Solve
for
Happy

Solve for Happy

ENGINEERING YOUR PATH TO JOY

Mo Gawdat

The gravity of the battle means nothing to those at peace.

For Ali

I am sure you're happy wherever you are now

Contents

Introduction

Seventeen days after the death of my wonderful son, Ali, I began to write and couldn't stop. My topic was happiness—an unlikely subject given the circumstances.

Ali truly was an angel. He made everything he touched better and everyone he met happier. He was always peaceful, always happy. You couldn't miss his energy or how he affectionately cared for every being that ever crossed his path. When he left us, there was every reason to be unhappy—even miserable. So how did his departure lead me to write what you're about to read? Well, that's a story that started around the date of his birth—perhaps even earlier.

Since the day I started working, I have enjoyed a great deal of success, wealth, and recognition. Yet through it all, I was constantly unhappy. Early in my career with tech giants like IBM and Microsoft I gained an abundance of intellectual satisfaction, plenty of ego gratification, and, yes, I made a bit of money. But I found that the more fortune blessed me, the less happy I became.

This wasn't just because life had become complicated—you know, like that rap song from the 90s, "Mo Money mo Problems." The issue was that, despite the rewards both financial and intellectual, I was not

able to find any joy in my life. Even my greatest blessing, my family, didn't give me the joy they might have because I didn't know how to receive it.

The irony was that as a younger man, despite the struggle to find my path in life and often just trying to make ends meet, I'd always been very happy. But by 1995, when my wife and I and our two children packed up and moved to Dubai, things had changed. Nothing against Dubai, mind you. It's a remarkable city whose generous citizens, the Emiratis, truly made us feel at home. Our arrival coincided with the breakout point of Dubai's explosive growth, which offered astounding career opportunities and millions of ways to make yourself happy, or at least try.

But Dubai can also feel surreal. Against a gleaming landscape of hot sand and turquoise water, the skyline is crowded with futuristic office buildings and residential towers where multimillion-dollar apartments are snapped up by a steady stream of global buyers. In the streets, Porsches and Ferraris jockey for parking spaces with Lamborghinis and Bentleys. The extravagance of the concentrated wealth dazzles you— but at the same time it tempts you to question whether, compared to all this, you've actually achieved much of anything.

By the time we arrived in the Emirates, I'd already fallen into the habit of comparing myself to my superrich friends and always coming up short. But those feelings of one-downs-man-ship didn't send me to the shrink or to the ashram. Instead it made me strive harder. I simply did what I'd always done as a geek who'd read obsessively since child-hood: I bought a pile of books. I studied technical analyses of stock trends down to the basic equations that plotted every chart. And by learning them I could predict short-term fluctuations in the market like a pro. I would come home after finishing my day job at just about the time the NASDAQ opened in the United States and apply my math

skills to making serious money as a day trader (or more accurately in my case, a night trader).

And yet—and I expect I'm not the first person you've heard tell this tale—the "mo' money" I made, the more miserable I became. Which led me to simply work harder and buy more toys on the misguided assumption that, sooner or later, all this effort was going to pay off and I'd find the pot of gold—happiness—thought to lie at the end of the high-achievement rainbow. I'd become a hamster on what psychologists call the "hedonic treadmill." The more you get, the more you want. The more you strive, the more reasons you discover for striving.

One evening I went online and with two clicks bought two vintage Rolls-Royces. Why? Because I could. And because I was desperately trying to fill the hole in my soul. You won't be surprised to hear that when those beautiful classics of English automotive styling arrived at the curb, they didn't lift my mood one bit.

Looking back at this phase in my life, I wasn't much fun to be around. My work was focused on expanding the business of Microsoft throughout Africa and the Middle East, which, as you might imagine, had me spending more time in airplanes than not. In my constant quest for *more* I'd become pushy and unpleasant even at home, and I knew it. I spent too little time appreciating the remarkable woman I'd married, too little time with my wonderful son and daughter, and never paused to enjoy each day as it unfolded.

Instead I spent most of my waking hours being driven, nervous, and critical, demanding achievement and performance even from my kids. I was manically trying to make the world conform to the way I thought it ought to be. By 2001 the relentless pace and the emptiness had led me into a very dark place.

At that point I knew I couldn't go on ignoring the problem. This pushy, unhappy person staring back at me in the mirror wasn't really

me. I missed the happy, optimistic young man I'd always been, and I was tired of trudging along in this tired, miserable, aggressive-looking guy's shoes. I decided to take on my unhappiness as a challenge: I would apply my geek's approach to self-study, along with my engineer's analytical mind, to digging my way out.

Growing up in Cairo, Egypt, where my mother was a professor of English literature, I'd started devouring books long before my first day of school. Beginning at the age of eight, I chose a topic of focus each year and bought as many books as my budget could afford. I would spend the rest of the year learning every word in every book. This obsessiveness made me a joke to my friends, but the habit stuck with me as my approach to all challenges and ambitions. Whenever life turned tough, I read.

I went on to teach myself carpentry, mosaics, guitar, and German. I read up on special relativity, studied game theory and mathematics, and I learned to develop highly sophisticated computer programming. As a kid in grade school, and then as a teenager, I approached my piles of books with single-minded dedication. As I grew older, I applied that same passion for learning to classic car restoration, cooking, and hyper-realistic charcoal portraits. I achieved a reasonable level of proficiency in business, management, finance, economics, and investment mainly just from books.

When things get tough we tend to do more of what we know how to do best. So, in my thirties and miserable, I submerged myself in reading about my predicament. I bought every title I could find on the topic of happiness. I attended every lecture, watched every documentary, and then diligently analyzed everything I'd learned. But I

didn't approach the subject from the same perspective as the psychologists who'd written the books and conducted the experiments that had made "happiness research" such a hot academic discipline. Certainly I didn't follow in the slipstream of all the philosophers and theologians who'd struggled with the problem of human happiness since civilization began.

In keeping with my training, I broke the problem of happiness down into its smallest components and applied an engineering analysis. I adopted a facts-driven approach that would be scalable and replicable. Along the way, I challenged every process I'd been told to blindly implement, tested the fit of every moving part, and looked deeply into the validity of every input as I worked to create an algorithm that would produce the desired result. As a software developer, I set a target to find the code that could be applied to my life again and again to predictably deliver happiness every time.

Oddly enough, after all this hyperrational effort worthy of Mr. Spock, I found my first real breakthrough during a casual conversation with my mother. She'd always told me to work hard and to prioritize my financial success above all. She frequently invoked an Arabic proverb that, loosely translated, meant "Eat frugally for a year and dress frugally for another, and you'll find happiness forever." As a young man I'd followed that advice religiously. I'd worked hard and saved and I'd become successful. I'd fulfilled my side of the bargain. So one day I went to ask my mom: Where was all that happiness I now had a right to expect?

During that conversation, it suddenly hit me that happiness shouldn't be something you wait for and work for as if it needs to be *earned*. Furthermore, it shouldn't depend on external conditions, much less circumstances as fickle and potentially fleeting as career success

and rising net worth. My path till then had been full of progress and success, but every time I'd gained yardage on that field, it was as if they moved the goal posts back a little farther.

What I realized was that I would never get to happiness as long as I held on to the idea that as soon as I do this or get that or reach this benchmark I'll *become* happy.

In algebra, equations can be solved in many ways. If A=B+C, for example, then B=A−C. If you try to solve for A, you would look for the values of the other two parameters—B and C—and if you tried to solve for B, you would be taking different steps. The parameter you choose to solve for drastically changes your approach to the solution. The same is true when you decide to **solve for happy**.

I began to see that throughout all my striving I'd been trying to solve the wrong problem. I'd set myself the challenge of multiplying material wealth, fun, and status so that, *eventually,* the product of all that effort would be . . . happiness. What I really needed to do instead was to skip the intermediate steps and simply solve for happiness itself.

My journey took almost a decade, but by 2010 I'd developed an equation and a well-engineered, simple, and replicable model of happiness and how to sustain it that fit together perfectly.

I put the system to the test and it worked. Stress from losing a business deal, long security lines at the airport, bad customer service—none of it could dim my happiness. Daily life as a husband, parent, son, friend, and employee had its inevitable ups and downs, but no matter how any particular day went, good or bad—or a little of each—I found that I was able to enjoy the ride of the roller coaster itself.

I'd finally returned to being the happy person I recognized as the "me" when I first started out, and there I remained for quite a while. I shared my rigorous process with hundreds of friends, and my Happiness Equation worked for them as well. Their feedback helped me

refine the model even further. Which, as it turned out, was a good thing, because I had no idea just how much I was going to need it.

My father was a distinguished civil engineer and an exceptionally kind man. Though my passion had always been computer science, I studied civil engineering just to please him. My field of study was not the biggest contribution to my education anyway because, as my father believed, learning takes place in the real world. Ever since I was in secondary school my father had encouraged me to spend each vacation in a different country. At first he squeezed every cent to make these experiences happen for me, and he made arrangements for me to visit with family or friends as I traveled. Later I worked to support the cost of my trips on my own. Those real-world experiences were so valuable that I vowed to offer a similar opportunity to my kids.

As luck would have it, my choice of university offered me the greatest benefit and blessing of those student days. I came to know a charming, intelligent woman named Nibal. A month after her graduation we married, and one year later she became Umm Ali, mother of Ali, as women are called in the Middle East when their first child is born. Eighteen months after that, our daughter, Aya, came along to become the sunshine and the irrepressible, energizing force within our family. With Nibal, Ali, and Aya in my life, my good fortune knew no bounds. My love for my family drove me to work hard to provide the best life I could for them. I took on life's challenges like a charging rhino.

In 2007 I joined Google. Despite the company's success, its global reach was limited at that point, so my role was to expand our operations into Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. Six years later I moved over to Google X, now a separate entity known as X, where I eventually became the chief business officer. At X, we don't try to

achieve incremental improvements in the way the world works; instead, we try to develop new technologies that will reinvent the way things are. Our goal is to deliver a radical, tenfold—10X—improvement. This leads us to work on seemingly sci-fi ideas such as autonomous carbon fiber kites to serve as airborne wind turbines, miniature computers built into contact lenses that capture physiological data and communicate wirelessly with other computers, and balloons to carry telecom technology into the stratosphere to provide Internet service to every human anywhere in the world. At X, we call these "moonshots."

When you're seeking modest improvement in what exists, you start working with the same tools and assumptions, the same mental framework on which the old technology is based. But when the challenge is to move ahead by a factor of ten, you start with a blank slate. When you commit to a moonshot, you fall in love with the problem, not the product. You commit to the mission before you even know that you have the ability to reach it. And you set audacious goals. The auto industry, for example, has been focused on safety for decades. They made consistent incremental progress by adding improvements to the traditional design of a car—the design we've all gotten used to since the early 1900s. Our approach at X is to begin by asking, "Why let an accident happen in the first place?" That's when we commit to the moonshot: a self-driving car.

Meanwhile, with my happiness model working well, and as I was deriving great pleasure from my career, doing my part to help invent the future, my son and daughter were learning and growing and, in keeping with my father's tradition, traveling to new places every summer. They had plenty of friends to visit across the globe, and they were always out exploring.

In 2014 Ali was a college student in Boston, and that year he had a long trip planned across North America, so we weren't expecting him

to make it home to Dubai for his usual visit. I was pleasantly surprised, then, in May, when he called to say he felt an overwhelming desire to come and spend a few days with us. For some reason he felt a sense of urgency, and he asked if we could book him a flight home as soon as school was over. Aya was planning to visit too, so Nibal and I were happy beyond belief. We made the arrangements and eagerly looked forward to the joy of having the whole family together in July.

Four days after he arrived, Ali suffered an acute belly pain and was admitted to a local hospital, where the doctors prescribed a routine appendectomy. I wasn't concerned. In fact, I was relieved that this was happening while he was home so we could take care of him. The vacation might not have been going as I'd imagined, but the change in plans was easy enough to accommodate.

When Ali was on the operating table, a syringe was inserted to blow in carbon dioxide to expand his abdominal cavity and clear space for the rest of the procedure. But the needle was pushed just a few millimeters too far, puncturing Ali's femoral artery—one of the major vessels carrying blood from the heart. Then things went from bad to worse. Precious moments slipped by before anyone even realized the blunder, and then a series of additional mistakes were made with fatal consequence. Within a few hours, my beloved son was gone.

Before we could even begin to absorb the enormity of what had happened, Nibal, Aya, and I were surrounded by friends who helped us handle the practicalities and supported us while we struggled to comprehend the sharp turn our lives had just taken.

Losing a child, they say, is the hardest experience anyone can endure. It certainly shakes every parent to the core. Losing Ali at his prime was harder still, and losing him unexpectedly to preventable human error may have been the very hardest thing of all.

But for me, the loss was even worse because Ali was not just my son

but also my best friend. He had been born when I was quite young, and I felt as if we'd grown up together. We played video games together, listened to music together, read books together, and laughed a lot together. At eighteen Ali was noticeably wiser than many men I knew. He was a support and a confidant. At times I even found myself thinking, **"When I grow up, I want to be just like Ali."**

Although all parents see their children as exceptional, I honestly believe that Ali truly was. When he left us, we received messages from all over the world, from hundreds of people who described how this twenty-one-year-old had changed their lives. Some of the people who wrote were in their teens, and some were well into their seventies. How Ali had found the time and wisdom to touch the lives of so many people, I'll never know. He was a role model for peacefulness, happiness, and kindness. And he had a sense of presence that spread those characteristics abundantly along his path. Once, I watched from a distance as he sat down next to a homeless person and spoke to her at length. He acknowledged her as a fellow human worthy of connection, then emptied his pockets and gave her everything he had. As he walked away she caught up to him, searched deep in her sack, and gave him what must have been her most valued possession: a small unopened plastic container of hand cream. That gift became one of Ali's dearest treasures. Now it's one of ours.

But now, because of a medical error, I'd lost him in the blink of an eye. Whatever I'd learned about happiness was going to be put to the test. I thought that if I could save myself and my family from the deepest depths of depression, I could count it as a great success.

But we did much better than that.

When Ali left our world so suddenly, his mother and I, as well as our daughter, felt profound grief. The pain of missing him still lingers, of course, and we regularly shed tears that he's no longer available for

a hug, a chat, or a video game. The pain we feel drives us to honor his memory and wish him well. Remarkably, though, we've been able to maintain a steady state of peace—even happiness. We have sad days, but we don't suffer. Our hearts are content, even joyful.

Simply put, our happiness model came through for us. Even during the moments of our most intense grief over Ali's passing, we were never angry or resentful of life. We didn't feel cheated or depressed. We went through the most difficult event imaginable just as Ali would: in peace.

At Ali's memorial, hundreds of people filled our home to pay their re-spects while a huge overflow crowd waited outside in the 110-degree heat of Dubai's summer. They just would not leave. It was an excep-tional memorial, in all ways built around the happiness that Ali had radiated throughout his life. People showed up in tears but quickly blended into the positive energy of the event. They wept in our arms, but when we talked, and when they came to understand our view of these events, which was informed by our happiness model, they stopped weeping. They walked around the house admiring the hun-dreds of photographs of Ali (always with a big smile) on every wall. They tried some of his favorite snacks set out on tables, or picked up an item of his as a souvenir, and remembered all the happy memories he'd given them.

There was so much love and positivity in the air, countless hugs and smiles, that by the end of the day, if you didn't know the circum-stances, you might have thought this was just a happy gathering of friends—a wedding maybe, or a graduation. Even in these distressing circumstances, Ali's positive energy filled our home.

In the days after the memorial, I found myself preoccupied with

the thought *What would Ali do in this situation?* All of us who knew Ali went to him regularly for advice, but he was no longer with us. I desperately wanted to ask him, "Ali, how do I handle losing you?" even though I knew his answer. He would just say, "*Khalas ya papa*"—It's over, Dad—"I've already died. There is nothing you can do to change that, so make the best out of it." In moments of quiet, I could hear no other voice in my head but Ali's repeating these sentences over and over.

And so, seventeen days after his death, I began to write. I decided to follow Ali's advice and do something positive, to try to share our model of happiness with all of those who are needlessly suffering around the world. Four and a half months later I raised my head. I had a first draft.

I'm not a sage or a monk hiding away in a monastery. I go to work, fight in meetings, make mistakes—big mistakes that have hurt those I love, and for that I feel sorrow. In fact, I'm not even always happy. But I found a model that works—a model that had seen us through our grief, the model that Ali's life helped generate through his example. This is what I want to offer you in this book.

My hope is that by sharing Ali's message—his peaceful way of living—I may be able to honor his memory and continue his legacy. I tried to imagine the positive impact spreading this message could create, and I wondered if maybe it is not for nothing that I have a high-profile job with global reach. So I took on an ambitious mission: to help ten million people become happier, a movement (#10million happy) that I ask you to join so that together we can create a small-scale global pandemic of Ali-style joy.

Weeks after the launch of the first edition of *Solve for Happy*, www .solveforhappy.com, several of my videos went viral on the web with viewership that exceeded a hundred million, and millions of shares and likes. It was clear that the message resonated and changed lives. Read-

ers and viewers took the mission on for themselves. They told those they loved about what they learned, and then asked them to continue to "pay it forward" and spread the word. Within a few months, my ambitious target to reach 10 million people with this message of happiness was surpassed.

But why stop now? If this is working so well, the mission might as well continue. And so, along with a group of volunteering champions, we have agreed to take the target up a notch to #OneBillionHappy. I have started the process of setting up a foundation, www.onebillion happy.org, which will offer tools and resources needed to support the movement of people sharing this model of happiness with others.

Ali's death was a blow I never could have expected, but when I look back, I feel that he somehow knew. Two days before his unexpected departure, he sat us all down as a wise grandfather would gather his children and said he had something important to share. He said he understood that it might seem odd for him to offer advice to his parents but that he felt compelled to do it. Usually Ali spoke very little, but now he took his time and spent most of it telling Nibal, Aya, and me what he loved most about us. He thanked us kindly for what we had contributed to his life. His words warmed our hearts, and then he asked each of us to do some specific things.

His request to me was "Papa, you should never stop working. Keep making a difference and rely on your heart more often. Your work here is not done." He then paused for a few seconds, sat back in his chair—as if to say *But now my work here is done*—and said, "That's it. I have nothing more to say."

This book and the #OneBillionHappy mission is my attempt to fulfill the task assigned to me by my happiness idol. For as long as I live, I will make global happiness my personal mission, my moonshot for Ali.

Part One
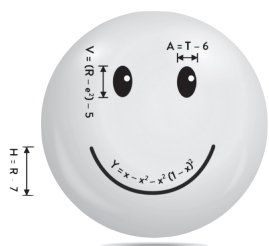
Happiness in the modern world is surrounded by myths. Much of our understanding of what happiness is and where to find it is distorted.

When you know what you're looking for, the quest becomes easy. It may take time to unlearn old habits, but as long as you stick to the path, you'll get there.

Setting Up the Equation

I t doesn't matter if you're rich or poor, tall or short, male or female, young or old. It doesn't matter where you come from, what you do for a living, what language you speak, or what tragedies you've endured. Wherever you are, whoever you are, **you want to be happy.** It's a human desire about as basic as the drive to take the next breath.

Happiness is that glorious feeling when everything seems right, when all of life's twists and turns and jagged edges seem to fit together perfectly. In those often all-too-brief flickers of genuine happiness, every thought in your head is agreeable, and you wouldn't mind if time stood still and the present moment extended forever.

Whatever we choose to do in life is ultimately an attempt to find this feeling and make it last. Some people look for it in romance, while others seek it in wealth or fame, and still others through some form of accomplishment. Yet we all know of people who are deeply loved, achieve great things, travel the world, snap up all the toys money can buy, indulge in every luxury, and still long for the elusive goal of satisfaction, contentment, and peace—also known as happiness.

Why should something so basic be so hard to find?

The truth is, it isn't. **We're just looking for it in the wrong places.**

We think of it as a destination to reach, when in fact it's where we all began.

Have you ever searched for your keys only to realize they were in your pocket all along? Remember how you removed everything from your desk, searched beneath the couch, and got more and more frustrated the longer they went missing? We do the same thing when we struggle to find happiness "out there," when, in fact, happiness is right where it's always been: inside us, a basic design feature of our species.

Our Default State

Look at your computer, smartphone, or other gadgets. They all come with preferences preset by the designers and programmers. There's a certain level of screen brightness, say, or a localized user interface language. A device fresh from the factory, set up the way its creators think best, is said to be in its "default state."

For human beings, simply put, the default state is happiness.

If you don't believe me, spend a little time with a human fresh from the factory, an infant or toddler. Obviously, there's a lot of crying and fussing associated with the start-up phase of little humans, but the fact is, as long as their most basic needs are met—no immediate hunger, no immediate fear, no scary isolation, no physical pain or enduring sleeplessness—they live in the moment, perfectly happy. Even in distressed parts of the world, you can see children with dirty faces using little pebbles as toys or holding a cracked plastic plate as the steering wheel of an imaginary sports car. They may live in a hovel, but as long as they have food and a modicum of safety, you'll see them run around hooting with joy. Even in news coverage of refugee camps, where thousands have been displaced by war or natural disaster, the adults in front of the camera will appear grim, but in the background

you'll still hear the sounds of kids laughing as they play soccer with a knot of rags for a ball.

But it's not only kids. This default state applies to you too.

Look back into your own experience. Summon up a time when nothing annoyed you, nothing worried you, nothing upset you. You were happy, calm, and relaxed. The point is, you didn't need a *reason* to be happy. You didn't need your team to win the World Cup. You didn't need a big promotion or a hot date or a yacht with a helicopter pad. All you needed was no reason to be *unhappy.* Which is another way of saying:

Remember !

Happiness is the absence of unhappiness.

It's our resting state when nothing clouds the picture or causes inter-ference.

Remember !

Happiness is *your* default state.

When you use a programmed device, you sometimes change its default settings without meaning to, sometimes so much so that certain functions become more difficult to use. You install an app that fre-quently connects to the Internet, and your battery life decreases. You download malware, and everything starts to go haywire. The same thing happens with the human default for happiness. Parental or socie-tal pressure, belief systems, and unwarranted expectations come along and overwrite some of the original programming. The "you" who started out happily cooing in your crib, playing with your toes, gets caught up in a flurry of misconceptions and illusions. Happiness be-

Illusions,
Social Pressures and
False Beliefs

The Happy You
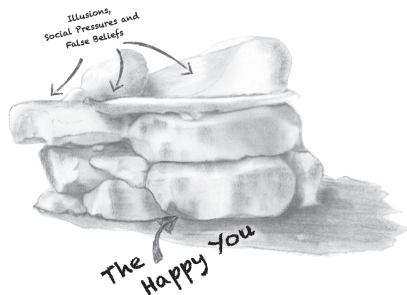
comes a mysterious goal you seek but can't quite grasp, rather than something simply there for you each morning when you open your eyes.

If we were to picture it, the times when you're unhappy are like being buried under a pile of rocks made up of illusions, social pressures, and false beliefs. To reach happiness, you need to remove those rocks one by one, starting with some of your most fundamental beliefs.

As every person who's ever called Tech Support knows, sometimes the first step to bringing a device back to proper functioning is to restore the factory settings. But unlike our gadgets, we humans don't have a reset button. Instead, we have the ability to unlearn and reverse the effects of what went wrong along our path.

Reset

How did we ever get the idea that we have to look for happiness outside us, to strive for it, reach it, achieve it, or even earn it? How did we get things so terribly wrong that we've accepted that happiness touches our lives only briefly? How did we let go of our birthright to be happy?

The answer may surprise you: *Perhaps that's what we've* **always been trained to do**.

Solve for Happy

You may have received sound advice like the kind my mother gave me, that I should study and work hard, save and be willing to defer certain forms of gratification to achieve certain goals. Her advice surely was a

major contributor to my success. But I misunderstood. I thought she meant that I needed to defer happiness along the way. Or that happiness would be the result once I had achieved success.

Some of the happiest communities in the world are actually in the poorer countries of Latin America, where people do not seem to think much at all about financial security or what we consider success. They work each day to earn what they need. But beyond that, they prioritize their happiness and spend time with their family and friends.

I don't mean to romanticize a life that appears quaint and colorful but still falls below the poverty line. But we can learn from a mind-set that weaves happiness into each day, regardless of economic conditions.

I have nothing against material success. Human advancement has always been driven by innate curiosity, but also by the perfectly reasonable desire to store up enough resources to survive winter or a drought or a bad harvest. Thousands of years ago the more territory your family or tribe controlled and the better your skills at hunting and gathering, the better were your chances of survival. Thus the idea of sitting idle under the mango tree lost ground to the idea of innovating and hustling a bit, expanding one's territory, and building up a surplus, just in case.

As civilization developed, more territory and more wealth usually meant better living conditions and the prospect of a longer life. Eventually, capitalism came along, reinforced by the Protestant ethic, which made prosperity a sign of God's favor. Individual effort and individual responsibility allowed the rise of what we now call income inequality, which increased the incentive to work even harder, if only to avoid being outpaced and crowded out by others. And once you'd risen, you certainly didn't want to fall back. Because as the competition increased, the traditional supports that had provided security through the family or village eroded.

The era just before our own saw the Great Depression and two world wars in quick succession, during which even those at the top of the income ladder had to worry about the basics. As a result, hardship shaped the priorities of an entire generation, underscoring the idea that what mattered most in life was to never endure such hardships again. *The "insurance policy" most widely adopted and passed along was called "success."*

Increasingly, as the twentieth century gave way to the twenty-first, the middle class raised their children to believe that the only logical course was to spend years in educational institutions to gain skills to be deployed in a lifetime of hard work in the hope of attaining security. We learned to make this path our priority, even if it made us unhappy, counting on the promise that when we finally achieved what society defined as success, then, at long last, we'd be happy.

Now, just ask yourself this question: How often do you actually see that happen? And instead, how often do you see a successful banker or business executive who's swimming in money but seems to be miserable? How often do you hear about cases of suicide of those who seemingly "have it all"? Why do you think this happens? Because the basic premise is flawed: success, wealth, power, and fame don't lead to happiness. As a matter of fact:

Remember !

Success is not an essential prerequisite to happiness.

Ed Diener and Richard Easterlin's work on the correlation of subjective well-being and income suggests that, in the United States, subjective well-being increases proportionately to income—but only up to a point. Yes, it feels lousy to have to work two jobs to be able to afford a tiny apartment and a beat-up Honda while paying off student

loans. But once your income reaches the average annual income per capita, which in the United States today is about $70,000, subjective well-being plateaus. It's true that earning less can dampen your sense of well-being, but earning *more* is not necessarily going to make you any happier.[1] Which suggests that all the expensive things advertisers say are the keys to happiness—a better cell phone, a flashy car, a huge house, a status-worthy wardrobe—really aren't so important.

Not only are wealth, power, and lots of toys not prerequisites for happiness; if anything, the chain of cause and effect actually works the other way. Andrew Oswald, Eugenio Proto, and Daniel Sgroi from the University of Warwick found that being happy made people roughly 12 percent more productive and, accordingly, more likely to get ahead.[2] And so:

Remember !
→ **While success doesn't lead to happiness, happiness does contribute to success.**

And yet we continue to chase success as our primary goal. One of the earliest psychologists to focus attention on happy individuals and their psychological trajectory was Abraham Maslow. Back in 1933, he summed up our pursuit of success in one profound sentence: "The story of the human race is the story of men and women selling themselves short."

While a reasonable level of success is common in our society, those who achieve the highest levels of success often have one thing in common, one thing that differentiates them from the pack. They all, almost compulsively, love what they do. Many successful athletes, musicians, and entrepreneurs have achieved their success because they love what they do so much they become experts at it just because the activity itself makes them happy. As Malcolm Gladwell puts it in *Outliers*, if you spend ten thousand hours doing something, you become one of

the best in the world at it.[3] And what's the easiest way to spend so many hours on one thing? Doing something that makes you happy! Wouldn't that be better than spending a lifetime trying to reach success in hopes that it will eventually lead to happiness? At work, in our personal life, relationships or love life, *whatever it is that we do*, we should directly:

Remember !

→ **Solve for Happy.**

What Is Happiness?

At my lowest point, back in 2001, I realized that I would never restore the happiness that was my birthright if I didn't at least know what I was looking for.

So, being an engineer, I set out to develop a simple process to collect the data I needed to determine what made me happy. First, though, I hesitated because the technique was so simple it seemed almost child–ish. But then it occurred to me: if our model for the default condition of human happiness is the infant or toddler, maybe "childish," or at least "childlike," is not such a bad thing.

I started by simply documenting every instance when I felt happy. I called it my **Happy List**. You might want to do the same thing. In fact, why not take a moment right now, pull out a pencil and a piece of paper, and jot down some of the things that make you happy. As assignments go, this one's not too tough. The list can be nothing more than a string of short, declarative sentences that get right to the point and complete the phrase

"I feel happy when _____."

Don't be shy. There's no reason to feel inhibited because no one ever has to see your list. You can include the obvious stuff, like scratching your dog under her chin or watching a beautiful sunset, and simple things like talking to your friends or eating scrambled eggs. There are no wrong answers. Write as many as you can think of.

When you're done, at least for the first pass, go back and highlight a few items that, if you were forced to set priorities, would be at the top of the list of things that make you happiest. Those will make for a valuable short list that will prove useful in our later discussions.

Here's some good news already: the very act of creating your Happy List makes for a very happy experience, so much so that, when you're finished, you should feel energetic and refreshed. I work on my list at least once a week, adding new things. Not only does it put a smile on my face, but it helps me cultivate something that psychologists say contributes to happiness over the long haul: an attitude of gratitude, which happens when you acknowledge the truth about our modern lives and the fact that there is plenty to be happy about after all.

So go ahead and enjoy. I'll go make a cup of coffee and wait for you. *(By the way, I feel happy when I enjoy a quiet cup of coffee!)*

The Happiness Equation

My hunch is that your list consisted almost entirely of ordinary moments in life—a smile on your child's face, the smell of warm coffee first thing in the morning, the kinds of things that happen every day.

So what's the problem? If the triggers for happy moments are so ordinary and so accessible, why does "finding" happiness remain such

a big challenge for so many people? And why, when we "find" it, does it so easily slip away?

When engineers are presented with a set of raw data, the first thing we do is to plot it and attempt to find a trend line. So let's apply this to your Happy List and find the common pattern among the different instances of happiness on it. Can you see the trend?

The moments that make you happy may be very different from the moments that make me happy, but most lists will converge around this general proposition: Happiness happens when life seems to be going your way. You feel happy when *life behaves the way you want it to.*

Not surprisingly, the opposite is also true: Unhappiness happens when your reality does not match your hopes and expectations. When you expect sunshine on your wedding day, an *unexpected* rain represents a cosmic betrayal. Your unhappiness at that betrayal might linger forever, waiting to be relived anytime you feel blue or hostile toward your spouse. "I should have known! It *rained* on our wedding day!"

The simplest way for an engineer to express this definition of happiness is in an equation—the **Happiness Equation**.