

The Antidote Summary

By Oliver Burkeman

What if our constant effort to be happy is making us miserable?

In *The Antidote*, by author and renowned journalist Oliver Burkeman, typical self-help advice is turned on its head. Burkeman draws upon psychology, ancient stoic philosophy, and Buddhist teachings, to reveal why negative thinking has its positive side.

Witty, practical, and wise, *The Antidote* is a thought-provoking, counter-cultural, and ultimately uplifting read. It presents us with an alternative "negative path" to happiness and success, and encourages us to embrace the things we try most to avoid, such as failure, uncertainty, and death.

We'll briefly explore why positive thinking isn't always the path to happiness. We'll also look at how our anxious attempts to feel secure, avoid failure, and ignore the imminent reality of death, are just a few reasons why happiness often escapes us.

Sometimes Self-Help isn't Helpful

The gospel of positive thinking isn't exactly complicated. Burkeman explains it in one sentence: 'Decide to think happy and successful thoughts, banish the specter of sadness and failure, and happiness and success will follow.' However, the message of relentless optimism proves sub-optimal, when it comes to our quest for happiness. We may feel good in the moment, when we attend a "Get Motivated" seminar, or when

we're faced with a loud somebody telling us that "Nothing is Impossible." But how reliable is this advice?

According to the author, at best, such advice lacks evidence, and at worse, it leads to more suffering. Here's why.

Self-help books, the apotheosis of the quest for happiness, are among the things that fail to make us feel happy. Self-help publishers refer to the "18th rule," which states: 'a person most likely to purchase any given self-help book, is someone who, within the previous 18 months, bought a self-help book— one that didn't obviously solve their problem.' For those of us who find ourselves returning to the self-help aisle, Burkeman empathizes. He believes that there's nothing wrong with our yearning for a neat book-sized solution to the problem of "being human"— it's understandable. But strip away the packaging, and we might find that the messages of such works are frequently banal. For example, bestsellers such as *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, essentially tell us to 'decide what matters most in life, and then do it.' And a book like *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, advises us to be pleasant rather than obnoxious and to remember a person's name. Not only is such advice merely apparent, but much of what we're told isn't supported by reputable research.

Read any popular psychology book that talks about the importance of goals and planning, and it's likely they cite the famous Yale Study of Goals. In 1953, students graduating from Yale University, were asked by researchers whether or not they had formulated specific written down goals, for the rest of their lives. Only 3% of participants said that they had. Two decades later, the researchers tracked down the class of '53, to see how their lives turned out. The results were unequivocal. 3% of graduates with written down goals, had accumulated greater financial

wealth than the other 97%. This is a jaw-dropping finding. The only problem is that this never happened. The Yale Study of Goals never took place. Some years ago, a journalist from the technology magazine *Fast Company*, set out to trace the source of the alleged study. No academic journal reference was ever found. Burkeman even took matters into his own hands, and called a senior Yale University archivist. The archivist replied that no such study exists, and had a note of frustration in her voice. Clearly, it wasn't the first time someone asked her this question.

So when it comes to the self-help industry, what we read about or hear in seminars should always be taken with a pinch of scientific salt. But speaking of science, here's some actual research, that points to why trying to "think positive" has its negatives.

The Downside of *Trying* to Look on the Bright Side

One of the foremost investigators of the problem with positive thinking, is Harvard psychologist Daniel Wegner. He's best known for his work on the Ironic Process Theory. The Ironic Process Theory explores how our efforts to suppress specific thoughts or behaviors result, ironically, in them becoming more prevalent. This has been demonstrated in the so-called white bear challenge. If you're told not to think about a white bear, what happens? You'll likely think about the white bear.

So if you're told to focus on the positives, and not on the negatives, where do you think your thoughts will go? Wegner's other studies support this idea, that our relentless effort to be positive, ironically brings about the opposite result. There's an example where experimental subjects were told of an unfortunate event, but then instructed to try not to feel sad about it. What ended up happening was that they felt worse

than people who were informed about the event, but given no instructions about how to feel. In another study, patients who had panic disorders, were given relaxation tapes to listen to. Results showed that their hearts beat faster than patients who listened to audiobooks, with no explicitly relaxing content. Furthermore, there's research to suggest that bereaved people who make the most effort to avoid grief, take the longest to recover from a loss. So, despite our best attempts to suppress difficult thoughts, mental suppression isn't the answer.

What's more, reassuring ourselves with positive affirmations, doesn't seem to do us much good either. In 2009, psychologist Joanne Wood, set out to test the effectiveness of "affirmations," and here's what she found. She found that people with low self-esteem, who were given the daily task of writing, "I'm a loveable person," became appreciably less happy due to the process. Not only did they not feel particularly lovable to begin with, but through trying to convince themselves otherwise, this merely solidified their negativity. In short, positive thinking made them feel a lot worse.

The point is, our *effort* to try to feel happy, is often precisely the thing that makes us miserable. As philosopher John Stuart Mill put it: 'Ask yourself whether you're happy and you cease to be.' There are many ways to be miserable, but there's only one way of being comfortable, and that's to stop running after happiness.

But if trying to be happy doesn't make us happy, are we doomed to a life of misery? Perhaps not.

The "Negative Path" to Happiness

Burkeman worked for several years as a journalist in the field of psychology, and he also considered his own very skeptical quest for happiness. Eventually, he realized that our constant positivity-pursuit, is counterproductive. Furthermore, so many of us put in too much effort to try to be positive, and we also try to eliminate the negative. This he argues, is precisely what causes us to feel insecure, anxious, uncertain or unhappy.

Hence we're invited to take a radically different stance, towards those things that we spend most of our lives trying so hard to avoid. What if we could learn to enjoy uncertainty, embrace insecurity, become familiar with failure. and even learn to value death? What if we just stopped trying to be so darn positive all the time?

In short, to be happy, we might need to be willing to experience more negative emotions or, at the very least, try not to run from them.

Developing "Negative Capability"

What if we could learn to live with uncertainty and fear, or mystery and doubt, without any irritability?

Many of our thoughts and actions are fueled by our need for closure. We're motivated to put an end to feeling uncertainty and anxiety, but what if there's no end? What if we choose not to seek resolution? What if we notice our craving for completeness, certainty, or comfort, but not feel compelled to follow where it leads? Closure is a myth, so perhaps it's time to bring closure to the fact that there may never be true closure. Instead, why not embrace the idea of "openture?"

"Openture" is a concept given to us by psychologist Paul Pearsall, a neologism to describe the opposite of closure. Rather than trying to correct all our negative thoughts, we should just let them be.

Stoics and Buddhists know all about the art of openture. The Stoic approach isn't a weary resignation to what life throws at us; instead, it's a tough-minded philosophy, that involves developing a kind of muscular calm in the face of trying circumstances. A way to strengthen this muscle is to examine, rather than to stray from negative experiences and emotions. One of the single most valuable techniques in the stoics toolkit, is the "premeditation of evils." The premeditation of evils, or negative visualization, is a practice used to deal with worries head-on. Instead of trying to focus on the best-case scenario, we imagine the worst.

Often, it's our negative belief about events, not the event itself, that feels crippling. Have you ever heard of the subway station exercise? Psychologist Albert Ellis recommended it to help New York patients overcome their fears. How would you feel if you were asked to do something weird, like getting up on a crowded train, and announcing the name of the next stop? Indeed, people would glare, toss their newspapers at you, or even yell at you to shut up. You'd feel hesitant, even terrified to go through with it. However, those who've attempted so-called "self-humiliation" exercises, tend to learn that nothing terrible happens. The imagined worst-case scenario isn't accurate, and often we don't feel humiliated. What's more, the feeling of self-consciousness is bearable. The subway station exercise demonstrates how irrationally we approach even mildly unpleasant experiences, and how we might find unforeseen benefits lurking within them. If only we could bring ourselves to look. But, we're often wrong about how bad things will get, and even more so about how it would feel *if* they did.

For Buddhists, openness is a willingness to observe the inner weather of thoughts and emotion. And it's the understanding that these thoughts and emotions don't need to dictate our actions. Burkeman attended a week-long silent Buddhist retreat, and discovered we could learn to see our thoughts and feelings like we do the weather. Just as outer weather conditions change, so too does our inner weather fluctuate. Thoughts and feelings come and go, because that's the nature of how the mind works. This one small element of Buddhism, shows the negative approach to happiness is this: it's rarely wise to struggle to change the weather.

We don't have to become a fervent Stoic, or retreat to the Himalayan hills to strengthen our "negative capacity." Still, we can learn to embrace some of the seemingly negative things we try so hard to avoid, namely insecurity, failure, and death.

Can We Feel Secure and Live Life at the Same Time?

What if feeling secure, and really living life are in some ultimate sense opposites? The quest to feel safe doesn't always lead to security, and even less so to happiness.

Financial security and material comforts, haven't done much to improve the collective-mood of happiness in developed countries. The International surveys of happiness, including several reputable research projects such as the World Values Survey, have consistently found that some of the world's poorest countries tend to be the happiest. For example, Nigeria—where 92% of the population live on less than \$2 per

day— comes first. Research also points out that anxiety disorders and depression, are far less common in poorer countries. In case you're wondering, their studies take into account the likelihood of getting diagnosed. Researchers suggest that people living under such conditions, with fewer securities, tend to have fewer illusions about reality and are more resilient. Not having the option of trying to protect themselves in counterproductive ways, seems to make for resilience in the face of hardship. And this makes for a more durable kind of happiness.

This begs the question, is our desire for security really a worthy goal?

Take relationships as an example. We seek fulfillment from strong romantic relationships and friendships, yet we could stifle those relationships if we strive too hard to achieve security. Flourishing relationships depend on the degree of being open to positive and negative experiences. To be vulnerable means to put down our defensive armor, and be authentic and present. According to a top researcher in shame, Professor Brene Brown, we can't say, 'here's the bad stuff, the grief, shame, and fear, I don't want these. We can't selectively numb emotion—the only way you achieve protection from negative feelings, is by protecting ourselves from the positive ones too'. Becoming numb to the negative emotions shuts us out from the positive ones as well. Healthy relationships are the most critical determinants of our happiness, and healthy relationships require a degree of vulnerability, which means giving up the protective shield of needing to feel safe.

Security is for the most part, an illusion. In the *Wisdom of Insecurity*, Alan Watts argues that, "To seek security is to remove ourselves from change—the very thing that defines life. We can no more achieve security than a wave can succeed in leaving the ocean." And, as

Burkeman puts it, 'To hold our breath is to lose our breath.'

Another strong emotion that can leave us short of breath, is failure. Kakorrhaphiophobia is our extreme fear of failure, that causes us to hyperventilate, feel dizzy and suffer heart palpitations just at the thought of failure.

Befriending Failure

Failure is everywhere. It's just that most of the time, we would rather avoid confronting that.

To avoid the thought of failure or remove the word impossible from our vocabulary, leaves us with a distorted understanding of what it takes to be successful. No autobiography of a highly successful person is complete, without several passages in which they attribute their success to a willingness to fail.

So it's worth considering how we might be better off embracing failure. For example, author JK Rowling, spoke about how she befriended failure and was better for it, in her now-famous 2008 Harvard University graduation speech. By any conventional measure, JK Rowling believed that she had failed on an epic scale. Several years before the graduation speech, she was a divorced, unemployed single parent, living in the UK. She says the fears that her parents had for her, as well as the fears that she had for herself, had come to pass by every usual standard. She was the biggest failure she knew. But in her speech, she wanted to tell everyone why failure is *fun*. Before the success of her Harry Potter books, she braved a dark period in her life. She had no idea how things were going to turn out. But failure forced her to strip away the inessential. She

stopped pretending that she was anything other than what she was, and she put all her energy into finishing the only work that mattered to her, which was writing. 'I was free,' she said, 'because my greatest fear had been realized, and I was still alive.'

Speaking of 'being alive,' another topic we tend most to avoid, is death.

We Should Celebrate Death

Rather than deny death, we could choose to celebrate it. We've explored how not trying to think specific thoughts or feel certain emotions isn't sufficient to eliminate them. Death is no exception. Death is everywhere, unavoidable, and uniquely terrifying. But unless we don't encounter a near-death experience, or it's not impinged upon us through recent loss or life-threatening illness, we manage to avoid all thoughts of it.

It may be hard to swallow the idea that we should spend more time contemplating death, but there are many powerful and practical arguments for doing so. Having a daily awareness of our mortality can lead to a happier existence, and a more authentic one. Death is a fact of life. But how does a greater degree of mortality awareness, lead to greater happiness? The answer is a down-to-earth, pragmatic and stoic one. If we're aware of life's fragility, the more we will cherish it, and in turn, we won't waste our lives on silly distractions.

When we think about death — the ultimate and unavoidable worst-case scenario—everything changes. All external expectations, all fears of embarrassment or failure, fall away in the face of death, leaving us only with what's important. As the famous Steve Jobs once said, 'Remembering that you're going to die, is the best way I know, to avoid

the trap of thinking that you have something to lose.'

Not all of us fear death. Did you know that along with Nigeria, Mexico ranks among the happiest nations in the world? What's interesting is that they practice "Memento mori," a ritual designed to encourage regular reflections on mortality. Intrigued, Burkeman took a trip to Mexico and attended their annual "Day of the Dead" celebration. They toast death and those who have died, with copious quantities of tequila, and eat bread in the shape of human remains. They build shrines and conduct vigils at the graves of the deceased. What resonates for most people, is not the loud celebration of death but the comfortable companionship that the Mexican culture seems to have with death.

To get into the habit of thinking about our mortality, psychologist Russ Harris offers us a simple exercise. Imagine you're 80 years old, or assuming you're already that age, imagine you're older. Now complete the sentence, 'I wish that I'd spent more time on... And I wish I'd spent less time on...'

When reflecting on death, Burkeman quotes renowned psychologist, Irvin Yalom. Yalom says, 'to honestly confront our mortality, is to undergo an awakening, a total shift in perspective, that fundamentally transforms how it feels to be alive.'

In Conclusion

The revelation of this book, is that the path to happiness, accommodates positive and negative emotions. Instead of focusing on happiness, maybe we should shift gear, and think about awe? Because, unlike the standard emotions such as love, joy, anger, fear, or sadness, awe is all of our

feelings rolled up into one. To feel awe, is to experience all these feelings, yet paradoxically experience no clearly identifiable, or describable emotion. Unlike the insufferable pursuit of happiness, to walk along the awe-inspired path is to accept the mysteries of life.

Furthermore, it's the acknowledgment that there will be disorientating chaos along the way. This kind of happiness has nothing to do with the easy answers, affirmations and upbeat optimism. It also doesn't demand that success should be guaranteed. It's a more difficult path, but also, a more authentic one.

It's about moderation, it's about balance, and it's about refraining from the effortful struggle to be happy. Burkeman didn't make it a regular habit to humiliate himself on public transport systems, nor did he return to Mexico to live a life fused with death. And to date, he hasn't been back on another silent retreat. But in smaller ways, to a modest degree, the negative capability has become part of his daily practice. His days are often punctuated with a "stoic pause." He takes a moment to remember that his judgment about the infuriating colleague, the heavy traffic, or the burnt food, primarily reflects his distress, not the situation itself. In moments where he's overwhelmed, he finds solace in the question: "What's the worst that could happen?" And he holds onto the belief, that no matter how terrifying, there's always a chance that he'll be able to cope.

So if you're the type who wants an intelligent guide, to understanding the misunderstood idea of happiness, then spare the time to give this book a full read-through. After all, what's the worst that could happen?