

## **Can You Learn to be Happy? Happier- Tal Ben-Shahar**

*This book abstract is intended to provide just a glimpse of this wonderful book with the hope that you may like to read the original book at leisure and enjoy its real beauty.*

### Preface

We all live with the objective of being happy; our lives are all different and yet the same. Anne Frank

The question of questions: how can we help ourselves and others become happier? Ultimate currency: happiness.

Rates of depression in 2006 10 times higher than that in 1960s. average age of depression in the same period the average age of onset of depression is 14.5 compared to 29 in 1960. A study conducted in American colleges tells us that nearly 45 % of students were “so depressed that they had difficulty functioning.” Wealth of countries improved but mental health has worsened.

### Why PS?

1998 Martin Seligman. Self-help books offer 3 secrets of success, five easy steps to happiness, which don't work. Bridging academic rigor and the fun of self-help movement is the purpose of this book.

Leonardo da Vinci “simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.”

### Using This Book

Intended to help you understand the nature of happiness and help you become happier. To make an impact treat it like a workbook. The work involves reflection and action.

### Part 1

#### What Is Happiness?

##### 1. The Question of Happiness

In the middle of difficulty lies Opportunity-Albert Einstein

After winning national squash championship, the joy suddenly disappeared before sleeping. Feeling of emptiness returned.

I became obsessed with the answer to a single question: how can I find lasting happiness.

How can a person be both successful and happy? How can ambition and happiness be reconciled.

Words like pleasure, bliss, ecstasy, and contentment are often interchangeably with the word happiness. Emotions are fleeting, they are enjoyable and significant, they are not the measure of happiness. We can exercise sadness at times and still enjoy overall happiness.

My objective in writing this book is to raise awareness of the general principles underlying a happy and fulfilling life.

### From Happy to Happier

The question “Am I happy?” is not helpful. It is a closed question. No binary answer. Helpful question is “How can I become happier?”

Creating Rituals: instead of focusing on cultivating self-discipline as a means toward change, we need to introduce rituals. It requires defining very precise behaviors and performing them at very specific times.

Introduce no more than one or two rituals at a time, and make sure they become habits before you introduce new ones. Tony Schwartz, "Incremental change is better than ambitious failure.... Success feeds on itself."

Aristotle, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit."

Gratitude: Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough: Daily, writing down 5 things to be grateful for in a journal-enjoyed higher levels of emotional and physical well-being.

Keep emotions fresh; imagine what each item means to you and experience the feeling associated with it. Expressing gratitude together can contribute in a meaningful way to the relationship.

## 2. Reconciling Present and Future

4 models:

Hedonist: present benefit, future detriment.

Rat race: Future benefit, present detriment.

Nihilist: present and future detriment

Happiness: present and future benefit.

Most common is Rat-race type:

He is afraid of performing poorly in tests, feels anxious and stressed. Looks forward to end of each period and each day. Accepts values of the adults-grades are the measure of success. Dislikes school, continues to work hard. When he does well, parents, teachers compliment, classmates envy.

In school, he feels he will have fun in the college. In college, he thinks job will bring fun. Then promotions and so on.

We learn to focus on the next goal rather than our present experience and chase the ever-elusive future our entire lives. We are not rewarded for enjoying the journey itself but for the successful completion of the journey. Society rewards results, not processes; arrivals, not journeys.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi "the best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile.

It is possible to enjoy both for much of the time.

To expect constant happiness, though, is to set ourselves up for failure and disappointment.

Happiness is not about making it to the peak of the mountain; happiness is the experience of climbing toward the peak.

## 3. Happiness Explained

Happiness is the meaning and purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence- Aristotle.

Why do you want to be happy? Because it is our nature to do so.

I define happiness as "the overall experience of pleasure and meaning." A happy person enjoys positive emotions while perceiving her life as purposeful. The definition does not pertain to a single moment but to a generalized aggregate of one's experiences: a person can endure emotional pain at times and still be happy overall.

Emotion causes motion, provides motivation to act.

While the happy person experiences highs and lows, his overall state of being is positive. Pleasure is the rule, pain, the exception.

We need the cause of our emotions to be meaningful.

Oxford defines spirituality as “the real sense of significance of something.”

Bertrand Russell “the happiness that is genuinely satisfying is accompanied by the fullest exercise of our faculties and the fullest realization of the world in which we live.”

Thoreau: “Life is too short to be in a hurry.”

Abraham Maslow: a person “cannot choose wisely for a life unless he dares to listen to himself, his own self, at each moment in life.”

If feasible, create an internet-free time zone each day between certain hours.

#### 4. The Ultimate Currency

Approximately one-third of American teenagers suffer from depression.

In his book Emotional Intelligence, Daniel Goleman notes that “each successive generation worldwide since the opening of the [twentieth] century has lived with a higher risk than their parents of suffering a major depression-not just sadness, but a paralyzing listlessness, dejection, and self-pity, and an overwhelming hopelessness-over the course of life.

Viktor Frankl: 25 % his European students and 60 % of his American students felt that they lived in an “existential vacuum,” a state of “inner emptiness, a void within themselves.”

#### 5. Setting Goals

Goals and success: people who set goals are more likely to succeed than people who do not. Having explicit objectives that are challenging and specific-with clear timeline and performance criteria-leads to better performance.

Within as short a period as a month, lottery winners return to their base levels of well being-if they were unhappy before winning, they will remain so.

Pirsig, focused on the goal of reaching the peak of the mountain and overwhelmed by what still lay ahead, was unable to enjoy the climb; he lost his desire-and his strength-to carry on. The monks who focused on the peak, but only to make sure that they were staying on course, not because reaching the peak itself was most important to them.

The emphasis in my approach is not so much on attaining goals as it is in having them. Contemporary researchers emphasize that it is the process of striving after goals-rather than goal attainment per se-that is crucial for happiness and positive affectivity.” The primary

The Purpose of having a goal- a future purpose-is to enhance enjoyment of the present.

Goals are means, not just ends. A goal enables us to experience a sense of being while doing.

Kenneth Sheldon et al. “People seeking greater well-being would be well advised to focus on the pursuit of (a) goals involving growth, connection, and contribution rather than goals involving money, beauty, and popularity and (b) goals that are interesting and personally important to them rather than goals they feel forced or pressured to pursue.”

Self-Concordant Goals: these are those which we pursue out of deep personal conviction and/or a strong interest.

In their research titled “The Dark Side of the American Dream,” Tim Kasser and Richard Ryan demonstrate that pursuing financial success as a central goal in life, as a guiding principle, leads to negative consequences.

### Want-To Versus Have-To

The feeling that one has chosen one’s goals freely is a precondition for self-concordance.

One way of becoming happier, increasing the base-level of our well-being, is to reduce the have-tos while increasing the want-tos, in terms of general life pursuits as well as daily activities.

Most of our choices are driven by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. The question is whether the intrinsic or extrinsic is more fundamental to the choice. These decide whether the work is of the want-to, or have-to.

Same applies to our daily pursuits. How much of my day is spent on activities that I want to do versus those that I have to do? Some have-tos are unavoidable. Personally I want to teach, but to do so I also have to spend many hours grading papers and exams. The challenge is not to entirely get rid of have-tos but reduce them and, as much as possible, replace them with want-tos. How happy I am depends to a large degree on the ratio between want-tos and have-tos in my life. This ratio largely determines whether I look forward to getting up in the morning or am I exhausted by the thought of what lies ahead; whether I feel a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction or more of a relief and release when the day, or the week is over.

Asking ourselves what we want to do or what would provide us both meaning and pleasure is often not enough. We need to dig deeper. Advice by my philosophy teacher, Ohad Kamin, “Life is short. In choosing a path make sure you first identify those things that you can do. Out of those, select the ones that you want to do. Then, reduce the choice further by zooming in on what you really want to do. Finally, select those things that you really, really want-to do- and then do them.

The outermost circle captures the possibilities available to me. The innermost circle encompasses my deepest wants and desires. Pursuing these makes me feel most real and authentic-realizing my dreams as the author of my life. We do not always have the luxury to follow the prescription of the innermost circle-there are often constraints that are outside of our control.

When we follow our bliss, we not only enjoy the journey, we are more successful.

Time is a zero-sum game, a limited resource. Life is too short to do only what we have to do; it is barely long enough to do what we want to do.

### Happiness Board

Create a group of people who care about you and your well-being, and who will hold you accountable to the ultimate currency. Ask them to keep track of your commitments and ensure that you follow through on them. Meet regularly to discuss your progress.

Following up on our commitments and goals isn’t easy. It takes time for a practice to become a habit, a ritual-and therefore most efforts at change ultimately fail. Change of any sort-be it starting an exercise regime, overcoming procrastination, or getting to spend more time with our family-is more likely to last when we enjoy the support of others.

## 6. Happiness in Education

Our best chance for happiness is education. Mark Van Doren

Two models illustrate how students are motivated: the drowning model and the lovemaking model.

The drowning model shows two things: that the desire to be free ourselves of pain can be a strong motivator and that, once freed, we can easily mistake it for happiness. A person whose head is forced under water will suffer discomfort and pain and will struggle to escape. If, at the last moment, his head is released, he will gasp for air and experience a sense of intoxicating relief.

Throughout the term, drowning in work that they do not enjoy, students are motivated by their fear of failure. At the end of the term, liberated from their books and papers and exams, they feel an overwhelming sense of relief-which, in the moment, can feel a lot like happiness.

This pattern of pain followed by relief is the model that has been imprinted upon us from grade school. It is easy to see how, unaware of alternative models, living as a rat racer could seem like the most normal and attractive prospect.

The lovemaking model, however, offers a different way of thinking about learning, one that can encompass both present and future benefit. The many wonderful hours that we put into reading, researching, thinking, and writing can be looked upon as foreplay. The Eureka experience-when we reach a solution to a problem is like a climax. As in the drowning model, there is a desirable end goal, but in the lovemaking model, we derive satisfaction from everything we do along the way.

In emphasizing achievements (which are tangible), schools simultaneously reinforce the rat-race mentality and stifle children's emotional development.

Daniel Goleman, in *Emotional Intelligence*, says, "Psychologists agree that IQ contributes only about 20 % of the factors that determine success. A full 80 % comes from other factors, including what I call emotional intelligence." The mind-set of the rat racer is antithetical to emotional intelligence and thus to a happy and successful life.

## Flow

Flow, according to Csikszentmihalyi, is a state in which one is immersed in an experience that is rewarding in and of itself, a state in which we feel we are one with the experience, in which "action and awareness are merged."

In a state of flow, we enjoy both peak experience and peak performance: we experience pleasure and perform at our best.

Performing at our best, we learn, grow, improve, and advance toward our future purpose.

In this zone our activities provide appropriate level of challenge, when the task on hand is neither too difficult nor too easy.

## Prejudice Against Work

It is clear to children that their education is about schoolwork, homework, and hard work. This prevents them from enjoying educational experience, because there is a society-wide prejudice against work.

Six hundred students between ages of 6 and 15 were told that they no longer needed to do any schoolwork. If they misbehaved in class, their punishment was to go out and play; if they behaved, their reward was getting to do more work. Hebb reports, "In these circumstances, all of the pupils discovered within a day or two that, within limits, they preferred work to no work (and incidentally learned more arithmetic and so forth than in previous years)." If we can learn to reframe our work and our education as a privilege rather than as a duty, we will be much better off in ultimate currency.

## Education Program

The most successful people are lifelong learners; they constantly ask questions and never cease to explore the wonder-filled world around them.

Your program can include personal development and professional development. Under each category, commit to learning material that will yield both present benefit as well as future benefit.

## 7. Happiness in the Workplace

My experience with those who were dissatisfied at work, is that they were enslaved not because they had no choice but because they had made a choice that made them unhappy.

### Slave to Passions

Being enslaved by the exigencies of life and by our constitution does not preclude the possibility that we can feel free. We experience freedom when we choose a path that provides us both meaning and pleasure. Whether or not our subjective experience of work is of freedom depends on whether we choose to be slaves to material wealth or to emotional prosperity, slaves to others' expectations or to our passions.

To make such choices, we might begin by asking some questions of ourselves. By posing a series of genuine questions, we challenge our assumptions, our conventional ways of thinking about what is possible in our lives: Am I happy at work? How can I become happier? What can I do to make my work more enjoyable?

We cannot, though, simply hope that the right job or right employer will be handed to us. We have to actively seek and create meaning and pleasure in the workplace. Blaming others may yield sympathy but not happiness. The ultimate responsibility for finding the right job or creating the right conditions at work lies with us.

In some jobs it is possible to restructure work to meet the conditions necessary for the attainment of the ultimate currency. For example, we can experience flow by setting clear goals and challenging ourselves even when our job does not require that we do so. We can assume more responsibility and seek higher levels of involvement in work that we find interesting; we can take initiative and look for areas where we can contribute to the organization.

What we need if we are to implement change in our lives is courage, and courage is not about not having fear but about having fear and going ahead anyway.

### Finding our calling

The psychologist Abraham Maslow once wrote that "the most beautiful fate, the most wonderful good fortune that can happen to any human being, is to be paid for doing that which he passionately loves to do."

### The Meaning, Pleasure, Strengths (MPS) Process

Finding the right work-the work that corresponds to both our passions and our strengths-can be challenging. We can begin the process by asking these three critical questions-"What gives me meaning?" "What gives me pleasure?" "What are my strengths?"

Amy Wrzesniewski and Jane Dutton, "Even in the most restricted and routine jobs, employees can exert some influence on what is the essence of their work."

When it comes to generating the ultimate currency, how we perceive our work can matter more than the actual work itself.

### Focusing on Happiness

The potential for happiness may be all around us, but if it goes unnoticed-if our focus is elsewhere and we fail to perceive it-we risk losing it. To turn a possibility into a reality, we first need to realize that the possibility exists.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "To different minds, the same world is hell, and a heaven."

## 8. Happiness in Relationships

All who would win joy must share it; happiness was born a twin. Lord Byron

"Without friendship, no happiness is possible." Aristotle.

David Myers, "there are few stronger predictions of happiness than a close, nurturing, equitable, intimate, lifelong companionship with one's best friend."

Unconditional love

The core self

The core self comprises our deepest and most stable characteristics-our character. It comprises the actual principles by which we live. Because we cannot observe a core self directly, the only way for us to know a person's character is through its manifestations, through the person's behavior, which is observable.

The Circle of Happiness

The circle of creativity is a space in which children can take risks and try things out, fall and stand up again, fail and succeed-because they feel secure and safe in the presence of a person who loves them unconditionally.

A Letter of Gratitude

In his positive psychology class, Martin Seligman encourages his students to write gratitude letters and make gratitude visits to people they care about. This simple exercise, which I used frequently in my class, often has profound effects on both the writer and the receiver- and the relationship.

It is not just a thank-you note. It describes particular experiences and shared dreams, and whatever else in the relationship is a source of joy.

Part 3

Meditations on Happiness

## 9. First Meditation: Self-Interest and Benevolence

Our actions should be guided by self-interest, by our own happiness.

Ralph Waldo Emerson: "it is one of the most beautiful compensations of this life that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself." Helping oneself and helping others are inextricably intertwined."

Research by Alice Isen and Jennifer George illustrates that we are more likely to help others when we feel good.

We often enhance our happiness to the greatest extent when we pursue activities that provide us with meaning and pleasure and that help others.

Happiness is not about sacrifice, about a trade-off between present and future benefit, between meaning and pleasure, between helping ourselves and helping others. It is about synthesis, about creating a life in which all the elements essential to happiness are in harmony.

#### 10. Second Meditation: Happiness Boosters

Most people, rich or poor, young or old, go through spells of happiness drought. I have not met many students who enjoy exam period. Whether it is out of necessity or by choice, for most of us there are periods when much of what we do does not afford us satisfaction. Fortunately, this does not mean that we need to resign ourselves to unhappiness during these times-be it for the month of exams.

Pursuing self-concordant goals impacts our experience in other areas, not directly related to these activities.

One or two happy experiences during an otherwise uninspiring period can transform our general state. I call these brief but transforming experiences happiness boosters-activities, lasting anywhere from a few minutes to a few hours, that provide us with both meaning and pleasure, both present and future benefit.

Happiness boosters acts as both motivational pull and a motivational push.

A partner in a top consulting firm reduced his workload sufficiently to introduce some happiness boosters. He spends two evenings each week with his family, plays tennis twice a week, and spends more than 3 hours each week reading for pleasure.

John Dryden, “we first make our habits and then our habits make us.”

An easier, more manageable way of bringing about change in the quality of life is through the gradual introduction of happiness boosters.

Introducing relatively brief experiences of meaning and pleasure is less threatening than overhauling an entire life and will therefore meet with less resistance-both from the person trying to change as well as from his family, colleagues and friends.

#### The Value of Free Time

If instead of doing nothing when we come back home from work we turn to our hobbies or other activities that challenge us, that we enjoy and that we care about, we are more likely to get a second wind and replenish our emotional bank. Maria Montessorie, “To devote oneself to an agreeable task is restful.” Happiness boosters, rather than enervating us, lead to ascending levels of energy.

Generate a list of happiness boosters that you can pursue throughout your week.

#### 11. Third Meditation: Beyond the Temporary High

According to Sonja Lyubomirsky, Kennon Sheldon, and David Schkade, a person’s level of happiness is primarily determined by three factors: “a genetically determined set point for happiness, happiness-relevant circumstantial factors, and happiness-relevant activities and practices. While we have no control over the first two, we usually have considerably more control over the kind of activities and practices that we pursue. This third category offers the best opportunities for sustainably increasing happiness.

The question we should be concerned with, is not whether or not it is possible to become happier, but rather how to do it. This book provides some, but not all, of the answers.

Appreciative Enquiry:



It focuses on what has worked. We can learn from them and then apply our learning to present and future situations. You can do this exercise on your own, though it is better to do it with a partner or in a small group.

#### 12. Fourth Meditation-Letting Our Light Shine

Understanding the theory of happiness is not enough to guarantee sustained happiness. If we feel unworthy of being happy, we will find ways to limit our capacity for happiness.

Many of us have limitations that are self-generated.

##### Inherent Worthiness

To lead a happy life, we must experience a sense of inherent worthiness. As Nathaniel Brandon writes, "In order to seek values, man must consider himself worthy of enjoying them. In order to fight for his happiness, he must consider himself worthy of happiness."

#### 13. Fifth Meditation-Imagine

Over and over we hear patients say., "Why did we have to wait until now, till we are riddled with cancer, to learn how to value and appreciate life."

The most a book or a teacher can do is to help raise our awareness, to help us become more fully in touch with what we already know. Ultimately, our progress, our growth, and our happiness comes from our ability to look within ourselves and ask the important questions.

#### 14. Sixth Meditation: Take Your Time

What can we do to enjoy our lives more despite the fast paced rat-race environment so many of us live in? There are no magic bullets or magic pills. We must simplify our lives; we must slow down. The good news is that simplifying our lives, doing less rather than more, does not have to come at the expense of success.

Henry David Thoreau advised way back in the nineteenth century "Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity."

Psychologist Tim Kasser shows in his research that time affluence is a consistent predictor of well-being, whereas material affluence is not. Time affluence is the feeling that one has sufficient time to pursue activities that are personally meaningful, to reflect, to engage in leisure. Time poverty is the feeling that one is constantly stressed, rushed, overworked, behind.

To raise our levels of well-being, we must safeguard our time, learn to say "no" more often-to people as well as opportunities. It means prioritizing, choosing activities that we really, really want to do, while letting go of others.

Teresa Amabile, in her article "Creativity Under the Gun," in Harvard Business Review, says that when this happens, creativity usually ends up getting killed. J. P. Morgan, one of the most successful and creative entrepreneurs of all time, said, "I can do a year's work in nine months, but not in twelve."

#### 15. Seventh Meditation: The Happiness Revolution

##### Conclusion

One of the common barriers to happiness is the false expectation that one thing-a book or a teacher, a princess or a knight, an accomplishment, a prize, or a revelation-will bring us eternal bliss.

