

Eight Minutes, Not Eight Hours

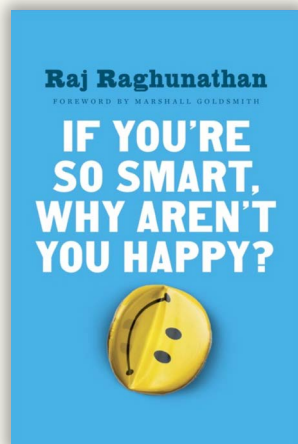


May 2024

## If You're So Smart, Why Aren't You Happy?

BOOK AUTHOR: RAJ RAGHUNATHAN

Published 2016



Raj Raghunathan spent over 40 years working with prominent CEOs in multiple sectors, has taught and coached them, and performed his own original research as well as synthesized that of others. He is interested in why the Smart-and-Successful are often lacking in happiness even though they have greater drive, IQ, critical-thinking ability, etc.

The author posits three things to be happy “beyond basic necessities and adequate health:” great social relationships, purpose, and a positive attitude toward life (p. 7). However, actually being happy is more complicated than simply knowing that; it requires determining why this is true. Most highly successful people chronically find themselves “temporarily” too busy to pursue a life program of health and happiness and seem to continually postpone enacting concrete ways of pursuing happiness (p. x). With specific action-steps laid out by the author, supported by research and reasoning, this book provides a plan with general strategies for becoming happier. He organizes the book around seven “deadly sins” against happiness followed by corresponding “habits of the highly happy” for each.

### Key Quote

*“Some of the world’s most respected leaders display strength alongside compassion – indeed, research confirms that kind and compassionate leaders (i.e. givers) ‘are more likely to rise to the top’” (p. 232).*


## KEY POINTS AND CONCEPTS

### First Sin: Devaluing Happiness | Habit: Prioritizing (Not Pursuing) It


When faced with the age-old question of what one would ask a genie granting three wishes, happiness is rarely listed as a request (p. 18). The reason for this is the fundamental happiness paradox, in which people routinely “sacrifice happiness for the sake of other goals” (p. 28). We do this for a few reasons. First, happiness seems too abstract when compared to short-term goals such as money and fame. Second, there are underlying negative associations with happiness, such as that it causes us to become lazy and that it is fleeting. Lastly, happiness and fulfillment simply are not the first things that occur to us when thinking about what we want for our lives.

The best ways to combat the above inclinations are to simply prioritize happiness by reminding ourselves of it frequently and to resist the urge to pursue or grasp it, such as by continually monitoring ourselves to see if we’ve reached greater happiness yet (pp. 35-37). To prioritize happiness:

- **Define it.** Figure out what it means to you by recalling recent events that made you happy and recognizing and placing emphasis on the correlates to happiness. These are: love/connection, joy, achieving important and worthwhile goals, awe, inspiration, interest, and hope. Harmony is also important, “not wanting to be somewhere else, doing something else,” as is abundance, believing that one has more than enough of important things in life (p. 39). When combined, harmony and abundance allow for both “full acceptance and full engagement” – a combination that may be a fundamental key to happiness (p. 40).
- **Incorporate it.** Make a list – a portfolio of sorts – of those things that have triggered happiness: activities, people, objects, experiences, pictures, songs, and so on (p. 41).



*When faced with the age-old question of what one would ask a genie granting three wishes, happiness is rarely listed as a request. The reason for this is the fundamental happiness paradox, in which people routinely “sacrifice happiness for the sake of other goals.”*



**EXERCISE:** Based on the definitions/aspects of happiness you are most drawn to write your own definition, keeping in mind that it may be a combination of different aspects. Then, think of three or four things that “lead you to feel happy in the way that you have defined it” (p. 261). Put that list somewhere you see it frequently. Redo this periodically.

### Second Sin: Chasing Superiority | Habit: Pursuing Flow

Being superior has tangible benefits and enhances happiness; not so when pursuing superiority (p. 50). Chasing superiority often entails subjective benchmarks, increasingly extreme demands, and short-term rewards, also causing self-centeredness and less compassion, thereby decreasing happiness (pp. 51-54).

The antidote to chasing superiority is what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi coined as “flow:” experiences which so absorb you that you lose track of external conditions such as time (p. 61).

**Characteristics:** Lack of self-consciousness; being in the moment/unavoidably focused (pp. 63-64).

**Conditions:** At “the sweet spot between anxiety and boredom;” shared skill levels or, ideally, “your opponent’s skills are just, ever so slightly, higher than your own” (p. 65).

Flow enhances happiness because it occurs amidst a challenge to improve and grow yourself, and, if enough flow experiences are strung together, it increases the likelihood of mastery (p. 66).

Studies show that “the desire for worldly success gets in the way of doing well in almost any domain” (p. 68). Instead, as exemplified in cases of well-trained athletes, flow allows us to forget what just happened and focus on what is happening in the moment (pp. 67-68). Chasing the reward of superiority can actually hurt performance, not allowing us to pursue flow in focusing on the process of pursuing the goal (p. 69).

One way to mitigate the need for superiority is self-compassion, because if we are prone to beating ourselves up, self-esteem suffers, thereby inspiring us to chase superiority (p. 75). Gratitude is another way: thinking of people who played a critical part in your success, likely increasing social bonds (p. 76).


**EXERCISE:** Think of someone who has had a positive influence on your life and why. Draft a short note to that person and send it to them if you can. Reflect on how you felt during the exercise.

### **Third Sin: Desperation for Love | Habit: Need to Love (and Give)**


Love / connectedness has been shown to be one of the single best predictors of happiness (pp. 86-87). The opposite is also true; in fact, neuroimaging shows that isolation activates areas of the brain that process physical pain (p. 88). But when people are desperate to grasp this critical need, happiness decreases.

Healthy desire for love (“secure attachment”) strikes a balance between seeking love and not being desperate for it (p. 88). Unhealthy attitudes are rooted in insecurity about relationships: either being needy or avoidant (p. 88). To promote secure attachment, practice gratitude (promoting stronger social bonds) and self-compassion (enhancing feelings of security), and love and give better, per the below (pp. 91-92).

Altruism leads to better moods than selfishness, in part because it takes away from focusing on one’s own worries and problems, but also because of potential reciprocity as well as proven improvements to health and stress levels (pp. 101, 104-105). For example, giving to charity has a similar effect as receiving double your household income (p. 102). Givers (see Adam Grant’s Givers and Takers) are also more likely to succeed in business: those who are more generous earn significantly more and are more likely to be promoted (p. 106). However, a balance is necessary because not all givers are alike: being efficient with emotional and physical resources while practicing generosity, and seeing the impact of one’s giving, makes certain givers much more likely to rise to the top than others (p. 108).



*Love/connectedness has been shown to be one of the single best predictors of happiness. The opposite is also true; in fact, neuroimaging shows that isolation activates areas of the brain that process physical pain. But when people are desperate to grasp this critical need, happiness decreases.*



**EXERCISE:** Think up an “altruistic prank.” See the website for help on coming up with an idea, write out exactly how and when you’ll do it, and keep in mind the wise practices of generosity listed just above.

#### **Fourth Sin: Being Overly Controlling | Habit: Gaining Internal Control**

Being in control can help us set and achieve higher goals – but only if we have a healthy measure of the desire to be in control; too much can easily lead to failure (pp. 122-123). It causes many issues, from psychological reluctance in others to roadblocks in ourselves, including anger when people don’t act the way we want, poor decision-making, and obsession over achieving a narrowly-defined goal (pp. 123-125). These people are also “likely to sacrifice other things that make [them] happy” (pp. 125-126). They make their internal happiness contingent upon external circumstances, and when they lack internal control, they seek external control (p. 141).

To let go of needing to control, it helps to seek situations in which you feel awe and give of your time in social service. Change your thoughts to control your feelings, increasing the chance of calm and rational thinking when feeling frazzled (pp. 137-139). Figure out “ways to be happy despite others’ actions and despite the external circumstances” (p. 139). To control your emotions (pp. 144-146):

- Avoid situations that cause unwanted emotions prior to important meetings or conversations. (This doesn’t mean suppressing negative feelings.)
- Label feelings, as this lowers their intensity and helps you move on.
- Reinterpret negative situations or put things in perspective.

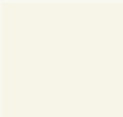

Also, living a healthier lifestyle sets you up for more controlled thinking and responses.

**EXERCISE:** Come up with a healthy lifestyle plan, including eating right, moving more, and sleeping better. Put reminders to enact specific items in your plan on your calendar, with alerts.

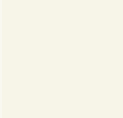

#### **Fifth Sin: Distrusting Others | Habit: Exercising “Smart Trust”**

Trust helps release oxytocin and contributes to national happiness levels worldwide (p. 152). Although trust comes with risks, the rewards of wisely trusting are far greater, as trust begets trustworthiness (p. 156). Companies can build this into their business model by, for example, avoiding scripts in customer service roles because of trusting well-selected employees to use their best judgment (p. 154).

Generally, we are “far more distrustful of others than [we] should be,” due in part to selective memory (pp. 166-167). Smart trust includes discerning “when, with whom, and how much to trust others,” and varies from person to person and situation to situation (p. 157). Keep in mind our misguided tendency to attribute others’ negative behaviors to internal causes, and positive behaviors to external ones (p. 160).



*To let go of needing to control,  
it helps to seek situations in  
which you feel awe and give  
of your time in social service.  
Change your thoughts to con-  
trol your feelings, increasing  
the chance of calm and rational  
thinking when feeling frazzled.*



- Elicit trustworthy behavior from others by judging the context of the situation. People are much more likely to behave well where trustworthy behavior is expected, and vice versa (p. 174).
- Take some perspective: the consequences of being cheated are typically not very high (p. 169).
- Try to understand what led someone to violate your trust by holding people accountable (p. 170).

Why bother? Harboring vengeful thoughts “has a significant negative effect on both your mental and physical health” (p. 173). By letting go of such thoughts and practicing forgiveness, anxiety drops and self-esteem increases (p. 173). Also, people are less likely to cheat you the more well-liked you are, and while leaders typically want to appear more competent than warm, this often causes them to be feared and distrusted (p. 175). Building “a history of mutually trustworthy behavior,” such as by buying lunch for a new colleague, lowers the likelihood of either of you breaking that trust down the line (pp. 175-176).

**EXERCISE:** Write, but don’t send, a letter of forgiveness: Recall the instance without wallowing, write a letter that acknowledges the various factors that may have been at play, and conclude with forgiveness.

**Sixth Sin:** Passionate / Indifferent Pursuit of Happiness | Habit: Dispassionate Pursuit of Passion

People are more happy being busy than idle in most circumstances, but the meaningfulness of busyness (i.e. the process) plays a key role, including by making us more productive (pp. 184-185). But if we have little control over a particular complex outcome, it is better for our happiness to depend on the process of working toward it than on the outcome itself (p. 185). Avoiding judging an outcome as good or bad after it occurs is dispassionate pursuit of passion – in contrast to an obsessive or indifferent pursuit – in which you have a preference for an outcome prior to it, but are nonjudgmental about it afterward (pp. 186-188).

People feel far less negative about a negative event the more time passes, in part because it is seen as meaningful due to how much was learned from it (p. 191). Can we do this with current events? One tactic: trust in life. You become more open, looking for positive consequences that can happen from negative outcomes and being grateful for negative events because of the opportunities that arose (pp. 195, 198-199). Placebo also works here, as believing that this is true can be a self-fulfilling prophecy (p. 198).

**EXERCISE:** Note three mildly negative things that happen to you for one week. Find one to three positive consequences of each and fill in how the positive came out of the negative. Review your notes when done.

**Seventh Sin:** Mind Addiction | Habit: Mindfulness

We are addicted to the idea of rationality and drawn-out deliberation, tending to “ignore or underestimate the importance of gut instincts and feelings” (p. 202). Sometimes it is better for decisions to be based on feelings and gut instincts because of their intelligence, and snap judgments can be very accurate (pp. 204-206). For quantitative, pragmatic decisions, thoughtful deliberation is best, but if we refocus our goals toward enhancing trust or maximizing enjoyment, instincts are better (pp. 206-207). Feelings and gut instincts are best followed in “domains in which we personally have a lot of experience,” while deliberation is best when seeking a functional goal, or making one on behalf of a group (pp. 214-215).

Disinterestedness, or being unbiased or neutral, enables us to “control the urge to change things,” which offers an alternative for situations in which our reactive thoughts trigger emotions, and back again (p. 220). This mindfulness “is the metaphorical equivalent of being the fly in the wall of your head” (p. 220).

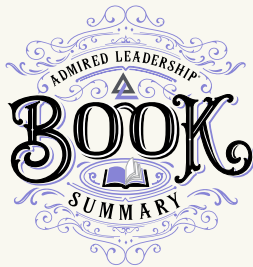
**Through mindfulness (pp. 222-232):**

- We are allowed to be distant from, yet intimate with, a situation through “bare attention” in which we merely observe “without commenting, judging, categorizing, or ruminating about it.”
- The pace of thoughts and emotions abates and, importantly, allows us to be better focused on the object of our observation.
- Negative feelings are like clouds: transparent and insubstantial once you enter them.
- The structure of our brains is literally rewired toward happiness.
- Self-awareness increases to the point of allowing us to notice and control blind spots.
- Aging of the brain slows, inflammation reduces, and health improves.

Some of the world’s most respected leaders display strength alongside compassion – indeed, research confirms that kind and compassionate leaders (i.e. givers) “are more likely to rise to the top” (p. 232).

**EXERCISE:** Sit in a comfortable, relaxed position. Observe your breath, then your mind, then your heart. Notice subtle sounds and textures around you, and feel your presence radiate outward. Finally, affirm your presence.

Raghunathan, R. (2016). **If You’re So Smart, Why Aren’t You Happy?** New York: Portfolio Penguin.



*We are addicted to the idea of rationality and drawn-out deliberation, tending to “ignore or underestimate the importance of gut instincts and feelings.” Sometimes it is better for decisions to be based on feelings and gut instincts because of their intelligence, and snap judgments can be very accurate.*

**The Latest and Greatest Books for Leaders**

We work hard to stay abreast of the current writings on leadership, especially those books our clients are reading or have been recommended to read. As a benefit to our clients and to facilitate our own learning, the Admired Leadership® team has long maintained a tradition of summarizing the newest books of interest to leaders. Better to read a summary for eight minutes before investing 8 hours in the entire book. After reading a good summary, we believe leaders are able to make better choices as to what to ignore, what to peruse and what to make the time to read closely.