

Podcast #35 – The Happiness Trap

Most of my training and clinical experience has been in the psychoanalytic tradition. I was trained formally as a psychoanalyst and much of my professional life has been doing psychoanalytic psychotherapy. And I continue to think that the core ideas of psychoanalysis are incredibly powerful and explain a wide range of phenomena.

Recently, however, I've come upon another psychological and psychotherapeutic paradigm that I find extremely interesting. It was first developed by Stephen Hayes and is called Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, or ACT. I just finished reading a popular version of this paradigm in a book called, **THE HAPPINESS TRAP: HOW TO STOP STRUGGLING AND START LIVING: A GUIDE TO ACT**. The core idea of this book—and of ACT-- can be found in this question: What if your very efforts to find happiness were actually preventing you from achieving it? In this model, our efforts to either avoid or control troubling thoughts, feelings, and urges, actually create the suffering for which most of us seek psychological help. In other words, the solution becomes the problem.

It turns out that the human brain and mind evolved in ways that focused primarily on the avoidance of danger and harm. As Harris puts it, the primitive mind was basically a "don't get killed" device. Our brains evolved to be extremely sensitive to detecting threats and, in fact, the "fight or flight" response is intended to deal with threats to our survival. The problem arises when the threats are no longer Saber Tooth tigers or dangerous physical environments, but, instead, are internal and not life threatening, for example, the threats of painful feelings and thoughts.

For example, one of the primary threats that our minds have to deal with is the threat of being rejected socially. In response to this threat, our minds had to become extremely sensitive to real and imaginary comparisons with other members of the group. Experiencing rejection as if it were life threatening, the mind is always seeking answers to the questions, "Am I fitting in?" or "Am I doing anything that might get me rejected?"

Further, given our preoccupation with survival and safety, it makes sense that we would be motivated so often to accumulate more and to create conditions that are "better." In

our prehistory, this might have meant accumulating a surplus of food, or defensible territory, or a lot of children; in the modern world, this becomes wanting or needing more money, a better job, more status, a better body, more love, perhaps a better partner. We are never satisfied. Our brains are hardwired to want more, to compare ourselves with others, and to critically judge ourselves for real and perceived weaknesses.

In conclusion, evolution has shaped our brains so that we are hardwired to suffer psychologically, to compare, evaluate, and criticize ourselves, to focus on what we're lacking, to rapidly become 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!

Our culture reinforces this all the time. We are led to believe that the goal of life is to experience pleasurable feelings all the time. Commercials sell products based on the illusion that high – octane happiness and joy is --and should be-- the goal of life. Such an impossible ideal is based on the idea that happiness involves the absence of suffering and pain. This is what Harris in this book refers to as the "happiness trap." If we try to have good feelings all the time we are doomed. Why?

Because pain is a part of life. For example, if we are open to loving someone, then we will invariably be disappointed and hurt at times in that relationship. Our bodies age and physical discomfort is inevitable. Hollywood and fairytales tell us otherwise. We are led to feel that if we're unhappy—*or worse, if others are happier than we are*--then we are failing.

The ACT model tells us that normal healthy human minds always create psychological suffering. The issue is really only how we respond to this inevitable suffering. Mostly, the ACT folks argue, we try to control or get rid of painful feelings and thoughts. But ultimately, this is an effort that's bound to fail. Some type of painful feelings or distressing thoughts are inevitable and simply part of the human condition,

In fact, Harris and his colleagues argue that there is very little that we can control about our thoughts and feelings. We think we should be able to control both, but we can't. We think we should be able to avoid them, but we can't. And so-- what's the solution? We can't turn our feelings and thoughts on and off like a switch. But we can seek to relate to them in a different way.

Harris says that, well, we have more choice than we think we do...that we can, for example, regard our thoughts as if they

were commands that we have to take extremely seriously all the time, *or* we can view our thoughts as if they were simply collections of words that we might choose to listen to if they're helpful, but choose to not listen to if they're not helpful. Too many people have developed control strategies to fight or flee from difficult feelings and thoughts—strategies that create vicious circles. So, for example, one person who's very afraid of rejection might, as a result, isolate himself. But his isolation leads him to feel more vulnerable to being an outsider. Or another person might deal with her social anxiety by drinking. However, the drinking can easily become a problem in her social life. Or someone who wants to get in shape physically might feel that working out is too difficult and therefore drop it --which, of course, worsens the problem. Or, finally, someone might be worried about an exam, and then distract him or herself by watching television. However, watching television too much might interfere with studying and therefore worsen the problem.

In each of these cases the solution becomes the problem. This, again, is the happiness trap – – in a nutshell it goes like this: In order to find happiness, we try to avoid or get rid of

bad feelings, but the harder we try, the more bad feelings we create.

ACT argues that thoughts are just stories, and stories are just words. The problem with our thoughts arises when we confuse the thought for the thing it refers to. They call this "fusion." The ACT people say this: thoughts are merely sounds and words. Thoughts may or may not be true. Thoughts may or may not be important. Thoughts are not orders. Thoughts are never threats, because even the most painful and disturbing thoughts do not represent a threat to us. So-- as the mind tells us stories, it's possible to step back and use our capacity for self-awareness to notice what we're thinking without buying into the truth of it. This is especially important because the majority of our thoughts have some degree of negative content. The trick is that we don't have to take them seriously. We don't need to pay them undue attention and we don't need to waste time and energy trying to fight them.

So, in this model, we don't try to get rid of the story, but instead, we ask the question: "Is this thought helpful? Does it help me take action to create the life I want?" Because the mind never sleeps, it's always generating stories, comparing,

judging, criticizing, planning, and fantasizing. We get lost in our stories.

So, in ACT, we allow ourselves to have thoughts and feelings without trying to get rid of them or control them. We use mindfulness to allow them to be there without giving them the power to control us. I think this is a very important and powerful suggestion. We need to accept reality as it is in the present moment, acknowledging how it is, right here and now, and letting go of the struggle to make reality something that it's not. Harris suggests that we think of the mind as being a bit like a radio, constantly playing in the background, broadcasting mostly negative stories 24/7, reminding us of bad things from the past or warning us of bad things that will come in the future. If we constantly tune into this radio and believe everything we hear, then we have a recipe for stress and misery. Instead, Harris thinks that we should not try to get rid of these images and thoughts but, instead, to stop struggling with them.

The reality is---- for the rest of your life, in one form or another, anxious pictures will appear in your mind because, remember, your mind evolved into a device the purpose of which is to prevent you from getting killed. It saved your

ancestors by sending them warnings. Now, that same mind sees potential danger everywhere, from a moody spouse to a parking ticket to a traffic jam, to a long line at the bank, or to an unflattering reflection in the mirror. None of these are, in reality, life-threatening, but our brains and minds don't know that. They react as if they were. Our minds are constantly trying to pick a fight with reality.

So, if thoughts and feelings don't have to control your behavior and dominate your life, then what's the alternative?

Well, the first thing that Harris and his colleagues suggest, is to practice mindfulness, to allow oneself to notice the ebb and flow of thoughts and feelings as they're occurring in the present moment—BUT, to not get locked into these thoughts and feelings. Instead, we try to pay attention only when they serve a bigger purpose – – namely, when they serve to help us move towards living a life better aligned with our values. We free ourselves from the sensibility that goes, "out with the bad, and in with the good".

But what do we mean by values? Values are, according to Harris, "our hearts deepest desires, how we want to be, what we want to stand for, and how we want to relate to the world around us, our leading principles that can guide us and

motivate us as we move through life. Values are a direction, not a goal. For example, the desire to be a loving and caring partner is a value. It's ongoing for the rest of your life. A goal, on the other hand, is a desired outcome that can actually be achieved or completed, for example, buying a house or finding a great partner. A value is like heading West – – there's always further west you can go. If you want a better job, that's a goal –and once you've gotten it the goal is achieved. But, as Harris suggests, if you value applying yourself at work, or being attentive to detail, or being supportive to colleagues, or friendly to customers, or being engaged in what you're doing, those are values.

The philosopher, Nietzsche, once said "he who has a why to live for, can bear almost any how." If, for example, we value our health, we are more willing to exercise on a regular basis despite the inconvenience of it." In this way, values are motivators. We may not feel like exercising but valuing our health can give us the will to do it. Our minds are always acting to try to subtract out difficult feelings and thoughts. When you pay attention, instead, to your values, then you may well allow yourself to feel quite a bit of discomfort, but this is in the service of leading a more satisfying life.

So, according to Harris, we should acknowledge the stories, thank our minds, let the stories come and go, and then choose actions that are aligned with our values. This is a different view of the good life than the self-help fetish of happiness all the time, or the impossible goal of creating positive feelings all the time. It's universal to want to avoid discomfort but human beings are the only creatures that can bring discomfort into any situation. We bring aversive thoughts into any and all situations. Our culture says "feel good, not bad --all the time". It's continually saying, "do not feel bad" *but to not feel bad too often means to not feel anything.*

We have to be willing to make room for the negative side effects of life, the unpleasant thoughts and feelings that invariably come as we struggle to make a meaningful life. After all, when we learned to walk we fell down all the time but we didn't give up. This is a model for how ACT views optimal living, namely, that you just have to keep moving forward in a valued direction, even though we're not 100% sure whether it will achieve our goals. Such is the nature of commitment -- you can never know in advance whether you're going to achieve your goals,--- all you can do is keep moving forward

ACT is an inherently optimistic approach. It assumes that no matter what problems you encounter, you can learn and grow from them, that no matter how many times you wander off the path you can always get back on track and start again, right where you are. You can then take effective action guided by your values to solve them. If your problems can't be solved, then you can just practice "acceptance." And the more awareness you bring to your experience right now, the more you'll be able to tell which problems are which. It reminds me of the serenity prayer: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

I think this is profoundly wise and that we owe Stephen Hayes, Russ Harris and their colleagues a great debt for helping us see this as it's played out in psychotherapy.