



# The Happiness Trap

STOP STRUGGLING, START LIVING



*Dr Russ Harris has written an easy to read, practical book on how to manage the many challenges life presents us. A great read, with strategies galore.*

Dr Rick Kausman

Author of *If Not Dieting, Then What?*

*It seems so much easier to find the meaning in life and get on with living after reading Dr Russ Harris's book. Full of helpful strategies and common sense ideas, The Happiness Trap is a wonderful journey of reassurance for anyone who is troubled by worrying feelings, nagging anxiety and moods of despair. As a psychologist who works with such people, it is wonderful to be able to recommend this book. I use the strategies myself and they really do work!*

Dr Mandy Deeks, Psychologist, The Jean Hailes Foundation for Women's Health  
Author of *Life Begins at Menopause*

*Dr Russ Harris skillfully leads the reader on a path along which we may pick up and embrace the tools for living a rich, full and authentically meaningful life - a life wherein real "happiness" truly resides. The Happiness Trap is a book for all - therapists and clients alike - it makes the skills of mindfulness accessible and applicable to everyday living.*

Christine Burke, Psychologist BA Dip Ed, M Ed (Counselling Psychology)

*Happiness is an elusive state. Highly valued, relentlessly perused, rarely experienced. Ironically, the harder we try to buy, seize, or closet happiness, the less likely we are to be happy. Indeed, even talking about "how we can be happy" often leaves us with a sense of dissatisfaction - the happiness trap. This is why Dr Russ Harris's book is so useful. This book is about practical and effective ways to understand, to accept, and to embrace the world as it is. Acceptance is the foundation from which happiness grows. The evidence-based techniques and skills taught in this book will strengthen your ability to accept, will help you develop the courage to change the things that can be changed, and will further develop the wisdom to know the difference. I highly recommend this to you.*

Dr Anthony Grant, Psychologist, Director of Coaching Psychology at Sydney university, Author of *It's Your Life - What Are You Going To Do With It!*

*This is a highly readable and original book. It goes against much of the cultural mainstream by arguing that directly trying to be happy may actually make you miserable. The book offers an alternative roadmap, one that helps you avoid emotional detours and guides you towards a life that is rich, full, and meaningful. If you feel like you are not living up to your full potential, this is the book for you.*

Dr. Joseph Ciarrochi, School of Psychology , University of Wollongong

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STOP STRUGGLING, START LIVING

Dr Russ Harris

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PUBLISHING

The cases mentioned in this book are all based on real people. However, their names and key distinguishing details have been changed to prevent identification.

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# Dedication

To my mother and father, for four decades of love, support, inspiration and encouragement. And to my wife Carmel, whose love, wisdom, and generosity has enriched my life and opened my heart in ways I would never have dreamed possible.

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## Foreword

There is a tremendous irony in happiness. It comes from a root word meaning ‘by chance’ or ‘an occurrence’, which in a positive sense connotes a sense of newness, wonder, and appreciation of chance occurrences. The irony is that people not only seek it, they try to hold on to it — especially to avoid any sense of ‘unhappiness’. Unfortunately, these very control efforts can become heavy, planned, closed, rigid and fixed.

Happiness is not just a matter of feeling good. If it were, drug abusers would be the happiest people on the planet. Indeed, feeling good can be a very unhappy pursuit. It is not by accident that drug users call their methods of doing so a ‘fix’ — because they are chemically trying to hold something in place. Like a butterfly pinned to a table, however, happiness dies unless it is held lightly. Drug abusers are not the only ones. In the name of producing an emotional result we call happiness, most of us tend to engage in behaviour that is the exact opposite and then feel awful and inadequate with the inevitable result. Until we wise up, we are all generally trying to get a ‘fix’ on happiness.

This book is based on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), which is an empirically supported approach that takes a new and unexpected tack in dealing with the issue of happiness and life satisfaction. Instead of teaching new techniques to pursue happiness, ACT teaches ways to undermine struggle, avoidance, and loss of the moment. Russ Harris has very carefully and creatively presented this approach in an accessible way. In 33 bite-sized chapters he systematically explores how we get into the ‘Happiness Trap’ and how mindfulness, acceptance, cognitive defusion, and values can release us from it.



The joyful message in these pages is that there is no reason to continue to wait for life to start. That waiting game can end. Now. Like a lion placed in a paper cage, human beings are generally most trapped by the illusions of their own mind. But despite the appearance the cage is not really a barrier that can contain the human spirit. There is another way forward, and with this book Dr Harris shines a powerful and loving beacon forward into the night, lighting that path.

Enjoy the journey. You are in excellent hands.

Steven C. Hayes  
Originator of ACT  
University of Nevada

## Introduction:

# I JUST WANT TO BE HAPPY!

Just suppose for a moment that almost everything you believed about finding happiness turned out to be inaccurate, misleading or false. And suppose that those very beliefs were making you miserable. What if your very efforts to find happiness were actually preventing you from achieving it? And what if almost everyone you knew turned out to be in the same boat — including all those psychologists, psychiatrists and self-help gurus who claim to have all the answers?

I'm not posing these questions just to grab your attention. This book is based on a growing body of scientific research that suggests we are all caught in a powerful psychological trap. We lead our lives ruled by many unhelpful and inaccurate beliefs about happiness — ideas widely accepted by society because 'everyone knows they are true'. On the surface, these beliefs seem to make good sense — that's why you encounter them again and again in nearly every self-help book you ever read. But these erroneous beliefs are both the cause of and the fuel for a vicious cycle, in which the more we try to find happiness, the more we suffer. And this psychological trap is so well hidden, we don't even have a clue that we're caught and controlled by it.

That's the bad news.

The good news is there's hope. You can learn how to recognise the 'happiness trap' and, more importantly, you can learn how to climb out of it — and stay out. This book will give you all the skills and knowledge you need to do it. It's based on a revolutionary new

development in human psychology: a powerful model for change known as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT).

ACT (pronounced as the word 'act') was created in the United States of America by psychologist Steven Hayes, and was further developed by a number of his colleagues, including Kelly Wilson and Kirk Stroschal. ACT has been astoundingly effective in helping patients with a wide range of problems: from depression and anxiety to chronic pain and even drug addiction. For example, in one remarkable study, psychologists Patty Bach and Steven Hayes used ACT with patients suffering from chronic schizophrenia and found that only four hours of therapy were sufficient to reduce hospital readmission rates by half! ACT has also proved highly effective for the less dramatic problems that millions of us encounter, such as quitting smoking and reducing stress in the workplace. Unlike the vast majority of other therapies, ACT has a firm basis in scientific research and, because of this, it is rapidly growing in popularity among psychologists all around the world.

The aim of ACT is to help you live a rich, full and meaningful life, while effectively handling the pain that inevitably comes your way. ACT achieves this through the use of six powerful principles, which are very different from the so-called commonsense strategies suggested in most self-help books.

## Is Happiness Normal?

In the western world we now have a higher standard of living than humans have ever known before. We have better medical treatment, more and better food, better housing conditions, better sanitation, more money, more welfare services and more access to education, justice, travel, entertainment and career opportunities. Indeed, today's middle class lives better than did the royalty of not so long ago, and yet, human misery is everywhere.

The psychology and personal development sections of bookstores are growing at a rate never seen before, and the bookshelves are groaning under the strain. The titles cover depression, anxiety, anorexia nervosa, overeating, anger management, divorce, relationship problems, sexual problems, drug addictions, alcoholism, low self-esteem, loneliness, grief,

gambling — if you can name it, there's a book on it. Meanwhile, on the television and radio, and in magazines and newspapers, the 'experts' bombard us daily with advice on how to improve our lives. This is why the numbers of psychologists, psychiatrists, marriage and family counsellors, social workers and 'life coaches' are increasing with every year. And yet — now, think about this — with all this help and advice and worldly wisdom, human misery is not diminishing but growing by leaps and bounds! Isn't there something wrong with this picture?

The statistics are staggering: In any given year almost 30 per cent of the adult population will suffer from a recognised psychiatric disorder. The World Health Organization estimates that depression is currently the fourth biggest, costliest and most debilitating disease in the world, and by the year 2020 it will be the *second biggest*. In any given week, one-tenth of the adult population is suffering from clinical depression, and one in five people will suffer from it at some point in their lifetime. Furthermore, one in four adults, at some stage in their life, will suffer from drug or alcohol addiction, which is why there are now over twenty million alcoholics in the United States of America alone!

But more startling and more sobering than all those statistics is that almost one in two people will go through a stage in life when they seriously consider suicide and will struggle with it for a period of two weeks or more. Scariest still, one in ten people will at some point actually attempt to kill themselves.

Think about those numbers for a moment. Think of the people in your life: your friends, family and co-workers. Consider what those figures imply: that of all the people you know, almost half of them will at some point be so overwhelmed by misery that they seriously contemplate suicide. And one in ten will attempt it! In the past two centuries we have doubled the span of the average human life. But have we doubled the richness, the enjoyment, the *fulfilment* of that life? These statistics give us the answer, loud and clear: happiness is not normal!

## Why Is It So Difficult To Be Happy?

To answer this question, we need to take a journey back in time. The modern human mind, with its amazing ability to analyse, plan, create and communicate, has largely evolved over the last hundred thousand years, since our species, *Homo sapiens*, first appeared on the planet. But our minds did not evolve to make us feel good, so we could tell great jokes, write sonnets and say 'I love you'. Our minds evolved to help us survive in a world fraught with danger. Imagine that you're an early human hunter-gatherer. What are your essential needs in order to survive and reproduce?

There are four of them: food, water, shelter and sex, but none of these things mean much if you're dead. So the number one priority of the primitive human mind was to look out for anything that might harm you and avoid it! In essence, the primitive mind was a 'Don't get killed' device, and it proved enormously useful. The better our ancestors became at anticipating and avoiding danger, the longer they lived and the more children they had.

With each generation the human mind became increasingly skilled at predicting and avoiding danger. And now, after a hundred thousand years of evolution, the modern mind is still constantly on the lookout for trouble. It assesses and judges almost everything we encounter: Is this good or bad? Safe or dangerous? Harmful or helpful? These days, though, it's not sabre-toothed cats or 200-kilogram wolves that our mind warns us about. Instead it's losing our job, being rejected, getting a speeding ticket, not being able to pay the bills, embarrassing ourselves in public, upsetting our loved ones, getting cancer, or any of a million and one other common worries. As a result we spend a lot of time worrying about things that, more often than not, never happen.

Another essential for the survival of any early human is to belong to a group. If your clan boots you out, it won't be long before the wolves find you. So how does the mind protect you from rejection by the group? By comparing you with other members of the clan: Am I fitting in? Am I doing the right thing? Am I contributing enough? Am I as good as the others? Am I doing anything that might get me rejected?

Sound familiar? Our modern-day minds are continually warning us of rejection and comparing us against the rest of society. No wonder we spend so much energy worrying whether people will like us! No wonder we're always looking for ways to improve ourselves or putting ourselves down because we don't 'measure up'. A hundred thousand years ago we had only the few members of our immediate clan to compare ourselves with. But these days we can open any newspaper or magazine, switch on any television, tune in to any radio, and instantly find a whole host of people who are smarter, richer, taller, slimmer, sexier, stronger, more powerful, more famous, more successful, or more admired than we are. What's the fastest way to make a teenage girl depressed? Show her a fashion magazine. When she compares herself to all those air-brushed, collagen-enhanced, digitally altered supermodels, she is guaranteed to feel inferior or downright unattractive. And the rest of us are not that different. Thanks to evolution, our minds are now so sophisticated they can even dream up a fantasy of the person we'd like to be — and then compare our 'real' self to that impossible standard. What chance have we got? We will always end up feeling not good enough!

Now, for any Stone Age person with ambition, the general rule for success is: the more, the better. The more sophisticated your weapons (and the more of them you have), the more food you can kill. The more plentiful your food stores, the better your chances are for living through times of scarcity. The more substantial your shelter, the safer you are from weather and wild animals. The more children you have, the better the chance that some of them will survive into adulthood. No surprise then, that our modern mind continually looks for more: more money, more status, more love, more job satisfaction, a newer car, a younger-looking body, a younger-looking partner, a bigger house. And if we succeed, if we actually get more money or a newer car or a better job, then we're satisfied — *for a while*. But sooner or later (and usually sooner), we end up wanting more.

Thus, evolution has shaped our minds so that we are almost inevitably destined to suffer psychologically: to compare, evaluate

and criticise ourselves; to focus on what we're lacking; to be dissatisfied with what we have; and to imagine all sorts of frightening scenarios, most of which will never happen. No wonder humans find it hard to be happy!

### What Exactly Is 'Happiness'?

We all want it. We all crave it. We all strive for it. Even the Dalai Lama has said: 'The very purpose of life is to seek happiness.' But what exactly is this elusive thing we are looking for?

The word 'happiness' has two very different meanings. Usually it refers to a feeling: a sense of pleasure, gladness or gratification. We all enjoy happy feelings, so it's no surprise that we chase them. However, like all our other feelings, feelings of happiness don't last. No matter how hard we try to hold on to them, they slip away every time. And as we shall see, a life spent in pursuit of those feelings is, in the main, unsatisfying. In fact, the harder we pursue pleasurable feelings, the more we are likely to suffer from anxiety and depression.

The other meaning of happiness is 'a rich, full and meaningful life'. When we take action on the things that truly matter deep in our hearts, when we move in directions that we consider valuable and worthy, when we clarify what we stand for in life and act accordingly, then our lives become rich and full and meaningful, and we experience a powerful sense of vitality. This is not some fleeting feeling — it is a profound sense of a life well lived. And although such a life will undoubtedly give us many pleasurable feelings, it will also give us uncomfortable ones, such as sadness, fear and anger. This is only to be expected. If we live a full life, we will feel the full range of human emotions.

In this book, as you've probably guessed by now, we are far more interested in the second meaning of happiness than in the first. Of course, happy feelings are quite pleasant, and we should certainly make the most of them when they present themselves. But if we try to have them all the time, we are doomed to failure.

The reality is, life involves pain. There's no getting away from it. As human beings we are all faced with the fact that sooner or later we will grow infirm, get sick and die. Sooner or later we all will lose

valued relationships through rejection, separation or death. Sooner or later we all will come face-to-face with a crisis, disappointment and failure. This means that in one form or another, we are all going to experience painful thoughts and feelings.

The good news is that, although we can't avoid such pain, we can learn to handle it much better — to make room for it, rise above it and create a life worth living. This book will show you how to do so. There are three parts to this process.

In Part 1 you will learn how you create and get stuck in the happiness trap. This is an essential first step, so please don't skip it — you can't escape the trap if you don't know how it works.

In Part 2, rather than trying to avoid or eliminate painful thoughts and feelings, you will learn how to fundamentally transform your relationship with them. You will learn how to experience painful thoughts and feelings in a new way that will lessen their impact, drain away their power, and dramatically decrease their influence over your life.

Finally, in Part 3, instead of chasing happy thoughts and feelings, you will focus on creating a rich and meaningful life. This will give rise to a sense of vitality and fulfilment that is both deeply satisfying and long lasting.

## The Journey Ahead

This book is like a trip through a foreign country: much will seem strange and new. Other things will seem familiar yet somehow subtly different. At times you may feel challenged or confronted, at other times excited or amused. Take your time on this journey. Instead of rushing ahead, savour it fully. Stop when you find something stimulating or unusual. Explore it in depth and learn as much as you can. To create a life worth living is a major undertaking, so please take the time to appreciate it.







PART  
1

How You Set The  
Happiness Trap

# Chapter 1: FAIRYTALES

What's the last line of every fairytale? You got it: '... and they lived happily ever after.' And it's not just fairytales that have happy endings. How about Hollywood movies? Don't they nearly always have some sort of feel-good ending where good triumphs over evil, love conquers all, and the hero defeats the bad guy? And doesn't the same hold true for most popular novels and television programs? We love happy endings because society tells us that's how life should be: all joy and fun, all peace and contentment, living happily ever after. But does that sound realistic? Does it fit in with your experience of life? This is one of four major myths that make up the basic blueprint for the happiness trap. Let's take a look at these myths, one by one.

## Myth No. 1: Happiness Is The Natural State For All Human Beings

Our culture insists that humans are naturally happy. But the statistics quoted in the introduction clearly disprove this. Remember, one in ten adults will attempt suicide, and one in five will suffer from depression. What's more, the statistical probability that you will suffer from a psychiatric disorder at some stage in your life is almost 30 per cent! Not exactly great odds, are they?

And when you add in all the misery caused by problems that are not classified as psychiatric disorders — loneliness, divorce, sexual difficulties, work stress, midlife crisis, relationship issues, domestic violence, social isolation, bullying, prejudice, low self-esteem, chronic anger and lack of meaning or purpose in life — you start to get some idea of just how rare true happiness really is. Unfortunately, many people walk around with the belief that everyone else is happy

except for them. And — you guessed it — this belief creates even more unhappiness.

### Myth No. 2: If You're Not Happy, You're Defective

Following logically from Myth 1, western society assumes that mental suffering is abnormal. It is seen as a weakness or illness, a product of a mind that is somehow faulty or defective. This means that when we do inevitably experience painful thoughts and feelings, we often criticise ourselves for being weak or stupid. Health professionals contribute to this process by readily slapping on labels such as, 'You're depressed', and these labels merely confirm how defective we are.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy is based on a dramatically different assumption. ACT proposes that the normal thinking processes of a healthy human mind will naturally lead to psychological suffering. You're not defective — your mind's just doing its job; the thing it *evolved* to do. Fortunately, ACT can teach you how to adapt to this in such a way that your life will be powerfully transformed.

### Myth No. 3: To Create A Better Life, We Must Get Rid Of Negative Feelings

We live in a feel-good society, a culture thoroughly obsessed with finding happiness. And what does that society tell us to do? To eliminate 'negative' feelings and accumulate 'positive' ones in their place. It's a nice theory and on the surface it seems to make sense. After all, who wants to have unpleasant feelings? But here's the catch: the things we generally value most in life bring with them a whole range of feelings, both pleasant and unpleasant. For example, in an intimate long-term relationship, although you will experience wonderful feelings such as love and joy, you will also inevitably experience disappointment and frustration. There is no such thing as the perfect partner and sooner or later conflicts of interest will happen.

The same holds true for just about every meaningful project we embark on. Although they often bring feelings of excitement and

enthusiasm, they also generally bring stress, fear and anxiety. So if you believe Myth 3, you're in big trouble, because it's pretty well impossible to create a better life if you're not prepared to have some uncomfortable feelings. However, in Part 2 of this book, you will learn how to handle such feelings altogether differently, to experience them in such a way that they bother you a whole lot less.

#### Myth No. 4: You Should Be Able To Control What You Think And Feel

The fact is, we have much less control over our thoughts and feelings than we would like. It's not that we have no control; it's just that we have much less than the 'experts' would have us believe. However, we do have a *huge* amount of control over our actions. And it's through taking action that we create a rich, full and meaningful life. (That's why we say ACT as the word 'act', rather than as the initials A.C.T.)

The overwhelming majority of self-help programs subscribe to Myth 4. For example, many approaches teach you to identify negative thoughts and replace them with more positive ones. Other approaches encourage the repetition of positive affirmations such as, 'Everything that happens is for my highest good and greatest joy', or 'I am strong, able and capable at all times'. Still other approaches encourage you to visualise what you want, to vividly imagine yourself the way you want to be, living the life you dream of. The basic theme of all these approaches is this: if you challenge your negative thoughts or images and, instead, repeatedly fill your head with positive thoughts and images, you will find happiness. If only life were that simple!

I'm willing to bet that you've already tried countless times to think more positively about things and yet those negative thoughts keep coming back again and again. As we saw in the last chapter, our minds have evolved over a hundred thousand years to think the way they do, so it's not likely that a few positive thoughts or affirmations will change them all that much! It's not that these techniques have *no* effect; they can often make you feel better temporarily. But they will not get rid of negative thoughts over the long term.

The same holds true for ‘negative’ feelings such as anger, fear, sadness, insecurity and guilt. There are multitudes of psychological strategies to ‘get rid of’ such feelings. But you’ve undoubtedly discovered that even if they go away, after a while they’re back. And then they go away again. And then they come back again. And so on and so on. The likelihood is, if you’re like most other humans on the planet, you’ve already spent a lot of time and effort trying to have ‘good’ feelings instead of ‘bad’ ones — and you’ve probably found that as long as you’re not too distressed, you can, to some degree, pull it off. But you’ve probably also discovered that as your level of distress increases, your ability to control your feelings progressively lessens. Sadly, Myth 4 is so widely believed that we tend to feel inadequate when our attempts to control our thoughts and feelings fail.

These four powerful myths provide the basic blueprint for the happiness trap. They set us up for a struggle we can never win: the struggle against our own human nature. It is this struggle that builds the trap. In the next chapter we will look at this struggle in detail, but first let’s consider why these myths are so entrenched in our culture.

## The Illusion Of Control

The human mind has given us an enormous advantage as a species. It enables us to make plans, invent things, coordinate actions, analyse problems, share knowledge, learn from our experiences and imagine new futures. The clothes on your body, the shoes on your feet, the watch on your wrist, the chair beneath you, the roof over your head, the book in your hands — none of these things would exist but for the ingenuity of the human mind. The mind enables us to shape the world around us and conform it to our wishes, to provide ourselves with warmth, shelter, food, water, protection, sanitation and medicine. Not surprisingly, this amazing ability to control our environment gives us high expectations of control in other arenas as well.

Now, in the material world, control strategies generally work well. If we don’t like something, we figure out how to avoid it or get rid of it, and then we do so. A wolf outside your door? Get rid of

it! Throw rocks at it, or spears, or shoot it. Snow, rain or hail? Well you can't get rid of those things, but you can avoid them by hiding in a cave, or building a shelter. Dry, arid ground? You can get rid of it by irrigation and fertilisation, or you can avoid it by moving to a better location.

But what about our internal world? I'm talking here about thoughts, memories, emotions, urges, mental images and physical sensations. Can we simply avoid or get rid of the ones we don't like? In the outer world, we can do so fairly easily, so shouldn't it be the same with our inner world?

Here's a little experiment. As you keep reading this paragraph, try not to think about ice cream. Don't think about the colour or the texture or the taste of it. Don't think about how it tastes on a hot summer's day. Don't think about how good it feels as it melts inside your mouth. Don't think about how you have to keep licking around the edges to stop it from dripping on your fingers.

How'd you do?

Exactly! You couldn't stop thinking about ice cream.

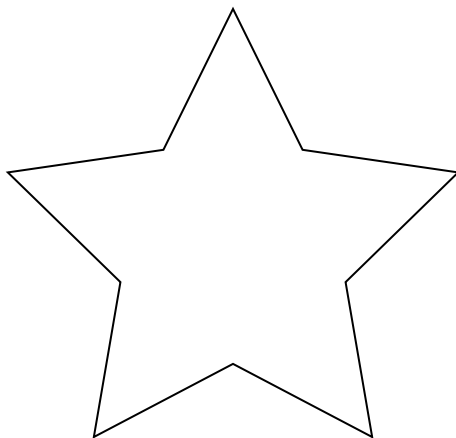
Here's another little experiment. Recall something that happened in the past week. Any memory will do, whether it's a conversation you had, a movie you watched or a meal you ate. Got one? Good. Now try to get rid of it. Totally obliterate it from your memory so it can never come back to you, ever again.

How did you go? If you think you succeeded, just check again and see if you can still remember it.

Now, tune in to your mouth. Notice how your tongue feels. Run it over your teeth, your gums, your cheeks and the roof of your mouth. Now try to get rid of those sensations. Try to turn your mouth totally numb, as if you just had a shot of novocaine from the dentist. Were you able to forget the sensations?

Now consider this hypothetical scenario for a moment. Suppose someone put a loaded gun to your head and told you that *you must not feel afraid*; that if you should feel even the slightest trace of anxiety, they will shoot you. Could you stop yourself feeling anxious in this situation, even though your life depended on it? (Sure you could try to act calm, but could you truly feel it?)

Okay, one last experiment. Stare at the star below then see if you can stop yourself from thinking for 60 seconds. That's all you have to do. For 60 seconds, prevent any thoughts whatsoever from coming into your mind — especially any thoughts about the star!



Hopefully by now you're getting the point that thoughts, feelings, physical sensations and memories are just not that easy to control. It's not that you have *no* control over these things; it's just that you have much less control than you thought. Let's face it, if these things were that easy to control, wouldn't we all just live in perpetual bliss? Of course, there are a few self-help gurus who claim to live in such a state all the time. Such people often get really rich, their books sell by the million and they attract huge followings of people desperate for 'the answer'. My guess is that many readers of this book will have already gone down that path and been sadly disappointed.

### How We Learn About Control

From a young age, we are taught that we should be able to control our feelings. When you were growing up, you probably heard a number of expressions like, 'Don't cry, or I'll give you something to cry about', 'Don't be so gloomy; look on the bright side', 'Take that frown off your face', 'You're a big boy now. Big boys don't cry', 'Stop feeling sorry for yourself', 'Don't worry, there's no need to be frightened.'



With words such as these, the adults around us sent out the message, again and again, that we ought to be able to control our feelings. And certainly it appeared to us as if they controlled theirs. But what was going on behind closed doors? In all likelihood, many of those adults weren't coping too well with their own painful feelings. They may have been drinking too much, taking tranquillisers, crying themselves to sleep every night, having affairs, throwing themselves into their work or suffering in silence while slowly developing stomach ulcers. However they were coping, they probably didn't share those experiences with you.

And on those rare occasions when you did get to witness their loss of control, they probably never said anything like, 'Okay, these tears are because I'm feeling something called sadness. It's a normal feeling and you can learn how to handle it effectively.' But then, that's not too surprising; they couldn't show you how to handle your emotions because they didn't know how to handle theirs!

The idea that you should be able to control your feelings was undoubtedly reinforced in your school years. For example, kids who cried at school were probably teased for being 'cry-babies' or 'sissies' — especially if they were boys. Then, as you grew older, you probably heard phrases (or even used them yourself) such as, 'Get over it!' 'Shit happens!' 'Move on!' 'Chill out!' 'Don't let it bother you!' 'Don't be such a chicken!' 'Snap out of it!' and so on.

The implication of all these phrases is that you should be able to turn your feelings on and off at will, like flicking a switch. And why is this myth so compelling? Because the people around us seem, on the surface, to be happy. They seem to be in control of their thoughts and feelings. But 'seem' is the key word here. The fact is that most people are not open or honest about the struggle they go through with their own thoughts and feelings. They 'put on a brave face' and 'keep a stiff upper lip'. They are like the proverbial clown crying on the inside; the bright face paint and chirpy antics are all we see. It's common in therapy to hear clients say things like, 'If my friends/family/colleagues could hear me now, they'd never believe it. Everyone thinks I'm so strong/confident/happy/independent ...'

Penny, a 30-year-old receptionist, came to see me six months after the birth of her first child. She was feeling tired and anxious and full of self-doubt about her mothering skills. At times she felt incompetent or inadequate and just wanted to run away from all the responsibility. At other times she felt exhausted and miserable and wondered if having a child had been a huge mistake. On top of that, she felt guilty for even having such thoughts! Although Penny attended regular mothers' group meetings, she kept her problems a secret. The other mothers all seemed so confident, she feared that if she told them how she was feeling, they would look down on her. When Penny eventually plucked up the courage to share her experiences with the other women, her admission broke a conspiracy of silence. The other mothers had all been feeling the same way to one degree or another, but they'd all been putting on the same act of bravado, hiding their true feelings for fear of disapproval or rejection. There was a huge sense of relief and bonding as these women opened up and got honest with one another.

To make a gross generalisation, men are much worse than women at admitting their deepest concerns because men are taught to be stoic: to bottle up their feelings and hide them. After all, big boys don't cry. In contrast, women learn to share and discuss their feelings from a young age. Nonetheless, many women are reluctant to tell even their closest friends that they are feeling depressed or anxious or not coping in some way, for fear of being judged weak or silly. Our silence about what we are really feeling and the false front we put on for the people around us simply add to the powerful illusion of control.

So the question is: How much have you been influenced by all these control myths? The questionnaire on the following pages will help you find out.

## CONTROL OF THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS QUESTIONNAIRE

This questionnaire has been adapted from similar ones developed by Steven Hayes, Frank Bond and others. When the term 'negative thoughts and feelings' is used, it refers to a whole range of painful feelings (such as anger, depression and anxiety), and painful thoughts (such as bad memories, disturbing images, and harsh self-judgments). For each pair of statements, please select the one that most accurately fits how you feel. The answer you choose doesn't have to be absolutely 100 per cent true for you all the time; just pick the answer which seems to be more representative of your general attitude.

- 1a.** I must have good control of my feelings in order to be successful in life.  
**1b.** It is unnecessary for me to control my feelings in order to be successful in life.
- 2a.** Anxiety is bad.  
**2b.** Anxiety is neither good nor bad. It is merely an uncomfortable feeling.
- 3a.** Negative thoughts and feelings will harm you if you don't control or get rid of them.  
**3b.** Negative thoughts and feelings won't harm you, even if they feel unpleasant.
- 4a.** I'm afraid of some of my strong feelings.  
**4b.** I'm not afraid of any feelings, no matter how strong.
- 5a.** In order for me to do something important, I have to get rid of all my doubts.  
**5b.** I can do something important, even when doubts are present.
- 6a.** When negative thoughts and feelings arise, it's important to reduce or get rid of them as fast as possible.  
**6b.** Trying to reduce or get rid of negative thoughts and feelings frequently causes problems. If I simply allow them to be, then they will change as a natural part of living.

- 7a.** The best method of managing negative thoughts and feelings is to analyse them; then utilise that knowledge to get rid of them.
- 7b.** The best method of managing negative thoughts and feelings is to acknowledge their presence and let them be, without having to analyse or judge them.
- 8a.** I will become 'happy' and 'healthy' by improving my ability to avoid, reduce or get rid of negative thoughts and feelings.
- 8b.** I will become 'happy' and 'healthy' by allowing negative thoughts and feelings to come and go of their own accord, and learning to live effectively when they are present.
- 9a.** If I can't suppress or get rid of a negative emotional reaction, it's a sign of personal failure or weakness.
- 9b.** The need to control or get rid of a negative emotional reaction is a problem in itself.
- 10a.** Having negative thoughts and feelings is an indication that I'm psychologically unhealthy or 'I've got problems'.
- 10b.** Having negative thoughts and feelings means I'm a normal human being.
- 11a.** People who are in control of their lives can generally control how they feel.
- 11b.** People who are in control of their lives do not need to try to control their feelings.
- 12a.** It is not okay to feel anxious and I try hard to avoid it.
- 12b.** I don't like anxiety, but it's okay to feel it.
- 13a.** Negative thoughts and feelings are a sign that there is something wrong with my life.
- 13b.** Negative thoughts and feelings are an inevitable part of life for everyone.

- 14a.** I have to feel good before I can do something that's important and challenging.
- 14b.** I can do something that's important and challenging even if I'm feeling anxious or depressed.
- 15a.** I try to suppress thoughts and feelings that I don't like by just not thinking about them.
- 15b.** I don't try to suppress thoughts and feelings that I don't like. I just let them come and go of their own accord.

To score your test, count the number of times you selected option 'a' or 'b'. (Please keep a record of your score. At the end of this book, I'll ask you to come back and do this test again.)

The more times you selected option 'a', the greater the likelihood that control issues are creating significant suffering in your life. How so? Well, that's the subject of the next chapter.

## Chapter 2:

# VICIOUS CYCLES

Michelle has tears streaming down her eyes. ‘What’s wrong with me?’ she asks. ‘I have a great husband, great kids, a great job. I’m fit; I’m healthy. We have a lovely house. We’re well off. We live in a beautiful area. So why aren’t I happy?’

It’s a good question. Michelle seems to have everything she wants in life, so what’s going wrong? We’ll come back to Michelle later in this chapter, but for now let’s take a look at what’s happening in your life.

### What’s *Your* Problem?

Presumably, if you’re reading this book, there’s room for your life to work better than it does. Maybe your relationship is in trouble, or you’re lonely or heartbroken. Maybe you hate your job, or maybe you’ve lost it. Maybe your health is deteriorating. Maybe someone you love has died, or rejected you, or moved far away. Maybe you’re having a midlife crisis. Maybe you have low self-esteem or no self-confidence or feelings of inadequacy. Maybe you have drug or alcohol problems or other addictions. It could be financial or legal difficulties, or that you just feel stuck and don’t know *what* you want. Maybe you’re suffering from depression or anxiety, or you could just be bored with life or feel that it lacks any meaning.

Whatever the problem is, it undoubtedly gives rise to unpleasant thoughts and feelings — and you’ve probably spent a lot of time and effort trying to escape them or blot them out. But suppose those attempts to get rid of your bad thoughts and feelings are actually lowering the quality of your life? In ACT we have a saying for this: ‘The solution is the problem!’

## How Does A Solution Become A Problem?

What do you do when you have an itch? You scratch it, right? And usually this works so well you don't even think about it: scratch the itch and it goes away. Problem solved. But suppose one day you develop a patch of eczema (a common skin condition). The skin is very itchy, so naturally you scratch it. However, the skin cells in this region are already inflamed and therefore highly sensitive, and when you scratch them, they release chemicals called histamines, which are highly irritating. And these histamines inflame the skin even further. So after a little while the itch returns — with a greater intensity than before. And, of course, if you scratch it again, it gets even worse! The more you scratch, the worse the eczema and the bigger the itch.

Scratching is a good solution for a fleeting itch in normal, healthy skin. But for a persistent itch in abnormal skin, scratching is harmful: the 'solution' becomes part of the problem. This is commonly known as a 'vicious cycle'. And in the world of human emotions, vicious cycles are common. Here are a few examples:

- Joseph fears rejection, so he feels overly anxious in social situations. He doesn't want those feelings of anxiety, so he avoids socialising whenever possible. He doesn't accept invitations to parties. He doesn't pursue friendships. He lives alone and stays home every night. This means that on the rare occasion when he does socialise, he's more anxious than ever because he's so out of practice. Furthermore, living alone with no friends or social life just serves to make him feel completely rejected, which is the very thing he fears!
- Yvonne also feels anxious in social situations. She copes with this by drinking heavily. In the short term, alcohol reduces her anxiety. But the next day she feels hung-over and tired and she often regrets the money she spent on alcohol or worries about the embarrassing things she did while under the influence. Sure, she escapes anxiety for a little while, but the price she pays is a lot of other unpleasant feelings over the long term. And if she ever finds herself in a social situation where she can't drink, her anxiety is greater than ever, because she doesn't have alcohol to rely on.

- Danielle is overweight and hates it, so she eats some chocolate to cheer herself up. For the moment, she feels better. But then she thinks about all the calories she's just consumed and how that will add to her weight — and ends up feeling more miserable than ever.
- Ahmed is out of shape. He wants to get fit again. He starts working out, but because he's unfit, it's hard work and it feels uncomfortable. He doesn't like the discomfort, so he stops working out. Then his fitness level slides even lower.
- There's a lot of built-up tension between Andrew and his wife, Sylvana. Sylvana is angry at Andrew because he works long hours and doesn't spend enough time with her. Andrew doesn't like those feelings of tension in the house, so in order to avoid them, he starts working longer hours. But the more hours he works, the more dissatisfied Sylvana gets — and the tension in their relationship steadily increases.

You can see that these are all examples of trying to get rid of, avoid or escape from unpleasant feelings. We call these 'control strategies' because they are attempts to directly control how you feel. The table on the following page shows some of the most common control strategies. I've organised them into two main categories: fight strategies and flight strategies. Fight strategies involve fighting with or trying to dominate your unwanted thoughts and feelings. Flight strategies involve running away or hiding from those unwelcome thoughts and feelings.