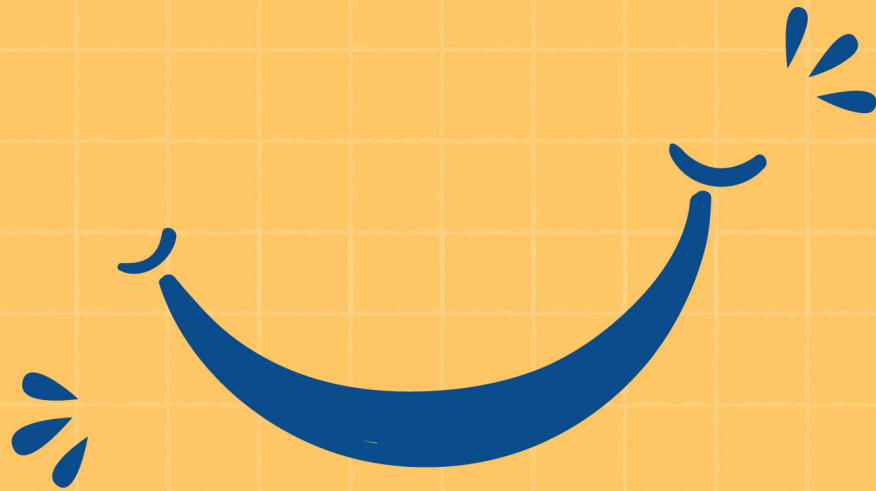


# SUMMARY

## THE AS IF PRINCIPLE

RICHARD WISEMAN



# **Summary of “The As If Principle” by Richard Wiseman**

Written by Lea Schullery

The Radically New Approach to Changing Your Life

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# Introduction

The majority of self-help gurus and business coaches all preach the same thing: if you want to improve your life, you need to change the way you think. They are continually spouting about the importance of positive thinking and how positive thought can lead to happiness. All you have to do is visualize your dream self and think like a millionaire, and you'll find success and wealth. The problem with this advice is that research continually shows that people often struggle to think happy thoughts, and even when people imagine their perfect selves or dream of endless wealth, they still never find success and happiness. It's time to find a new approach. Over a century ago, Victorian philosopher William James proposed a radically different approach to change. Since then, researchers across the world have conducted experiment after experiment to prove that James's theory applies to almost every aspect of people's lives. Even more important, their research has given rise to many easy and effective exercises that can help people feel happier, avoid anxiety and worry, fall in love and live happily ever after, stay slim, increase their willpower and confidence, and even slow the effects of aging. Throughout *The As If Principle*, author Richard Wiseman builds on the work of James's radical theory and reveals how everything you currently believe about your mind is wrong. Instead, change doesn't have to be difficult and can be accomplished through a series of easy-to-implement techniques designed to improve several different areas of your everyday life.

“You are about to encounter a new approach to change. An approach that is grounded in science, overturns conventional thinking, and provides a basis for the easiest, quickest and most effective ways of changing your life. So sit up straight and take a deep breath. Forget all about positive thinking. It's time for positive action.”



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# A Radical New Theory About The Relationship Between Emotion and Behavior

It was toward the end of the 1880s that philosopher William James began to study the relationship between emotion and behavior. This may seem like a strange topic of choice considering common sense tells us that certain events and thoughts cause you to feel certain emotions, thus affecting your behavior. For example, perhaps you find yourself walking down an unexpectedly dark street late at night, you might begin to feel anxious. Or maybe you walk into your boss's office and find you're getting a pay raise, so you feel happy! The action affects behavior. But James was ready to explore an alternative to the commonsense theory of emotion.

James was inspired by the legendary naturalist Charles Darwin, who theorized that a person can perceive another person's feelings by observing their facial expressions. By simply looking at photographs of people's emotions, we can identify how a person is feeling, proving that we can know how others are feeling based on their facial expressions. After reading about Darwin's experiments, James used it as a basis for his new theory about emotion. He theorized that people smile not because they are happy but rather always feel happy because they are smiling. He explained this hypothesis by stating, "You do not run from a bear because you are afraid of it, but rather become afraid of the bear because you run from it."

However, it wasn't until the late 1960s when a young academic by the name of James Laird discovered that when he forced himself to smile, he *felt* happier. Intrigued, he then tried frowning and suddenly felt sad. Could our actions affect our emotions? Laird then found the long-lost theories of William James and decided to conduct a few experiments. By attaching electrodes to participant's faces, researchers could measure their reactions as they made different faces. Researchers discovered that when participants smiled, they began to feel happier even though they knew they were only smiling for an experiment.

Paul Ekman from the University of California then became intrigued about the notion that altering people's facial expressions could make them feel either relaxed or angry and became determined to discover how the As If principle affects the body. He found that when people look fearful, their heart rate becomes quicker and their skin temperature drops. Similarly, when they smile, their heart rate decreases, and their skin temperature increases. But it's not just facial expressions that can affect behavior. Psychologists became intrigued about whether or not the way we walk and talk can influence our emotions. Psychologist Sara Snodgrass from Florida Atlantic University found that people who took long strides, swung their arms, and held their heads up high were happier than those who took shorter strides, shuffled along, and watched their feet.

Ultimately, the As If principle states that if you want to feel happy, simply act as if you already are! Give yourself a Happy Talk by saying statements like, "I feel good about myself today," "I feel enthusiastic today," or "I feel my life is under my control." Sound as convincing as possible, don't rush the statements, and speak slowly. By the end of the exercise, you should feel a boost in happiness!



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# Acting Like You're In Love Can Lead to Real Love

Think about the last time you experienced a strong emotion. Perhaps you felt anxious before an important speech, nervous before a job interview, excited after a good date, or angry when someone insulted you. When you feel these emotions, you likely feel a dramatic change in your bodily sensations. For instance, your heart rate may increase, your mouth might become dry, and perhaps your palms might even feel sweaty. Psychologists have long tried to identify how certain bodily sensations are associated with a particular emotion. Is anger associated with an increase in heart rate and faster breathing? Is joy linked to a decrease in heart rate and shallower breathing? It was in the 1960s that psychologist Stanley Schachter extended the As If principle to bodily sensations. For instance, if someone shouts at you, you feel your heart beat faster and conclude that you must be angry. Similarly, when you are with someone you find attractive, you might experience the same increase in heart rate but assume that you are feeling desire.

Schachter used his version of the As If principle to prove that the principle could create happiness and anger. But could it produce passion? Gregory White from the University of Maryland conducted two studies in which he made men's hearts beat faster while showing them a videotape of an attractive woman talking about her hobbies. Researchers then asked the men to rate how sexy she was and how much they wanted to kiss her. In the first experiment, White had one group of men run in place for two minutes to increase their heart rate while another group did the same exercise for just a few seconds. The men in the group with an increased heart rate found the woman more attractive than the other group. But why? They simply interpreted their increased heart rate as desire!

Perhaps this means you should skip the long walks on the beach and the romantic dinners on the first date. Instead, get your heart rate pumping by heading to theme parks, high bridges, comedy shows, or even watch a scary



movie on a first date to find love! Furthermore, if you behave like you're in love, then you'll increase your chances of falling in love. Moving closer to your date, looking into her eyes, and playing footsie under the table can all make you more attracted to your prospective partner.

For example, the power of footsie can be quite incredible. Harvard psychologist Daniel Wegner once conducted an experiment in which men and women were paired into teams and played poker against another male-female team. One team, however, was taught to cheat by secretly sending codes to one another by tapping out information with their feet under the table. Essentially, they were playing footsie. As soon as the game finished, participants were asked to rate the attractiveness of the other players. The couples who had been behaving as if they were in love found each other more attractive compared to those who didn't play footsie.

Psychologist Robert Epstein is also convinced that almost any two people can fall in love with each other by behaving as if they are in love. This may sound crazy, but the evidence is overwhelming. Take a look at the many celebrity couples who have fallen in love with each other after acting out an on-screen romance. Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, Warren Beatty and Annette Bening. In each instance, the celebrities acted as if they were in love and promptly fell in love with each other for real.

Lastly, if you find that you need to bring back the magic in a relationship, there is an exercise to help you spark the flames once again. First, determine which activities you both find exciting. This could be something as simple as going for a walk, trying a new restaurant, going on a hike, inviting a friend over to dinner, or going to a movie. Or it could be something bigger like going on a vacation, learning something new together, planning a major purchase, swimming with dolphins, or jumping out of a plane. Choose 6 activities and number them 1-6. Next, roll a die and see which number it lands on. Finally, ensure that you complete this activity during the next two weeks and repeat the process every two weeks.



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# **The More You Say Something, The More Likely You'll Come to Believe It**

As we have discovered so far, the As If principle states that behavior causes emotion. So, for example, when people smile, they feel happy, and when they frown, they feel sad. But what if the As If principle determines more than just how we feel? What if the principle also affects what we believe? Common sense suggests that thoughts create behavior. For instance, imagine you have the choice to go out one evening to a movie or play. If you prefer movies to plays, you'll likely head to the movie theater. In this case, your thought caused your behavior. Like William James, however, psychologist Daryl Bem aimed to turn that common sense on its head.

Bem suggested that behavior influences what people believe. So, for instance, if you want to go out for the evening and are subtly persuaded to go to the theater to see a play, you might enjoy it and suddenly believe, "I guess I enjoy the theater more than the movies!" In fact, American President Lyndon B. Johnson used this exact strategy to his advantage during the Vietnam War, a conflict that people publicly protested that caused much U.S. conflict and casualties. To bolster public support, the American government frequently attempted to put a positive spin on the conflict, arguing that the Communist North of the country would soon be defeated or that the South would soon be able to defend itself.

Many administrators privately expressed their concerns about this strategy, so what did Johnson do? He sent the doubters on a fact-finding mission to the country along with a group of reporters. Johnson understood that in the process, these doubters would be unable to express their doubts and would, instead, have to give public speeches defending the government's policies. As a result, many of the officials began to believe what they were saying. Over the years, this same procedure has been used to influence people's beliefs to create either positive or negative change.

For example, during the Korean War, American prisoners of war spent time in camps where they were required to attend long lectures on the benefits of communism and then asked to discuss the talks in small groups. A member of the Chinese Communist party was often assigned to each group to help the groups reach the “correct” conclusion. If the group failed, they were forced to endure the lecture and discussion again. Next, Americans were asked to jot down a few pro-communist statements, like “Communism is wonderful,” and “Communism is the way of the future.” A few weeks later, they were then asked to read the statements aloud to themselves. Then, a couple of weeks later, the Americans were asked to read the statements out loud to their fellow prisoners.

Eventually, they were rewarded with fresh fruit or candy if they wrote a pro-communist essay for the camp newsletter. When the essay was published, the author was given a Mao Tse-tung badge that excused them from unpleasant camp chores. Over time, many of the American prisoners changed their attitudes toward communism, and some even preferred to stay in Korea rather than return home.



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# Use the As If Principle To Inspire Motivation

Many social psychologists know about the story of the wise old man and the abusive teenagers. As the story goes, a wise old man once lived in a rough neighborhood. One day, a group of teens decided to give the old man a hard time. As they walked past the old man's house, they would shout relentless abuse at him. At this point, many old men would shout back, call the police, or simply hope the group would grow tired of their mean-spirited ways. But this old man was different, so he waited for the group to show up and immediately handed each of them a five-pound note and explained he was happy to pay them for shouting abuse.

These actions repeated for the next week; however, the following week, the man explained he could only pay them each a pound. The group continued to take his money and shout their abuse. But at the start of the third week, he explained that he could only pay them twenty pence each. Insulted by the offer, the teenagers refused to shout their abuse! But how can we explain this behavior? Well, to answer this question, we can look at psychiatrist Edward Deci who conducted an experiment in which he instructed volunteers to solve a puzzle for 30 minutes. Before starting the puzzle, some of the volunteers were told that if they could solve it, they would be given a financial reward. Others weren't offered any incentive.

After thirty minutes, the people who expected a cash reward didn't work as hard to solve the puzzle. The other group, however, worked harder simply for their own enjoyment. In other words, financial incentives turn something that is supposed to be fun into hard work. In fact, even thinking of a reward can be discouraging. One researcher found that when writers were asked to think about bestselling authors and their financial success, their work was less creative. Writers wrote more creatively when they were focused on the simple pleasure of writing.

Instead of attempting to motivate people through rewards, we can use the As If principle as a form of motivation. For example, Patricia Pliner from

the University of Toronto demonstrated just how the As If principle could be used to get people to spring into action. Through her experiment, a group of researchers simply went door-to-door asking people to donate to a charity for cancer. Of this group, 46 percent of people decided to donate. In the next stage, the researchers had the volunteers approach the second set of houses and asked the residents to wear a small pin to help publicize the cause. Almost all the residents agreed.

Two weeks later, the volunteers returned to these pin-wearing residents and asked for a financial donation. Amazingly, over 90 percent of the residents agreed to donate. Known as the foot-in-the-door technique, this approach shows how a small initial request can motivate people to agree to a much larger request later. These pin-wearing residents believed they were already supporting the charity, so a donation only continued that support!



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# Changing How You Act Can Change Your Self-Esteem

Do you trust your own judgment? Do you think you will do well in most situations? Do you often put your mistakes behind you and focus on a better future? If you answered yes to these questions, then you likely have high self-esteem. However, if you answered no, then that suggests that you are slightly insecure. Conventional psychology suggests that personality causes behavior. In other words, people with low self-esteem are more likely to endure humiliating and demeaning experiences. However, the As If principle turns this idea on its head.

Rather than low self-esteem causing people to endure demeaning experiences, the As If principle suggests that taking part in demeaning experiences causes people to develop low self-esteem. Psychologist James Laird aimed to discover if this was the case. To test this theory, Laird asked participants to complete a self-esteem questionnaire and then instructed them to sit at a table where they would then participate in one of two tasks: organize heavy weights or cut up and eat a live worm. After flipping a coin, the researcher explained that they had been assigned the worm-eating task.

However, just before the participants were about to indulge in some worm-eating, another researcher rushed in and explained that they didn't have to eat the worm after all! Interestingly, only 20 percent of the people assigned to eating the worm switched to sorting the weights. Although they had the option to switch tasks, their experimentally created low self-esteem caused the vast majority of them to choose to eat the worm. (Thankfully, experimenters rushed across the room and stopped the study just as the participants were about to munch on the worm). This experiment proved that when people are faced with a degrading task, their self-esteem suffers as a result.

After this study was published, other psychologists criticized the method, stating that participants must have felt safe in the knowledge that

researchers would never allow them to actually eat a worm. Questioning the results, psychologists completed the same experiment but replaced worms with large, edible caterpillars. In this second study, the results replicated Laird's original findings. In other words, the As If principle proves that a person's sense of identity is the direct and unfortunate result of having been forced to endure an unpleasant event. As a result, those with low self-esteem only endure more negative events, which causes an even greater decline in their esteem.

In fact, even the way you dress can influence the way you see yourself. Mark Frank from Cornell University conducted a study to prove whether people who wore black clothing acted in a more authoritarian and aggressive manner. Luckily, the data was already available. Simply searching through the records of the National Football League, Frank identified five teams that wore black outfits and looked at their behavior on the field. As it turns out, teams dressed in black experienced more penalties than others, suggesting that they tended to engage in more aggressive behavior. These findings were also replicated in the data of ice hockey teams.



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# Your Actions Can Improve Your Mental Health

It should come as no surprise to learn that millions of people across the world struggle with some form of psychological disorder. While some live with an irrational phobia, others experience debilitating anxiety and depression. For more than a century, psychologists and scientists have attempted to cure these problems through drugs, operations, and even just simply talking. But can the As If principle help these people? Well, research suggests it can by helping us reduce the feelings we don't want.

In the early 1990s, researchers discovered that injecting Botox into the frown lines between the eyes caused partial paralysis of the forehead, resulting in a reduction of wrinkles. As a result, you can achieve a more youthful appearance. But even more than that, researchers wondered if facial paralysis could affect our emotions. In one experiment, one group of women underwent Botox injections while another group received a similar filler injection; however, only Botox paralyzes the facial muscles.

After the injections, experimenter Joshua Ian Davis asked the women to watch several video clips, including a scary clip of a man eating live worms, a funny clip from America's funniest videos, and a serious documentary about Jackson Pollock. After each clip, the women were asked to rate how they felt. As it turns out, women who received Botox reported less of an emotional reaction to the clips when compared to those who received filler treatment. Ultimately, immobility can cause a loss in emotional experience, proving the accuracy of the As If principle that states that if your body doesn't physically express an emotion, then you'll be less likely to feel it!

In the 1970s, British doctor Peter Brown visited a children's hospital in China to observe how doctors carried out tonsillectomies. But he found something even more shocking. In the West, patients who undergo this particular surgery report experiencing a great deal of pain. In China, however, Brown reported seeing smiling five-year-olds as they received a



quick anesthetic throat spray. They continued to smile as they climbed onto a table and opened his or her mouth. Within seconds, a doctor whipped out the tonsils and dropped them into a bucket of water. Afterward, the children walked to recovery, showing few signs of discomfort. But why was this?

The answer lies in the way we behave. The Chinese children were taught to be relaxed and smile. As a result, they felt less pain. In other words, if you feel pain and act like you don't, you'll feel less pain! Not only can the As If principle help us reduce pain, but it can also help us minimize our negative emotions. For instance, by acting calmly, you can become less angry. Psychologist Brad Bushman from Iowa State University carried out several experiments showing how feelings of anger can be quickly squashed by acting like a calm person. For example, in one study, Bushman had college students spend 20 minutes playing either a relaxing or violent computer game. Next, the students were asked to play another game against an unseen player. If they won, they would be allowed to blast their opponent with a loud noise.

In reality, there were no unseen players, and the students always won the second round. The results found that those who had been playing the relaxing computer game were far less aggressive, choosing a quieter and shorter noise blast for their imaginary opponent compared to those who played the aggressive zombie-killing game. Simply put, acting in a relaxed and calm way can produce relaxing and calming thoughts.



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# The As If Principle Can Make You Younger and Healthier

Lastly, the As If principle has the power to allow us to travel back in time. Okay, maybe not literally but mentally! In 1979, psychologist Ellen Langer recruited a group of men in their 70s and 80s for a week of reminiscence. Before the retreat, she asked participants to undergo a series of tests that measured their physical strength, posture, eyesight, and memory. She then split the men into two groups and told one group (the “time travelers”) that the experiment was about the psychological impact of reliving the past and the other group it was about the effects of reminiscing.

Throughout the retreat, the time-traveling group listened to 1959 radio broadcasts and were encouraged to act as if they were 20 years younger. For instance, the time travelers had no help when arriving at the retreat and had to carry their suitcases inside. Additionally, they didn’t have access to rails and other movement aids they used at the nursing home. Even more, they were encouraged to talk about the past in the present tense and avoid having conversations about anything that happened after 1959. For the control group, however, their life at the retreat was quite different. They heard present-day music, watched current movies, and were asked to reminisce about 1959 in the past tense.

Within a matter of days, Langer could see a dramatic difference in the men’s behaviors. The time-traveling participants were now walking faster and were more confident. What's more, several of these participants had decided they could get around without the use of their canes. After testing both groups of men, Langer found that the time-traveling group showed improvements in dexterity, speed of movement, memory, blood pressure, eyesight, and hearing. Even more interesting, more than 60% of the time-traveling group showed an improvement on intelligence tests. Simply put, acting as if they were young men knocked years off their bodies and minds!

Not only can the As If principle help us travel back in time, but it can also help us reach our dietary goals. If you behave healthily, then you can literally improve your health. According to Schacter, people eat based on two different signals. The first comes from within the body, sending you a message that you are hungry either through a rumble in the tummy or a sudden drop in blood sugar. The second signal comes from outside influences, such as seeing a great-looking cake in the bakery window prompting you to walk inside and purchase a slice.

Schachter's research suggests that slimmer people tend to follow their internal signals while overweight people follow external signals. So if you want to lose weight Schachter's theory can help. Try to get in touch with your internal signals by focusing more on what your body is telling you. So before you order that cake, ask yourself, "Am I really hungry?" Keep unhealthy foods out of sight and stay away from supermarket aisles that are packed with snacks and cookies. Lastly, focus on your food as you eat. This means you should avoid watching television, listening to music, or even reading while you are eating. Instead, focus on the food and slowly chew with each mouthful.

If that fails, try eating in front of a mirror, replacing your knife and fork with chopsticks, or using your nondominant hand. All of these tricks will force you to focus on your food rather than mindlessly eating simply because you are bored.



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# Final Summary

For thousands of years, people have assumed that the relationship between the body and brain is similar to that of a rider to a horse. In the same way a rider determines how a horse behaves, so our minds decide what our bodies do. This thinking has led to an incredible amount of self-help tips focused on changing the way we think to become happier, healthier, and wealthier. Unfortunately, this approach is ineffective. Luckily, more than a century ago William James turned this conventional view of the human psyche on its head. Instead, he suggested that our actions influence how we feel. In the century following James' proposal, researchers have proven time after time that his theory applies to a remarkable range of psychological phenomena, from persuasion to procrastination, fear to phobias, and passion to personality. It's now time to use the power of the As If principle to help people improve their lives and to change the world.



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