

# SUMMARY HAPPY EVER AFTER

PAUL DOLAN



# **Summary of “Happy Ever After” by Paul Dolan**

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Happy Ever After (2018) invites readers to deconstruct the social pressures which mold our lives.

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# Introduction

None of us are immune to social pressure. Just as we intuit speech and social cues from others, so we also form our understanding of the world and our definitions of success. And even if we don't share those values, it's impossible to escape the perception that getting married, having children, and owning your own home are considered the milestones of adulthood. Similarly, even if we make a concentrated effort to resist it, we're still impacted by our mother's constant question, "When are you going to give me grandchildren?" or the pressure to feel successful in comparison to our friends, families, and co-workers.

These social pressures can make the world-- and our understanding of our personal goals and identities-- more than a little tricky. In fact, we often feel such pressure to conform or to avoid disappointing our loved ones that we make life choices which will leave us profoundly unhappy. And by contrast, choosing to reject social pressures in favor of personal preferences can often lead to such disapproval from others that we're unhappy then as well. So, what's the solution? How do we cultivate a way of life that really will give us the "happy ever after" future we've been dreaming of?

Well, that's exactly what we're going to learn in this summary! By thinking critically about the social narratives which inform our worldview, we'll discover:

- Why married people aren't necessarily happier (and divorced people aren't more miserable!)
- Why secretaries are often happier than CEOs and
- Why your free will isn't as free as you think it is

# Money Can't Buy Happiness

We've all heard this saying in addition to variations like, "You can't take it with you go." And as is the case with many cliches, it's become a timeless saying for a reason. However, our life choices rarely reflect the truth of these platitudes, as evidenced by a 2008 study conducted by the Pew Research Center, which discovered that "being wealthy" was a top priority for more than 50% of Americans. Similarly, a 2014 American Heartland Monitor survey found that half of the American population believes that being rich isn't just important-- it's actually the key to living a good and happy life. But the truth is that money doesn't actually make us happier at all! Let's take a look at a few reasons why.

For starters, the American Time of Use Survey-- which asks 20,000 people to report on their happiness, sense of meaning, and stress in daily life-- discovered that happiness does rise in relation to income, but only to a certain point. And after one's income exceeds that point, happiness actually decreases. So, what are the magic numbers? Well, according to this survey, income-based happiness peaks for those who are earning anything between \$50,000-\$75,000. People who earn \$100,000 don't report higher levels of happiness than those who make \$25,000, but both are less happy than those in the \$50,000-\$75,000 bracket. This discrepancy in happiness indicates that maybe we should adjust our goal from "earning more" to "earning enough to be happy with." This shift in priorities would certainly invite us to be more thankful and content for what we have!

And that brings us to another point: the danger of comparison. Because if your wealth goals are heavily influenced by a desire to keep up with someone else or appear more successful than your neighbor, you're at an even greater risk for unhappiness! A 2007 study conducted by Bob Frank discovered this when he learned that most people would be happier to live in a 3,000-square-foot house which was surrounded by 2,000-square-foot houses than to live in a 4,000-square-foot house surrounded by neighbors whose homes were 6,000-square-feet. And that makes sense, right? We all

want to feel like we're at least equal to (or maybe even a little bit better) than everybody else. But unfortunately, that also means we're prone to comparing our success to everyone else's and that's a guaranteed happiness killer.

# Success Doesn't Equal Happiness Either

Many of us have felt the pressure of our parents' expectations for us to find a successful or high-paying career, And although their personal reasons might vary, one universal common denominator is the fact that people equate success with happiness. But the two aren't always synonymous, as you've probably noticed if you've ever had a friend with a prestigious job which required her to work long hours, have no time for a social life, and left her mentally and physically drained. This is even backed up by a number of statistics which confirm that the "best" or highest-paying job doesn't always rank highest in happiness.

For example, although social norms might say that being a lawyer is better than being a florist, a 2012 City and Guilds survey found that 87% of florists are happy at work in contrast with 64% of lawyers. Similarly, a 2014 study conducted by the Legatum Institute concluded that CEOs are actually not happier than their secretaries, despite the significant difference in their pay. So, what can we do to be happier at work? Well, one practical step might be to stop working so hard! Because the American Time of Use Survey reports that people who work 21-30 hours a week show higher levels of happiness and fulfillment than people who work more or less. So, from these two examples, we can see that when it comes to money and success-- two things we assume will make us very happy-- a "just enough" approach is best. Instead of aggressively pursuing more and more and being dissatisfied with what we have, we should strive for levels of money and success with which we can simply be content.



# Being Married Doesn't Mean You're Well-Adjusted

Society tends to regard marriage as a definitive hallmark of adulthood. You're often considered to be a happy, well-adjusted, and "respectable" member of society if you're married, but does marriage really make us happier? Well, according to statistics, the answer seems to be no! Data from a German socioeconomic panel that followed a group of couples around for 20 years concluded that people are especially happy in the years immediately before and after their weddings. But this data also shows that 50% of people are less satisfied after marriage, while the other half are happier. This means that satisfaction levels are literally split right down the middle, and thus, marriage is not a universal prescription for a happier life! In fact, it's truly all about what works for each individual couple.

The American Time of Use Survey backs this up, but its results come with an interesting twist. Upon surveying couples, they discovered that people who are married wouldn't say they're happier than their single or divorced peers-- unless their partner is in the room. When they feel free to be honest, however, their happiness levels actually aren't any higher than those of divorced people. So, what does this tell us about marriage? Well, for starters, we can learn that we need to revamp our social norms. If the truth is that marriage doesn't always make us better or happier people, then we need to stop using it as a hallmark of success. And conversely, we need to stop assuming that there's something wrong with being single and stop pressuring single people into relationships.

# Infidelity Isn't Always the Worst Option

Being unfaithful to your partner is pretty universally regarded as a terrible thing to do. In fact, it's considered so heinous that many religions openly condemn it. The Ten Commandments, for example, even reiterates it twice by saying, "Thou shalt not commit adultery" and "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife." By and large, modern society also reflects this belief; national statistics show that in the United Kingdom, 70% of women and 63% of men believe that cheating is "always wrong." Similarly, in the US, 84% of people-- both men and women-- believe that extramarital affairs are "morally unacceptable." And because of this, we tend to accept that infidelity is universally bad without probing the question more deeply.

But if we take a look at the animal kingdom-- and the simple facts of human sexuality-- we might be forced to realize that infidelity is more natural than we think. Not only is it statistically and sexually improbable that we can maintain our attraction to one partner throughout the remainder of our lives, data scientist Seth Stephens-Davidowitz has shown that Google searches for "sexless marriages" are eight times more common than searches on "loveless marriages." This suggests that it's far more common to be in loving but sex-free marriages and that the desire for additional sexual stimulation is more normal than we think. In fact, only one species of mammal-- the owl monkey-- has monogamy as its default setting; all other animals, including humans, routinely experience (and act on) sexual attraction to partners who are not their life mate.

And when we consider these facts in conjunction with statistics which prove that-- even though they believe it's wrong-- one in three women and one in three men admit to cheating over the course of a marriage, we're left with the conclusion that we might have to alter our views on infidelity. So, while that doesn't mean that we should believe it's okay to cheat on your partner or break their trust, we can start to become more accepting of pansexuality and consensually non-monogamous relationships. In fact, we definitely should because statistics from a survey conducted by the University of

Michigan found that partners in consensually open relationships reported higher levels of trust, intimacy, friendship, and satisfaction-- as well as lower levels of jealousy-- than their monogamous peers. So, let's consider adjusting our worldview to reflect the diversity of the realistic human experience.

# Parenthood Can be More Stressful Than Satisfying

Having children is another of those standard hallmarks of adulthood, another one of the tests we use to determine whether someone is happy, successful, and well-adjusted (at least in accordance with performative social norms). Conversely, this means that people who are intentionally child-free are often stigmatized and discriminated against, even being branded as “lazy” or “selfish.” And to make matters worse, research shows that women who choose to remain child-free are actively stigmatized more harshly than men. But in fact, this discrimination is not only unfair, it’s scientifically unsound! So, let’s take a look at a few very good reasons to avoid having children.

For one thing, children are incredibly expensive-- and they’re also a lifetime investment. A study conducted in the United Kingdom discovered that the cost of supporting a child until her twentieth birthday totalled more than \$250,000, a financial burden that every parent isn’t equally equipped to handle. Children also have a significant negative environmental impact, as an Oregon State University study determined. This study examined the impact of having one less child compared with a variety of environmentally-friendly activities like using low-energy lightbulbs, reducing your car mileage, and recycling, and it discovered that consistently engaging in these activities could reduce your carbon footprint by a whopping 486 tons! That sounds pretty good, right? But if you were to have one less child, you could cut down on 9,441 tons of carbon. That’s 20 times the amount that can be produced by one hard-working, eco-friendly adult!

But even if you don’t care about how children affect our environment, what about their impact on your mental health? A diary study spearheaded by leading psychologist Daniel Kahneman asked 1,000 American women to rank the activities they enjoyed most. And out of a list of 16 possible tasks, taking care of children ranked as the twelfth most enjoyable task. A similar study conducted by the UK’s mental health charity Mind found that 20% of all new mothers struggle with serious mental health problems after giving

birth, while a Norwegian study which surveyed over 80,000 mothers reported that having a child triggers self-esteem issues that can last for the next three years.

So, while it's absolutely possible to have a happy and fulfilling life with children and it can definitely make you happy if becoming a parent is one of your top goals, it's also important to remember that it's not a universally positive experience. As such, we should reject the societal pressure to believe that parenting has to make us happy or that having children is a necessary milestone. Because a child-free life is every bit as valid and fulfilling as one which includes being a parent.

# It's Possible to be Too Obsessed With Health

In an age dominated by fitness and lifestyle bloggers, the pressure to stay healthy-- and look cute while doing it-- and keep up with everyone else is overwhelming. And that's exactly why we have to take a break and remember that it's important to avoid succumbing to this pressure. Because it's never wrong to want to be healthy or to make active efforts at self-improvement, but it is a bad idea to become obsessed with health or pursue it for the wrong reasons. A prime example of the wrong reasons can be found in our propensity for judgment. Because society often discriminates against fat people, our fitness goals might be motivated by the desire to not be seen as fat or so that we can feel justified in judging others. But is this really the right mindset to have?

Current research would suggest that it's definitely not-- and that fat people aren't nearly as sloppy, lazy, or unhealthy as we mistakenly perceive them to be. In fact, studies which examine the relationship between your Body Mass Index (or BMI) and happiness have found that being overweight doesn't intrinsically lower your levels of happiness at all unless you're morbidly obese. Morbid obesity occurs when a person is more than 100 pounds over a weight that is considered optimum or healthy for them and at this stage, many people do report being unhappy. But even these people reported that their dissatisfaction stems primarily from the stigma they experience from people who are considered to be a "normal" weight. So, even these instances of unhappiness stem from social pressure rather than weight itself.

Our stigmatization of weight-related issues can even affect mental health treatment, as seen in the cases of many people who struggle with anorexia. Although those with physical problems like cancer or a broken limb can expect instant medical treatment and sympathy, those with mental health problems often face the difficulty of added restrictions or requirements that they must meet in order to receive treatment. For example, even when an anorexic patient is engaging in blatantly self-injurious behavior, they can

often expect to be told that they “haven’t lost enough weight to be considered a serious case” or “aren’t anorexic enough.” These standards are clearly biased and ignore an obvious need for mental health treatment.

And as we consider the discrepancies in mental health care, it’s also important to remember that disorders like anorexia often stem from the social pressure to be obsessed with health. The idea that we should look a certain way or maintain an “ideal” weight in order to be attractive creates unhealthy expectations in all people and it can be especially harmful to vulnerable teens who struggle with self-image. So, perhaps we should revolutionize our perception of health as well. Let’s think more critically about the standards of health care we provide and the impact they have on real lives. And before we judge others for being “too fat,” or “too thin,” or too much of anything, let’s consider their overall happiness and quality of life and whether we’re detracting from it.

# Free Will Isn't as Free as We Think

Do you believe in free will? It's safe to say that pretty much everyone does; the phrase, "It's a free country" often escapes our lips in casual conversation and we base many of our choices off the assumption that we have the freedom to do as we please. But how true is that really? If we stop to consider the socioeconomic factors which shape us, we discover that we're not nearly as free as we think. The wealth and social standing of our parents, for example, has a tremendous impact on the people we become and the futures we create. In fact, studies show that for every 1% increase in your family's income, your likelihood of attending college increases by 0.7%. Negative factors also have a significant impact on our futures; additional studies show that nine out of ten juvenile offenders in the United States experienced some form of profound trauma in childhood.

And while these examples certainly aren't intended to say that our fate is determined by our circumstances or that everyone who is abused will become an abuser, it's important to understand the impact these factors can have on a life. Because even if we can fight against them, our experiences do shape us for better or worse. This means that in some ways, our free will is limited because our individual experiences predispose us to view the world differently than other people. Some of us are sensitive to different stressors than others and each of us struggles with something unique to our life experiences. So, if we understand that these factors are instrumental in shaping the choices we make and the people we become, it might inspire us to be a little more understanding of others and remember that, even if we do have the freedom to make our own choices, all of us are not equally free.



# Final Summary

A number of societal norms and milestones of success influence our perception of what will make us happy. But it's important to remember that these expectations aren't always grounded in reality and the pressure to conform can often lead us to make choices which are ultimately unsatisfying. By thinking critically about happiness and practicing self-awareness, we can arrive at a better understanding of who we are and what we want to pursue in life.



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