

# SUMMARY

# SURPRISE

TANIA LUNA AND LEEANN RENNINGER



# **Summary of “Surprise” by Tania Luna and LeeAnn Renninger**

Written by Alyssa Burnette

Learn to embrace the unknown and be delighted by  
surprises.

Introduction	5
What Exactly is Surprise?	6
We Need Surprise Just as Much as We Need Predictability	7
Learn to Bounce Back	9
Take Out the Guesswork	11
Become a Surprise Engineer	13
Surprises Can Improve Your Relationship	15
Collect New Experiences	17
Final Summary	18



# QuickRead

F R E E B O O K S U M M A R I E S

**Go to [QuickRead.com/App](https://QuickRead.com/App) now to download our app and get access to thousands of free book summaries as both text and audiobooks.**

**Get the key insights of non-fiction books in minutes instead of hours. Listen to our free audiobooks while you workout or on your commute to work.**



# Introduction

Do you love surprise birthday parties? Are you that friend who's always willing to try a wacky food on a dare or take a death-defying plunge off a cliff? Or maybe you're a little more like me, in which case, none of those things describe you. If you're more like me, you probably have your standard "usuals" at every restaurant and bar, and you have a certain structure and routine to your day. And if that's the case, you're probably not a fan of the unpredictable. You might even feel deeply disconcerted when things don't go according to plan.

But as much as we may not like surprises, studies show that they can actually be more beneficial than we think. In fact, altering our attitude toward the unexpected has been proven to deepen our connections with others and promote increased happiness! So, through these next few chapters, we're going to take a closer look at the science of surprise: how it functions, how it affects us, and why we actually need a dash of unpredictability in our lives.

## What Exactly is Surprise?

As a kid, did you ever have the experience of being suddenly confronted with a clown? Whether that sight made you happy or freaked you out a little, this example gives us a great case study for examining the inner workings of surprise. So, let's take a look at the stages of surprise that occur when you're confronted with the unexpected. For the purposes of this example, we'll imagine that you're at your birthday party, laughing and playing with your friends, when suddenly, you turn the corner and a clown jumps out, holding balloons and cheering, "Happy birthday!"

Your first involuntary instinct would be to enter what Luna and Renninger call "the freeze phase"-- that moment where you're slightly numb with shock and you stare at the surprising stimuli like a deer in the headlights, making what the authors term "the duh face." But after the initial shock clears, your brain can effectively process the information and arrive at a reasonable conclusion: "I was startled because a clown jumped out in front of me. This clown is here as a form of entertainment for my birthday party." This is known as "the find phase," and it's characterized by your brain's search for information as it seeks to help you make sense of what happened.

Then, once you then understand the situation, you enter "the shift phase," in which you start to alter your perspective in light of the new information you've just received. In this phase, your thought process might look something like, "I thought I was just going to run around and play, but now a clown is here. He's probably going to put on a show for us to watch." And lastly, now that you've processed all that information, you'll enter "the share phase." Because your brain has been dealing with a high volume of information, stimulated by strong surges of emotion and adrenaline, it might find it a little hard to cope, so to give yourself a sense of closure, you start to share the information with friends. Even if you ultimately enjoyed the surprise, saying things like, "There's a clown here!" or "I was so surprised!" helps you laugh about the experience and recognize that you're okay.

# We Need Surprise Just as Much as We Need Predictability

Imagine a world where everything was the same. Actually, it might look a little something like the movie *Groundhog Day*. Every morning, you would get out of bed at the same time, hear the same story on the news, see the same view from your window, and perform all your morning tasks in the same order. In a world like this, chances are that you'd probably eat the same meals and have roughly the same conversations as well, while experiencing the same range of emotions with little to no variations.

Now, I don't know about you, but as much I like order and routine, that much predictability would absolutely drive me crazy! Why? Because we need a little surprise in our lives, even if it's just in small doses! We need the pleasant surprise of saying, "I feel like going to a movie today!" instead of pursuing the same rote activities you had planned. We need the unexpected joys of running into a friend when we hadn't planned to see them or receiving an extra chicken nugget in our order because moments like these give us little bursts of pleasure in our everyday lives.

But of course, this list only touches on life's pleasant surprises and not the moments where we find out something painful that we never expected to hear or when something ends with painful results. And because surprises like these are all too real and all too common, it's no surprise that many of us are afflicted with anxiety. Worrying about our relationships, our grades, our futures, and the nation's political climate can often keep us up at night and leave us desperately grasping for the reassuring consistency of things we can control.

But this creates something of a weird catch-22 as we confusedly cycle between feeling bored because we're concentrating on predictable things and being scared about the things we can't control. It's therefore unsurprising that this leads to a feeling of overall dissatisfaction and restlessness, leaving many of us unhappy with our lives. So, what can we

learn from this? Well, for starters, we can conclude that we need a mixture of both surprise and stability in our lives all the time in order to maintain a healthy balance. And furthermore, we should be intentional in our cultivation of this balance so that we can manage our anxiety.



## Learn to Bounce Back

In the last chapter, we touched briefly on some of life's unpleasant surprises and how they can rock our world. So, in this chapter, we're going to explore them in closer detail and learn more about how we can cope with the surprises that unsettle us. Resilience-- or the ability to bounce back after going through a negative experience-- is considered the number-one cure for handling negative surprises. But being resilient doesn't mean acting like everything is fine when it isn't and it definitely doesn't mean that you should downplay moments of significant trauma or loss.

Instead, it's more about how you handle some of life's little unpleasanties, like finding out that your favorite restaurant is closed when that was all you were craving tonight or learning that you failed that test. In these cases, being resilient means developing the ability to healthily and effectively process your disappointment so you avoid overly depressive mood swings or the feeling that you need to stay in your comfort zone where nothing bad can happen to you. Because unfortunately, if you insulate yourself from new experiences to the degree that nothing bad can happen to you, nothing good can happen either. So, not only will you be less happy, you'll miss out on a lot of positive surprises too!

If you've never thought about cultivating resilience before, here are a few steps to get you started. You can begin by finding a foundation, altering your perspective, and looking for the silver lining. For example, you can define the foundation of your life by identifying a community that is well-placed to support you in times of stress. It might be your family, your friend group, or any other support system where you have strong relationships with people you trust. And when you know you have a community of people who have your best interests at heart, you can rely on this stable foundation to give you comfort and strength.

The next two steps-- altering your perspective and looking for the silver lining-- go hand in hand. Because unfortunately, it's easy to focus on the

downsides of any situation, but it takes a little more work to look for the positives. You can start cultivating your ability to look for the positives by recognizing that sometimes, disappointments are wake-up calls that motivate you to change for the better. For example, if you fail a test, you might learn one of two things: that your current study methods aren't working for you and you have an opportunity to change for the better, or that perhaps this area of study isn't right for you and you have a chance to discover a new path that suits you better.

## Take Out the Guesswork

If you're like me and you tend a bit towards the anxious end of the spectrum already, you might often handle uncertainty by trying to predict what will happen through thoughts like, "I bet they're really thinking \_\_\_\_," or "They're going to do \_\_\_\_ and everything will go wrong." This practice, of course, has a number of downsides, including the fact that you can rarely predict what someone else is thinking or doing and that your brain is only too happy to come up with a variety of scenarios which will torture you. Wouldn't it be nice to take all the guesswork out of the equation?

In order to do so, however, you have to give yourself the freedom to be vulnerable and accept the unexpected, even though that can often be really hard to do. So, how can you cultivate vulnerability? Well, for starters, you can work on learning to accept two things: firstly, that worrying doesn't give you more control. In many stressful situations, we worry and try to predict the outcome because it helps us feel like we have a little more control over what will happen. But unfortunately, in those cases, you don't have control, you just have more anxiety. So, if we can begin to accept that-- as painful as it is-- there are many scenarios that we're helpless to fix, we can start to relinquish some of that nervous energy and fear.

This in turn will help us accept the next important lesson: that vulnerability isn't weakness; instead, it simply opens us up to receive support from others. And when we learn to think of vulnerability as openness, we find a new and unexpected freedom to share genuine personal experiences, use our stories to encourage others, and learn to draw strength from shared experiences. And as you've probably already realized, this plays into the lessons we discussed in the last chapter because vulnerability can help us come to terms with the fact that surprises are inevitable. We can't control them, we can't predict them, but we can learn to trust in a supportive foundation that will help us bounce back from surprises.

And when you put all of these lessons into practice at the same time, it won't be long before you find that your life is free from the nervous tension of trying to predict and control circumstances that were never within your reach anyway. In place of that anxiety, your life will be filled with the relaxing freedom of openness, trust, and genuine connections with others.

## Become a Surprise Engineer

Now that we've taken a moment to reflect on life's negative surprises and how to cope with them, it's time to circle back to the fun part that we discussed in earlier chapters: those positive surprises that everyone loves. Remember how we talked about the pleasure of finding that you received an extra chicken nugget or unexpectedly running into a friend? Both of those are great examples of surprises that someone else gifted to you. But have you ever taken a moment to think about the surprises you could orchestrate for someone else?

That's why this chapter focuses on the power of embracing the unexpected by becoming "a surprise engineer." While this isn't an official role you'll find on a job description or a resume, it is an invitation to reconsider the way you interact with others in daily life by finding new ways to engineer delightful surprises. And they don't always have to be big things, either! Although most people think of things like surprise birthday parties or spontaneous proposals, you really don't have to go that far in order to bring moments of beauty to someone's day. In fact, you can engineer surprises as small as a sweet note in your significant other's bag on their way to work or paying for the coffee of the person behind you in line. You can leave a kind compliment on someone's Instagram page or share the work of a budding creative who could really use some positive feedback about their art.

Each of these things are so small, yet so huge because of the impact they have on another person's life. And what makes them even more special is the fact that you're not just affecting that one person's day-- you're creating a ripple effect of kindness that will spread to everyone in that person's sphere of influence. For example, if you pay for someone else's coffee unexpectedly or compliment a stranger as you pass, that person will be so surprised and delighted that they'll tell others about it. That's because of the "sharing phase" of surprise we discussed earlier; when something surprising happens, you instantly want to share it with someone else. So, as that person tells the story of your random act of kindness, they will inspire

and encourage others. And although you may never see it, those people might go out and engineer a kind surprise themselves because your actions reminded them of the joy it can bring. And isn't that a beautiful way to embrace the unexpected?

# Surprises Can Improve Your Relationship

Earlier, we discussed the monotony of living every day the same way, devoid of surprises. Well, just like we don't want that for our daily routine, it turns out that pretty much everybody hates that in relationships too. In fact, stagnation-- or the feeling that you and your partner lack that special spark or feeling of surprise-- is one of the biggest reasons why relationships break down. That's because, whether we realize it or not, we need complexity and variety in our relationships in order for them to stay interesting.

Whether that's as simple as your partner unexpectedly coming home with flowers or the feeling that the two of you will always be open to trying something new or learning new things about each other, these little elements of surprise are what keep relationships thriving. But in order to achieve this flexibility, it's important that you're both open to debate and complexity when it comes to aspects such as your political and religious beliefs or your personal preferences. Because each of these things are often deeply personal, people tend to staunchly and dogmatically defend them, often in conjunction with a refusal to give in or accept another person's point of view. But if you want to achieve true flexibility and openness in your relationship, it's vital that you're willing to listen to each other and accept areas where you might be wrong or need to compromise.

However, with that said, it's equally important that your partnership isn't so unpredictable as to become unstable. Because just as we need a little consistency and stability in our everyday routines, the same is true of our relationships. That's why surprises in a relationship should take the form of unexpected sweet gestures for one another or the stimulation of a healthy debate. You should never feel that your partner is unpredictable because they're hiding things from you or disappearing for long periods of time or doing other things that would make anyone feel devalued. So, in short, what we can take away from this chapter is that relationships need an equal

balance of stability and surprise in order to stay healthy and keep the spark alive.



## Collect New Experiences

It might not be possible to tickle yourself, but it's definitely possible to surprise yourself! It's also easier than you might think. In order to collect a lifetime of pleasantly surprising experiences, all you have to do is be open to adventure. And those adventures don't have to be big ones like bungee jumping or visiting the grand canyon (although both of those are great!)

Instead, you can add simple surprises to your everyday life through small things like checking out on a song by an artist you wouldn't normally listen to or watching a film that's outside your typical wheelhouse. You can even give yourself the gift of new experiences by trying out things like a dance class or cake decorating workshop to give yourself the opportunity to develop new hobbies or interests. As you can see from these examples, your new adventures don't have to be big things; all you need are small moments of beauty in the everyday to help you collect a lifetime of new and delightfully surprising experiences.

## Final Summary

In a world that is ever-changing and unstable, it's no surprise (pun intended!) that we often gravitate toward lifestyles and choices that give us a sense of predictability and control. However, this can often be unhealthy because it closes us off from new experiences that can stimulate and enrich our lives. That's why it's important for us to learn to embrace the unpredictable by discovering how surprise functions and why we need it in our lives. And as we've discussed in this book, surprises are far more vital than we think for our mental and emotional health as well as our relationships.

We can learn to relinquish our fear of the unknown by cultivating resilience, taking out the guesswork and embracing vulnerability because these steps will help us accept the things we can't control and learn to bounce back from unpleasant surprises. We can also find joy and strength in becoming a "surprise engineer" and bringing unexpected positivity to the lives of everyone around us.



# QuickRead

F R E E B O O K S U M M A R I E S

**Go to [QuickRead.com/App](https://QuickRead.com/App) now to download our app and get access to thousands of free book summaries as both text and audiobooks.**

**Get the key insights of non-fiction books in minutes instead of hours. Listen to our free audiobooks while you workout or on your commute to work.**

