

Preface

For me, happiness is a choice. And by saying that I don't mean you can or should be happy all the time. Everyone's life has its ups and downs. Off days, bad moments, unfortunate events – there's no way to avoid these. That's life. However, you are in charge of how you react to things that come your way. Of course, there are biological factors at play as well, but your mindset is key in all this. Are you someone who primarily sees problems or solutions? Do you tend to blame others or take responsibility for your own stuff? Do you live in the past or in the present? Do you focus on what you're missing or on what you have? Whether you realize it or not, those are choices you make every single day. It's our way of organizing the 24 hours in a day. And day after day, that is what makes the difference between feeling stressed or relaxed, losing control or feeling in control, feeling dissatisfied or satisfied, being unhappy or happy. Many people are inclined to blame others for life's disappointments. As if other people, things and circumstances stand in the way of our happiness. Like the annoying neighbor, the jealous colleague, the government, the economy, a rough childhood, or perhaps a really happy one.

However, you might not think happiness *is* a choice, that life just is what it is. With our busy jobs, family obligations, social lives and visits to the gym, there are after all much more important things to worry

about than happiness. In our daily life, we're actually relieved to have survived another day. At night, we fall into bed exhausted, scroll past the perfect lives of other people for a while, and then fall asleep, only to get up the next day to slog through yet another day. Daily life gives us enough to worry about and happiness doesn't always feel like a choice. Does this sound familiar? Do you perhaps feel the need to change something about this mindset? If not, then I'm afraid the paper on which this book is printed amounts to some pretty expensive firewood. But if all this does sound promising and you do believe you yourself can determine a large portion of your own happiness and joy, then you're definitely in for a treat.

How we react to things – our mindset – is incredibly important for our day-to-day happiness. And please don't be unnerved by the word "mindset". It's not just a buzzword or something for TED talk gurus. In my world, mindset is primarily a strategy; a way of thinking and therefore also a way of acting. It's something you can use to model your life. Not because it will suddenly make everything perfect, but because it helps you deal with whatever comes your way in the best way possible. It helps to minimize negativity whenever possible, makes it easier to take the necessary punches and to proactively look for the positive. Since you're in command, it makes every day more relaxed and fun. That's the reason why this way of thinking facilitates happiness, and therefore success. And you know what the beauty of

this whole process is? It's all in your mind! And the beauty of this? That you can train your mind. Think of it as physical exercise. Just like working out every day makes you feel fit and strong, you become a happier person as soon as you decide to work on cultivating a positive mindset. It might even mean you will also become one of those annoying people proclaiming "happiness is a choice"! If so, let me apologize for this in advance.

This book offers insights and tools to optimize your mindset in small, easy steps. How to learn to care less about what others think of you; to say no to things you dislike a bit more often; to accept failure is a part of life and that there's no need to strive for perfection. This book teaches you how to achieve the things you want and how to stop complaining about what you'd like to have but don't. You will learn how to care a little less about the proverbial greener grass at the neighbor's and to focus instead on your own lawn. The no-nonsense art of a joyous mindset, that's what this book offers. Why wait around for happiness when you can create it yourself?! The only thing you need is the right frame of mind and to know where happiness, however small, can be found in everyday life. 365 days, for the rest of your life. *Happy Life 365.*

- Kelly

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IT'S ALL IN YOUR MIND

I don't want to teach you
how to control your thoughts,
but how to prevent them
from controlling you!

Our modern world

Our society is one of affluence, with unprecedented freedom, opportunities and luxury. As you're reading this book, I'm assuming you don't live in a developing country and do not have to worry about whether there's food on the table tonight. Well, lucky you! Hooray for progress! Or not? Yes, our current modern world has more creature comforts on offer than ever and there's opportunities around every corner, but on average people are less happy, more dissatisfied and more stressed than ever. In the end, all this progress has also made our lives busy and hectic.

Since we don't always give ourselves enough breathing space, it can be extra tricky to be mindfully present in this modern world of ours. We're just too engrossed in our smartphones, social media, e-mail and all kinds of technological devices. Just notice how many people around you are glued to the small screen in their hands. Day after day, most of us are really busy with crossing off tasks on to-do lists, with all sorts of obligations and tight schedules regarding work, family life, friends and physical exercise. In those rare moments in between when we do have some spare time, we immediately reach for our phones. We drive home from work on autopilot, without really being aware of our surroundings. At home, we turn on the television or are online until we go to bed. Days go by without a moment of mental

rest. Most of us take better care of the battery in our phones than we do of ourselves. And the result? We feel overwhelmed; alive but not truly living. Hardly surprising, is it?

Everyone wants to be happy, but not everybody manages to find happiness in life. These days, happiness is often marketed as a goal in itself. "Buy X and you will become happy. Learn Y and you will become happy." That's why we've started confusing happiness with having fun. It's something our brain does – more about this later – and which businesses are very good at exploiting. Sex, casinos, cars, parties, grocery delivery services, flat screens, unhealthy food and being popular – all of it brings us pleasure, but it does not automatically make us happy. Pleasure and happiness are linked, but experiencing pleasure is not the source of happiness. Does drinking make an alcoholic happy? Yes, it may bring him pleasure. But happiness? Nope. Pleasure is readily available and therefore easiest to pursue, but when we're obsessed with it, it numbs us and forms a distraction from true happiness. Taking pleasure in things is necessary, but it's not enough. Research shows that people who pursue materialistic and superficial sources of pleasure are more anxious, emotionally unstable and less happy in the long term.

A lot of people expect to feel happier when they make progress in life and less happy when they don't. Research by psychologist Daniel Gilbert indicates that on average, people remain equally unhappy or

happy, regardless of whether their situation changes for better or for worse. The researchers found people get used to almost everything in the end. Whether someone won the lottery or became paraplegic, a year later, this person would be approximately just as happy or unhappy as before the extremely positive or negative event. In fact, many studies show that people get accustomed to just about everything, except “real” poverty, interpersonal conflict, pain and noise nuisance. (Aha! This explains why loud neighbors sometimes drive us up the wall.)

Even money doesn't buy happiness. This effect is known as the hedonic treadmill (or hedonic adaptation), a theory about happiness arguing that experiencing more pleasant emotions does indeed make people happier, but only fleetingly. It's why someone with a hedonistic lifestyle kind of resembles a hamster on a treadmill. People want to earn more and more money and do all sorts of fun stuff in order to stay happy. (Just like a hamster needs to keep running to spin the wheel.) The first time flying Business Class, the complimentary glass of champagne is still special, but as it soon becomes business as usual, drinking exclusive champagne on a private jet becomes the next goal. Some people can keep this up for quite a while, but it's a fragile basis for happiness. It only takes a few setbacks and the money is gone, and with it any chance at sustaining lasting happiness. The only times when money does make us happy is when it contributes to fulfilling our basic needs, like shelter, food and

clothing. So no, money can't buy happiness, even though most people would probably love to be able to experience that themselves first!

So if we can't buy happiness, what then? How to become happy? By teaching ourselves methods for becoming happier in daily life. I'm going to explain this without delving into all the research, although my statements are almost always based on scientific findings. But I'd rather you didn't drown in the dense facts about the exact why and how; there are plenty of other books available if you're interested. My aim is to give practical, actionable advice, helping you out with the "yeah, but *how* do I do this?!" Because that's the tricky part. Moreover, the "how?!" question" is very important, as being happy is an active and not a passive state. Just like you can't build muscles by simply reading about it, you can't become happy by knowing a lot about it. No, we can only become happy by doing. And for that, we only need to understand the basic concepts of how our brain works. It's the same as needing to know the basics of how a smartphone works. I may not have a clue about the whole software side of it, but I do know how to charge it, how to call someone and how to turn it on and off. With this basic knowledge I can use my phone to do the things I need and the things I want. The same applies to the brain: familiarize yourself with its most important functions, use them to your advantage and get to enjoy them for the rest of your life.

The evolution of the brain

Our brain is designed for survival, and ensuring you are happy is *not* a priority. The only thing that counts is protecting you from existential threats, making sure you don't die by doing something stupid. Perhaps the following situations sound familiar? You're worried about the restructuring at the office; worried about the presentation you have to give; worried about your health; worried about whether you will ever find the love of your life. And that frown on your forehead? Splendid! It means your brain is working precisely as it should. Ruminating activates your internal alarm system. In ancient times, when your great-great-great grandfather was running around on the prairie in his leather tanga briefs, this fight-or-flight response was extremely convenient. It triggered an acute stress reaction, so that when he was confronted by a lion, he didn't think, "Oh, what a cute animal, let me pet it", but, "Runnnnnn!" More importantly, it meant his body was primed to run. Because, among other things, the system increases your heart and breathing rate (and therefore blood flow) and leads to a state of hyperfocus.

The whole system is designed to help us survive dangerous situations by either fighting or fleeing. By the way, this primitive system is also the reason why many people are still afraid of blood, heights and confined spaces. Nowadays, these dangers are

of course pretty nonexistent, but in the past it could mean certain death. This alarm system still works like a charm whenever a car speeds by, causing us to flinch and take a step back. However, in less threatening situations it can go haywire. Like when there's a daddy long-legs in the corner of the bedroom, a spider not nearly as deadly as the venomous ones your ancestors had to brave. Or when your doctor orders a blood test, which is surely not going to kill you, but can provoke a panic reaction all the same. For some people getting very few "likes" online can even trigger this stress response, even though this can hardly be considered a serious threat. (Well, okay... maybe for your ego.) So our stress system still regularly gets triggered by a host of uncommon situations that aren't life-threatening at all – or at least, not anymore. And yes, for some people even "worry lines" on their forehead can feel like a potential threat.

From an evolutionary standpoint, it isn't particularly practical to have a brain predisposed to happiness. A perpetually happy person would lack the necessary drive to procreate or go hunting, as things would already be fine and dandy. Just like a permanently depressed brain wouldn't stand a chance either; it would lack the motivation to get anything done. Basically, our brain is programmed to aim for somewhere in the middle, for the state of "I'm feeling okay". Not happy as a clam, nor crestfallen, but fine. In short, our brain is wired to prevent existential problems, like not starving to death, avoiding deadly