

NOTES FROM: *The Happiness Hypothesis*, by Jonathan Haidt

SUMMARY: This is a book about finding modern truth in ancient wisdom, where professor Haidt looks at different philosophical traditions and their teachings to discover which have stood the test of time and what is now amply supported by modern psychological research.

It turns out that ancient philosophy and modern psychology have converged on some very clear answers that are *so* easy and effective to implement that you'll likely be *amazed* at how much your life improves just by making a few simple changes.

None of these simple changes require you to become a billionaire or amass millions of followers on social media, either. You can pursue those things if you want, of course, and you might even succeed! That would be wonderful, depending on the person! But it's only a fragile, vulnerable happiness that's based *exclusively* on those things.

The Happiness Hypothesis is also where Haidt popularized the “elephant and rider” view of your emotional brain and rational brain. An elephant without a rider is out of control and chaotic, and a rider with no elephant lives without passion, energy, and drive. Clearly, one is more powerful than the other, but in the book Haidt explores a few ways you can “tame” the elephant and educate the rider.

“Love and work are to people what water and sunshine are to plants.”

Haidt compares the emotional part of the human mind to an elephant, and the rational part of the mind to a rider of that elephant. Without the rational part of the mind, the elephant would be out of control and our minds (and lives) would be chaotic. But without the elephant, our lives would lack a lot of the energy, passion, and drive that makes life worth living.

“Aristotle asked about aretē (excellence/virtue) and telos (purpose/goal), and he used the metaphor that people are like archers, who need a clear target at which to aim. Without a target or goal, one is left with the animal default: Just let the elephant graze or roam where he pleases. And because elephants live in herds, one ends up doing what everyone else is doing. Yet the human mind has a rider, and as the rider begins to think more abstractly in adolescence, there may come a time when he looks around, past the edges of the herd, and asks: Where are we all going? And why?”

The rider can't order the elephant around against its will. We can try to rationally tame our emotions, but often we find that the elephant is too powerful for us, and we revert to past actions and behaviors.

Distract and coax the elephant without engaging in a direct conflict of wills. We *can* rationally change our behavior, but only obliquely.

Moral judgements are a lot like aesthetic ones: subjective. We make up reasons to justify our feelings, and two perfectly intelligent, reasonable, rational people can engage with the same moral dilemma and come to two different conclusions.

“When you refute someone's argument, you are just knocking away the reason they made up for justifying their true underlying reasons.”

“No man can ever be secure until he has been forsaken by Fortune.”

“Earth is a tiny speck where even tinier people play out their insignificant ambitions.”

“Negative thoughts raise a filter through which subsequent events are also perceived negatively.”

“Most people think that regardless of what they do, they are good people and their actions are based on good reasons.”

“We are accurate when thinking about the faults of others, but grossly underestimate our own.”

“Each of us thinks that we see the world directly, as it really is. This is naive realism.”

“The direct causes of most evil are high self-esteem and moral idealism.”

When self-esteem is challenged by harsh reality, that's when people often act out violently.

“The struggle between ‘for’ and ‘against’ is the worst disease of the human mind.”

We learn what causes pleasure or pain immediately after an event, but the brain has trouble connecting success on Friday with actions it took on Monday.

“Set for yourself any goal you want. Most of the pleasure will be had at each step of the way.”

“Attaining something you want is more akin to dropping a big weight, and will lead to less happiness than the pursuit itself.”

“Of course, it's better to win the lottery than to break your neck, but not by as much as you'd think.”

“Everyone can find a reason to be owed something.”

The brain is more sensitive to changes than it is to absolute levels. A change in your wealth, happiness, or any other measure will be felt quite strongly, whereas the *actual* difference between having, say, \$100,000 in the bank and \$500,000 in the bank could quite possibly go unnoticed.

People adapt to wealth and other things like it, such that any gain or loss will become the “new normal” soon enough, and life will go on as before.

Some things have a *reverse correlation*, such as happier people being able to influence people more effectively and thereby make more money. It wasn't that making more money made them happier, but that being happier helped them make more money.

People are horrible at affective forecasting, which means predicting how they will feel in the future.

"People who don't live *enviable* lives can still live *meaningful* lives."

"Children need love to develop properly."

"Children's two major needs are safety and exploration."

People with connections to others, obligations, and constraints are less likely to commit suicide.

Having strong relationships strengthens the immune system and lengthens life, even more so than quitting smoking.

"When heaven is about to confer a great responsibility on any man, it will exercise his mind with suffering, subject his sinews and bones to hard work, expose his body to hunger, put him to poverty, place obstacles in the paths of his deeds, so as to stimulate his mind, harden his nature, and improve wherever he is incompetent."

"None of us knows what we are truly capable of enduring."

"The appreciation of your strength allows you to face more difficult situations in the future."

"Adversity shines the light on true friendships and forces fake friends away."

"You need interesting material to write a good story."

Commitment Story: "The protagonist has a supportive family background, is sensitized early in life to the sufferings of others, is guided by a clear and compelling personal ideology, and, at some point, transforms or redeems failures, mistakes, or crises into a positive outcome, a process that often involves setting new goals that commit the self to serving others. The life of the Buddha is a classic example."

"Reciprocity is a deep instinct; it is the basic currency of social life."

Reciprocity is what drives human interaction, and we all subconsciously believe in karma.

Adversity is most beneficial to people in their late teens and early twenties.

Emerson: "If a man is at heart just, then in so far is he God."

“Even atheists have special places and things that mean something to them; they just don't infer that God is responsible for their existence.”

“Life is a movie that we walk into late and have to leave early.”

“People recover on their own from almost anything that happens to them.”

“When feelings of connection to the universe happen, two areas of the brain that compute the limits of the self and your location in space and time are shut off.”

“There is perhaps no meaning *of* life but meaning can be found *within* life.”

An understanding of religion and modern science are both needed in order to have a greater insight into human nature.

“Happiness is not something that you can find, acquire, or achieve directly. You have to get the conditions right and then wait. Some of those conditions are within you, such as coherence among the parts and levels of your personality. Other conditions require relationships to things beyond you: Just as plants need sun, water, and good soil to thrive, people need love, work, and a connection to something larger. It is worth striving to get the right relationships between yourself and others, between yourself and your work, and between yourself and something larger than yourself. If you get these relationships right, a sense of purpose and meaning will emerge.”