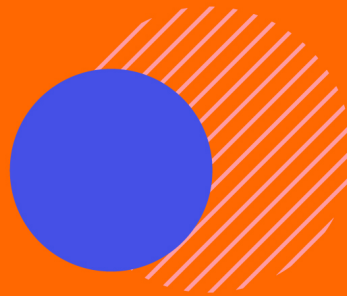


SUMMARY

THE HAPPINESS TRACK

AMANDA LITTLE



Summary of “The Happiness Track” by Emma Seppala

Written by Alyssa Burnette

Learn how to get your life on the path to happiness.

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Introduction

“Just be happy!”

“Just think good thoughts.”

“But you have so much to be happy about!”

“Other people have it worse.”

We say these things all the time when people tell us they're feeling unhappy. But although we mean them to be encouraging, the truth is that it's not always that easy. As much as everyone wants to be happy, there is really no such thing as a “happiness switch” in our brains. We can't simply press a button and have the happiness we seek. As a result, telling people to “just be happy” or reminding them that “other people have it worse” is a form of toxic positivity that invalidates another person's genuine emotional struggles. So, how can we transcend all this? What's the secret to rising above toxicity and misconceptions and creating a truly happy future? Over the course of this summary, we'll explore the author's answers and practical tips for these questions!



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Be Where You Are

Has anyone ever given you that advice before? If so, it might have sounded like a bit of a non-sequitur; after all, it's physically impossible to be present in two places at the same time! But we all know that it's very possible to be physically present in one place while your mind is engaged with something else. In fact, you can be so lost in your own head that you might feel as though you're a million miles away. Indeed, this is a very common phenomenon, especially in our busy modern age. While technology provides us with the helpful opportunity to always stay connected, that opportunity can sometimes be a double-edged sword. That's because our phones can be a portal to another, stressful headspace-- one where family drama and relationship debacles can plague us at work and vice versa. And as a result, it can feel impossible to stay fully present in any given moment. In fact, it can often feel as though you're being pulled in a million different directions with every ping of a new notification!

This mental sensation is actually very similar to a medieval torture practice known simply as stretching. This practice was typically used to get information from someone who refused to give it up, so the victim was tied to a device called "the rack." Their arms would be spread apart and tied at one end of the rack while their legs would be stretched and tied on another end. The torturer could then turn a wheel that would twist the rack farther and farther apart, stretching and elongating it. Eventually, the victim's arms and legs would be stretched so far that their limbs would be dislocated or even ripped from their body. Granted, this is a pretty graphic and unpleasant example, but sadly, it's also a very apropos analogy. Because when we find ourselves stretched between work, family, friends, and other commitments-- with no time allotted to focus on our mental health-- it's easy to feel as though we are being mentally torn apart or tortured. Therefore, it's no surprise that this feeling increases our stress and decreases our happiness!

And that's why the author's first tip for getting on the happiness track is simply "be where you are." If you want to cultivate genuine happiness, then you have to kick the multitasking habit. And you have to start by staying present in the moment. Of course, that's often more easily said than done! Because we're taught that multitasking equals productivity and that productivity equals success, many people don't know how to slow down and focus on only one thing at a time. And sadly, it's not something we can fix with a pill or a magic word. (Although it would certainly be great if we could!) No, much like exercise or healthy eating habits, being present is a skill we have to cultivate. And just like the previously mentioned examples, developing this skill can be pretty hard work. But it's definitely worth it in the long run!

So, start by simplifying your workspace and your mind. For example, if you often find yourself checking Facebook messages during work or checking work emails when you're meant to be focusing on your family, it's a great idea to employ a site blocker that can help. (BlockSite is an awesome tool!) You can use Chrome extensions like BlockSite to restrict your access to certain sites for a specific period of time. And if there are some that you need to block permanently, you can do that too! Eliminating these pop-up distractions from your life is a great place to start because it allows you to declutter your mind and focus only on one thing at a time. And if you can continue this practice for at least twenty-one days (the length of time it takes to cultivate a habit) then you've already made this a part of your daily routine! That means that it will eventually become instinctive and require less effort to focus on only one thing at a time.

You might also find that it helps to set deadlines for yourself. Some projects might have deadlines of their own, but some things are pretty open-ended. And when that happens, it's easy to procrastinate or forget about it. Then you're overwhelmed and rushing to meet the deadline before you know it! That's why it may help to self-incentivize. For example, tell yourself that you only have one hour in which to do something and then work to get it done in that hour! You might find that you can complete your work at a faster pace than you ever imagined and that you have the power to free up

your day. So, start applying these habits to your daily routine and see how they help you to stay present in the moment!



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I Eat Pressure for Breakfast

Many of us have heard that slogan-- or some silly variation of it-- a hundred times. That's because many people claim to thrive under pressure or imply that stress is somehow an integral part of their success. But the author's research shows that nothing could be further from the truth! While it's always good to have a goal or to be motivated, both of those things are very different from being constantly stressed. And, contrary to popular opinion, stress is not necessary for success or motivation! But if that's not true, why do so many people think that it is? As a psychologist, the author's professional experience has given her an opportunity to examine this problem at length and she's discovered a few key insights.

For starters, many people embrace stress and pressure because they believe they need it for motivation. If you don't have a boss or a deadline telling you that you have to get something done, they worry that they might not have the motivation to do it. So, sometimes people procrastinate until the last possible second or overload themselves with too many commitments and believe that this pressure is necessary to help them get the job done. This happens because we associate stress with the rush of adrenaline it gives us. As the adrenaline courses through our bodies, activating our "fight or flight" response, we suddenly find the strength and motivation to see a task through. Without it, we might feel lazy or apathetic. But that doesn't mean that that stress is good.

Short bursts of adrenaline-based motivation can certainly be helpful, but this process puts a lot of wear and tear on our bodies. And over time, we can suffer tremendously from the stress. Because stress is an inherently negative thing, it naturally generates negative self-talk and negative coping mechanisms. For example, if you're under a great deal of pressure, being kind to yourself probably isn't your first instinct. Instead, you're more likely to think something like, "You're so stupid! Why can't you get this done faster!" Similarly, you might be preoccupied with worries about what will happen if you fail. Instead of helping and motivating us, this stress can actually lead to burn-out and cause us to suffer from anxiety or depression

or both. (Negative self-talk contributes heavily to depression!) And in many cases, it can also lead to a mental breakdown. So, by putting ourselves under intense and prolonged stress, we're actually doing our bodies more harm than good! That's why it's better to focus on being present in the moment and creating small, self-driven incentives for motivation rather than relying on external pressure.



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Enjoy the Little Things

This might sound like the most cliché advice in the world, but it might actually be the most helpful! That's because we should never underestimate the power of life's small, beautiful moments. Here's why: as we mentioned in the previous chapter, stress is the result of intense pressure and/or negativity. This wears us down and causes us to become frantic, nervous, and worried. But because it's impossible to rid our lives of all stress, it's vitally important that we find positive ways to counteract the stress we do encounter. And that's why our lives need to be filled with frequent bursts of little, happy things. The author's research is only one example of many psychological studies which prove that small bursts of happiness significantly reduce our stress levels. In fact, the need for this positive reinforcement is one of the most widely held scientific truths about mental health. The great news is that these small moments of happiness aren't hard to come by!

It can be something as simple as sharing a funny meme with a friend. Or maybe you look forward to picking up a pumpkin spice latte on your work every morning. Maybe you just really love petting your cat. These small moments of joy can be anything and they will be different for every person. But no matter what brings you joy, the important thing is that you cultivate those moments. Because those moments are going to reduce your stress and re-set the short fuse that many of us accumulate during the stressful workday. They can also help you to focus on the positive, which is crucial for mitigating stress. Because-- let's face it-- it's highly unlikely that anyone loves every single aspect of their job or life. There's going to be something we hate doing, some task that feels mindless and unnecessary. As a result, we may often find it difficult to concentrate on that task (i.e. to stay present in the moment), to stay motivated, or to avoid procrastination. But if we can focus on the positive aspects of our lives as much as possible, we can improve our overall outlook.

For example, maybe you just really hate a certain part of your job. Maybe there's nothing positive about it and you're just always going to hate it. But maybe that task is just a stepping stone on your path to something better. Maybe once you master that skill, you can move on to the job you really want. Or maybe it's simply paying the bills and you can be grateful for that. Altering your perspective in these small ways might not sound like much, but they can result in a substantial difference. In fact, if your outlook on life gets even slightly more positive, it can reduce your stress and improve your mental and physical health! So, take some time to truly stop and smell the roses. Tell your friend a joke. Treat yourself to a cupcake. And as you fall asleep each night, try to make a mental list of all the things you're grateful for.

These small positive things might sound cliché, but remember that our brains are basically computers. We have the power to program them with a vast array of information, so it's up to us to choose whether we want our brains to focus on the positive or the negative. Even simple things-- like the thoughts we dwell on and the attitudes with which we approach our days-- go a long way towards programming our brains. So, if you want to put your life on the happiness track, start by programming your brain to look on the bright side!



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Final Summary

Life is full of twists and turns and unwanted curveballs. Over the course of our lives, we'll experience a great deal of stress and unpleasantness that we neither sought nor asked for. And given that everyone simply wants to be happy, it's understandable that we want to avoid as much pain and stress as possible. Perhaps we've even desperately wished that we could pre-program our lives to simply follow a happy path. Fortunately, the author believes that we can!

By simply following a few best practices, it's possible to adjust your mindset and cultivate a happy life. Just remember to practice being present in the moment, reducing your stress, and curate your collection of small, happy moments. These actions might not seem significant, but they can have a profound impact on your quality of life. So, put them into practice and watch as your life slides smoothly onto the happiness track.



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