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BOOK REVIEW

R. Harris: The Happiness Trap

Robinson, London, 2008, 262 pp, Price: £9.99, ISBN 978-1-84529-825-8

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Walk into any well-stocked book store today and you have the option to browse among numerous self-help books, all of which claim to hold the key to a happier existence—so, why should *The happiness trap* by Dr. Russ Harris be any different? We all know that minimising our negative thoughts and feelings, embracing our positive thoughts and feelings, and carrying out enjoyable activities lead us towards a happier and more content frame of mind, right? Wrong—at least that is what the contents of this book would have you believe.

Harris captures the readers attention straight from the off, by proposing that all we believe to know about happiness is false, and it is these false beliefs themselves that inevitably make us miserable in the end. The author goes on to suggest that our efforts to achieve what we perceive as happiness are actually inhibiting our chances of ever realising this goal.

Our beliefs about happiness, according to Harris, are conjured up through our adherence to four popular myths: that happiness is the natural state for all humans; if you are not happy you are defective; to create a better life, we must get rid of negative feelings; you should be able to control what you think and feel. Believing in these myths lead to eventual feelings of failure, since each myth represents a way of life that we cannot ever realise. Rather than adhere to these commonly believed strategies, Harris proposes that implementing the strategies used in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) will enable us to have "a rich, full and meaningful life, while effectively handling the pain that inevitably comes our way" (p. 2). Indeed, by attempting to rectify our negative thoughts and feelings we only add to them, since our efforts to erase them are destined to fail, thus: "the solution is the problem" (p. 22).

The book encourages the reader to take control of their thoughts and feelings and outlines methods to do so, boosting coping strategies that we all employ on a daily basis to suppress the constant inner broadcasts of our inner thoughts, or 'thinking selves' as Harris describes (see chapter 7). Through the six core principles of ACT, the author aims to

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enhance our mindfulness skills (mental awareness) and to ultimately empower us with psychological flexibility in the ongoing quest for the full and meaningful life.

Throughout the book the reader is asked to consider if their thoughts are helpful, and postulates that when we fuse with our thoughts we believe them to be true and important, almost like orders that threaten us. Once the reader has learned how to defuse these thoughts it becomes an easier task to escape the happiness trap. 'Defusion' enables us to view our thoughts simply as internal sounds or words that are not always true or wise and are not always important. Once the thoughts that interfere with our daily lives are accepted and defused, we can choose to ignore them and focus our attention on to doing something that we value that brings us a positive, real reward in our lives.

You might think that this all sounds a bit daunting, but Harris has provided the reader with the tools to ensure a release from the happiness trap. In order to master the techniques described in the text, the author has scattered various questionnaires, breathing exercises, suggestions, personal introspection exercises throughout the book, even including a frequently asked questions chapter!

Harris has approached this book with an enthusiasm and commitment that is evident throughout the content as one reads, but unfortunately does not offer any real empirical evidence as to the reliability or validity of his findings. Whilst there are many individual examples of case studies that are implemented to exemplify various views, scientific proof is lacking.

Perhaps it may be easy to suggest that someone wishing to read such a book in an authentic attempt to turn around their life for the better might not want to waste time reading through the results of clinical trials, but, nonetheless, an evidence-based section in the appendix would have certainly added more to the efficacy of the ACT programme.

The book is easy to read and is composed of three parts: 'How to set the happiness trap', 'Transforming your inner world', and 'Creating a life worth living'. *The happiness trap* becomes more akin to a workbook with its use of questionnaires and exercises—a workbook that records measurements and charts the reader's progress as he or she works towards the end of the last chapter and towards their ultimate goal: a fuller life, enriched with meaning and hope.

Harris certainly has broken the mould of the self-help book with this enthusiastic and unique approach to making the most of our lives. Although the wording is simple and elegantly phrased throughout, the text might prove too much for those suffering from more severe types of mental illness, such as clinical depression, for example—that said, a book like this, with it's fresh, innovative and interactive style, might just prove to be 'just what the doctor (Harris) ordered'.