impatient parent. This attitude ruined the book for me.

Karate1kid says

If you are willing to read just one self-help book - this is the one. Especially if you prefer advice on how to find out what you like and why you are better off behaving in a certain way, to 'just so' statements about beliefs you must adopt and the way you should think-feel-behave to achieve a specific goal / way of life some guru says is best.

The advice is based on a third wave CBT approach (more behavioral than cognitive) called Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). If you are looking for an in depth discussion of the psychological theory and relevant research see the second edition (2011) of ACT by Hayes, Strosahl and Wilson. If you're interested in its philosophical basis see Hayes, Barnes-Holmes and Rocheand (2001) - Relational Frame Theory. Those books are not easy to read. I don't recommend them as a starting point even for professionals new to ACT, and they are completely unnecessary for readers interested in self-help.

Harris does a very good job simplifying the philosophy and therapy ideas, explaining motivations and translating it all into practical advice and exercises. There is always room for improvement, but this book already is much better than good enough.

Robin Gillmore says

I have read a lot of self-help books over the years, but this one is different and has made a significant difference to my quality of life. Acceptance Commitment Therapy is very different to traditional approaches to anxiety and depression because it teaches tools of acceptance rather than control, using three principal mechanisms:

1. Diffusion - decoupling ourselves from our thoughts
2. Expansion - accepting and making room for uncomfortable thoughts, feelings, urges and sensations
3. Connection - focussing on actions and behaviours which align with our deeply held values

I cannot recommend this book enough!
