

# The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F\*ck Summary

By Mark Manson

It's nice to know that in the 21st century, not giving a fck can be hailed as an art form. The thing is, although human beings have never had more variety, or more choice, we're not necessarily living our best lives.

Welcome to the contemporary world of the illusion of choice; a place where we compare what we have, and who we are, to other people.

*The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F\*ck*, examines how we tend to gravitate towards ideas on how to live a good life. It critiques the self-help genre of advice that's neither practical nor helpful, and often leaves us feeling guilty because we feel alone in our inability to implement such seemingly simple suggestions.

The problem with the hyper-positive era of self-help, is that it messes with our mindset. It makes us think that if we just try harder to be happy, we will make this happen. Or it tells us that we're special and should be treated accordingly. These viewpoints lead us to believe that suffering is something to be afraid of, and to avoid it at all costs. Author, blogger, and anti-bullshitter Mark Manson, believes that a lot of contemporary advice is fatally flawed. He argues that a conventional, and in his opinion misguided pursuit of the good life, actually sets the scene for a hard life. Hence, his counter-cultural bestselling book, *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F\*ck*, gives a different and refreshing perspective, tailored to the no-nonsense seeker.

Mark Manson started a blog in 2009, offering dating advice, which propelled him into the blogosphere of fame. Now, he writes about things such as life, death, love, and everything in between. However, Manson

isn't your typical best-selling author on self-help. He blends academic research with his insights, making his work reliable and relatable. His style of writing is punchy and profane, with an occasional poop joke to keep you laughing. His blunt honesty about life, and how to live it, might just be the well-needed antidote to the contemporary self-help genre that can offer a bit of a "kumbaya" approach.

Let's briefly look at Manson's constructive approach to unlearning what we know about happiness. He also suggests that we re-evaluate our hopes and aspirations, and how we encounter struggles. Furthermore, we're invited to look at our value systems and told to rid ourselves of shitty values, and seek instead, creativity, generosity and humility. Finally, life shouldn't be about FOMO, or the Fear of Missing Out, so get busy living, because the author also has a different take on how we should think about death.

## **Damn the Positivity and Stop Searching for Happiness**

One of the key messages of this book is that, if we want a happier, stress-free existence, then we need to adopt a damn the positivity attitude.

One of the things we can do to begin is to stop trying so hard to be happy. After all, our struggles are what give life meaning. The advice is, that obviously we should give a damn about some things, but only about the things that truly matter to us. For Manson, what truly matters should be, family, friends, having a purpose, and maybe burritos, if that's your thing. We also only have a finite number of things to worry about, so choose wisely what you decide to worry about.

The pursuit of happiness is often what results in an existential crisis of the mind. In fact, Manson says, very directly, that all of this "how to be happy" business, is crap. Paradoxically, fixating on the positive, on what's better, or who's better, only serves to remind us over and over again, of what we're not. Moreover, it makes us question what we lack, and what we should have been but failed to be. After all, no truly happy person feels the need to stand in front of a mirror and recite that she's happy. She just is. The first hard truth to grapple with is that the more you pursue feeling better all the time, the less satisfied you become. This is because pursuing something, just reinforces the fact that you lack it in the first place. So don't chase after the mirage of happiness, because it'll trap us into leading a life of perpetual unhappiness.

## **Sorry, But You're Not Special**

We're in the middle of a, "but I'm so special", crisis. We all think that we're special because we've been told that we are. The concern about this current socio-cultural message about life and happiness, feeds into a sense of entitlement.

The expectation of feeling that we're unique and special snowflakes, sets up the notion that we need to feel good all the time. What's more, we feel entitled to special treatment. And, somehow, because we're so super special, life's rules don't apply to us. We also feel entitled to protection from anything that makes us feel uncomfortable, such as failure, rejection, and struggle. But, as we know, struggle is one of the key factors in learning, in growing, and ultimately in feeling happy.

The message is that we all need to regain a healthy perspective, and to release ourselves from the pressure of having to be extraordinary. And,

remember what we do in life, probably won't matter all that much anyway, and most of the time life's going to be relatively uneventful and mundane. Accepting this reality may be a hard pill to swallow, but it allows us to breathe a little easier in the long run. We can feel less inadequate and stop searching for all sorts of ways to compensate. When our expectations match reality, we find value in ordinary things such as spending time with friends, helping others, solving problems, and doing what we genuinely enjoy.

## **Limit How Much You Care About Things, to Avoid Getting Stuck in a Loop**

One of the problems with caring too much, is that we get trapped in the feedback loop from hell.

Unfortunately, there's no such thing as not caring entirely, because it's rooted in our biology to care about things. The problem arises when we start to care too much about unimportant things. We're also inclined to measure our self worth against unrealistic societal values, and when we don't match up, we feel lousy. This causes us to get caught in the feedback loop from hell.

How often do you check Facebook, or Instagram, and see everyone that you know having the greatest time imaginable in the history of the universe? And this makes us feel as if our lives don't measure up.

We believe that everyone else is happy, so there must be something wrong with us if we don't feel the same way. So we feel bad. And then, this encourages us to feel bad about feeling bad; or, feeling guilty for

feeling guilty. Or we may even get angry about getting angry. Welcome to the feedback loop of hell. The brain's feedback loop works in such a way that we get anxious about feeling anxious, and then we start to feel doubly anxious. This in turn causes more anxiety, and so the loop continues; like the introduction tune on a DVD menu.

And, because technology delivers infinite choices, and provides us with so much content and information, there are now endless triggers telling us that we may not measure up. We believe we're not good enough, and our lives aren't the way they're supposed to be. This may cause feelings of stress and neurosis, because that's what it's like being trapped in the feedback loop from hell. So, to counteract the infinite loop, we need to detach the importance that we place on the unimportant, and it's time to be a lot more pragmatic about reality.

## **Life is Going to Suck Sometimes, and That's Okay**

It's totally okay that life isn't going to be rosy all the time. Irrespective of what we do in life, we will encounter struggles. The issue is often in how we choose to view and perceive these problems. Toxic self-help messages make us believe that life should be easy and comfortable all the time. But this toxic positivity has led to a generation of people who believe that enduring hardship, and dealing with negative experiences and emotions, should be avoided at all costs.

Suffering and working through our fears and anxieties will ultimately help us to build courage, perseverance, and resilience. For many, times of struggle, have resulted in the most meaningful experiences. So put on your safety belts because it's not always going to be an easy ride.

You may well have heard the popular phrase, 'Life's tough; get a helmet'. The truth is that yes, life can and will be incredibly difficult at times. How we choose what's worth taking on as a struggle, is a key factor in our decision to care. Instead of asking what we want from life, it's better to ask what you're willing to put up with, or what you're willing to struggle for. There's no perfect life, so it's best to stop hoping for a life free of problems. Problems never stop; they only get exchanged or upgraded. And if you reframe happiness as something where you strive towards solving difficulties, as opposed to avoiding them, you'll be a lot more fulfilled.

## **Stop Being a Victim and Take Responsibility**

Another hard truth is to accept the fact that we're not victims and we need to take some responsibility.

The key message here is that you always have choices, an infinite possibility of choices, no matter what circumstances you find yourself in. We can't control what happens to us, but we can control how we respond.

The problem is, that so many of us go through life, feeling like our experiences are imposed upon us. Often we're guilty of collapsing into victim mode. Consider William James as an example of this behavior. He was born in the 19th century, into a wealthy American family. Throughout his youth, he suffered from ill-health, relentless vomiting, and extremely painful back spasms. His dream was to become a painter, but he struggled to make a success of this career, so he decided to pursue medicine, but he soon dropped out. He was mocked relentlessly by his father for lacking talent. Feeling unhappy, almost to the point of suicide, William James came across the advice of a philosopher, Charles Peirce.

Peirce argues that everyone should take 100% responsibility for their lives. This resonated with James, who realized that he blamed his situation on things outside of his control; namely his ill health and his father's criticism. Empowered by this newfound realization, he started afresh. He took responsibility for his actions and, after years of hard work, William James became a pioneer of American psychology.

So the point is, giving a damn about things that don't matter, and the things that you can't control, is a complete waste of time.

## **Failure is a Way Forward**

When was the last time you barrelled headfirst into a scary or unknown situation?

Most of us avoid risk because we're afraid of being wrong, or worse still, failing altogether. Failure alters our perception because it threatens our sense of who we are. The author's 'Law of Avoidance' argues that we tend to flee from anything that threatens our identity. For example, many amateur artists and writers, refuse to publicize or sell their work. They're terrified that no-one will like the work they put out there, because trying, and failing, destroys their sense of identity. Identities are built around possibility, and they're also very fragile. The fear of failure is often so great that not only do we avoid taking risks, but, often we avoid trying at all.

Advice from Buddhism teaches us that identity is an illusion. Whatever labels you may give yourself, such as being happy or sad, successful or unsuccessful, are merely constructed by us. In other words, they simply aren't real and so we shouldn't let them dictate the course of our lives.



We need to give up on who we think we should be, and free ourselves to fail and grow.

The inventor of the lightbulb, Thomas Edison, allegedly said, 'I have not failed 1000 times. I have successfully discovered 1000 ways *not* to make a lightbulb'. The message here is that Improvement is based on thousands of tiny failures. And, if someone is better than you at something, it's likely that this is because they have failed at it, more than you probably have.

The moments when we don't care, and decide to act anyway, are often the moments that most clearly define the course of our lives. So, if you lack the motivation to make an important change in your life, do something. Anything. Then harness this reaction to that particular action as a way to motivate yourself. This process of putting aside motivation in favor of action, is known as the 'Do Something Principle'. The correct order is to put action first because this leads to inspiration, which then builds motivation. It's not the other way round, because if you try to start with motivation, it's likely you'll end up in another endless loop.

## **Change How You Measure Success and Failure**

Comparisons are odious.

Take for example the story of two guitarists, Dave Mustaine and Pete Best. In 1983, Mustaine was thrown out of his band when they were on the cusp of fame. Anger fueled his determination to prove his worth, by becoming more successful than his former bandmates. He worked relentlessly to improve his skills, and he formed a new band. The name of his new band was Megadeth. Megadeth went on to sell over 25 million



records. You may be thinking that this is a story of success, right? Not for Mustaine. He continued to judge his success against the achievements of his former band, Metallica. Metallica is one of the world's biggest music acts, and this comparison was the thief of all of Mustaine's joy. His yardstick for success and happiness was to be more successful than his former bandmates, a measure that resulted in feelings of disappointment, despite his undeniable success with Megadeth.

Pete Best on the other hand, had completely different criteria for success and happiness. As with Mustaine, Best was kicked out of a band on the brink of stardom. This group happened to be the iconic Beatles. Best did initially suffer from depression as he watched his bandmates achieve unimaginable success. But, by adopting a shift in perspective, he changed his values. He realized that what he really wanted in life was a loving family, and a happy home life. Sure, he still wanted to play music, but he didn't want musical success, or the lack of it, to define his life. This refocusing led to a fulfilled and contented life, and Best even went back to making music again, this time for less successful bands.

The key message from these stories is that, when it comes to lasting happiness, what we value matters far more than our success. We need to rid ourselves of shitty values and strive towards values that actually make us happy and fulfilled. When we're being creative, expressing generosity, or acting in a humble manner, is often when we're most contented. So, rather than seeking out fame and success, and perhaps wishing you were someone or somewhere else, embrace the moment, because FOMO is a killer of joy.

## **In Conclusion**

Self-improvement is all about prioritizing our values, deciding what

matters to us, and then giving a damn about what we choose. The problem comes in when we care too much about everyone and everything. We need to rid ourselves of the need to feel perpetually entitled to be comfortable and happy. We also need to change our perceptions around adversity. Adversity isn't injustice. Every single challenge isn't a failure, every inconvenience isn't a personal slight, and every disagreement isn't betrayal.

When we focus on needing to be fulfilled, and happy all the time, and when we care too much about the wrong things, this is when we get caught in our very own individual feedback loop from hell. And this causes us to feel in constant motion, while never arriving or achieving anything. So best we don't care about things that don't matter and the things that we can't control. Instead, we need to focus on reality-based values that are within our control and helpful to society. After all, who we are is defined by what we're willing to struggle for, and care about.