

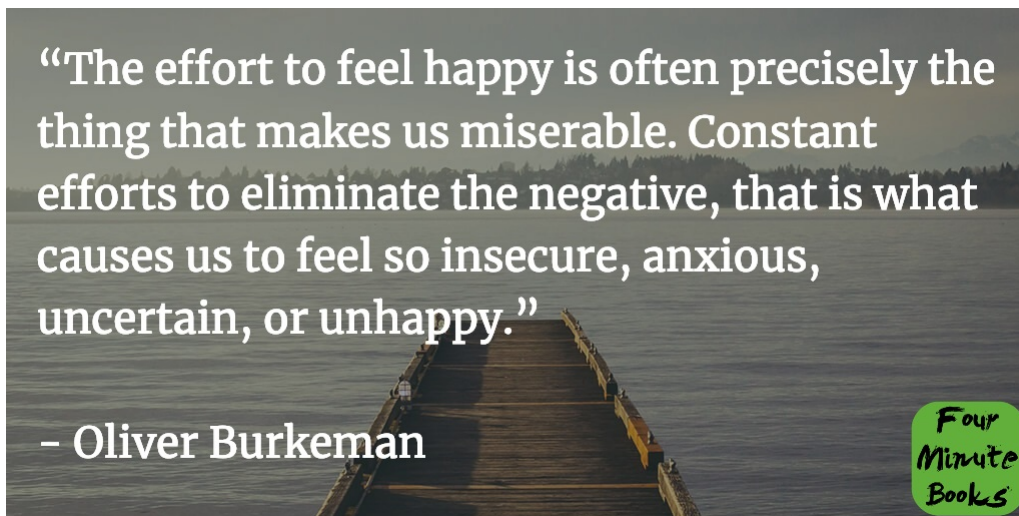
The Antidote Summary - Four Minute Books

 fourminutebooks.com/the-antidote-summary/

1-Sentence-Summary: *The Antidote* will explain everything that's wrong with positivity-based self-help advice and what you should do instead to feel, live, and be happier.

Read in: 4 minutes

Favorite quote from the author:



On a scale of 1 to 10, how happy do you feel right now? Maybe, it's a 7: good, but could be better. Now imagine it's time to pick up your lunch, but it's raining and the sandwich order is wrong. Uh-oh, suddenly, your happiness has declined to a 5.

Quick, better fix it! The sun comes out, back up to 7 — thank goodness. But then you're hit with a surprise layoff. Now you've got no money *and* no happiness. Wow. What a disaster.

Everyone wants to be "happy." Yet, despite our obvious cultural obsession with the pursuit of happiness, precious few among us seem to be able to achieve happiness in any lasting way. More conversations and books about happiness might even be *inversely* correlated with observed happiness.

Is it just impossible to become happier? Or are people choosing the wrong routes to happiness?

In *The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking*, Oliver Burkeman unravels the mystery of this apparent paradox. As a journalist who's spent years writing about happiness and self-help, Burkeman draws on an eclectic body of evidence from history, business, philosophy,

psychology, and expert interviews to make his case against positivity. Even if you actually *like* positive thinking, this book will convince you that it's not nearly as effective as promised.

Here are 3 lessons I've learned from this book:

1. Thinking explicitly about happiness and pursuing it directly are actually counterproductive.
2. Imagining the worst-case scenario makes you resilient, not depressed.
3. Setting goals is just as likely to lead us into misery as it is to bring happiness.

Instead of giving up on happiness as a goal, let's try some unconventional methods that are backed by serious the evidence!

Lesson 1: Focusing on happiness and chasing it won't get you the result you want.

Common sense suggests the best way to get something is to try really hard at it. The psychology of happiness, however, turns this seemingly obvious truth on its head.

The mind is a very noisy place, with all manner of thoughts and judgments coming and going at any given time. **When you dedicate a lot of mental effort to scanning your mental landscape for negative thoughts in order to root them out, paradoxically, the opposite happens.** Instead of losing them, you'll enlarge those very negative thoughts!

Plenty of empirical evidence supports this idea, such as the "don't think of a pink elephant" effect. For instance, research participants who are given instructions to try not to feel sad about some fictional, unhappy event end up feeling *worse* than a control group who's given no instructions at all. Grief seems to last longer in those who actively avoid going through it.

And people who repeat positive affirmations – you know, those peppy little mantras – take a happiness hit when they inevitably notice that they've failed to live up to them.

Lesson 2: Thinking about the worst-case scenario actually makes you tougher, not depressed.

How would you feel if you were asked to do something weird, like getting up on a crowded train and announcing the name of next stop? Certainly, people would glare, toss their newspapers at you, or even yell at you to shut up. You'd feel hesitant, even terrified, to go through with it.

But, as Burkeman and others who've attempted "self-humiliation" exercises tend to learn, nothing particularly bad happens at all. The imagined worst-case scenario wasn't accurate, they didn't feel terribly humiliated, and the feeling of self-consciousness was bearable.

Our modern-day cult of positivity often urges individuals to engage in "positive visualization," imagining things going right. This is supposed to make us feel happy, motivated, and brave. Unfortunately, positive visualization fails to deliver. Experiments suggest that simply imagining an achievement is *too* psychologically satisfying — it causes people to relax *prior* to meeting their goal in reality.

Imagining the worst-case scenario instead counterbalances our tendency towards "hedonic adaptation." It can help keep us from growing greedy and complacent. Plus, every time you look on the bright side and predict a good outcome, you subtly reinforce to yourself that life would truly be terrible if things didn't go that way.

But, as the self-humiliators learned, we are often wrong about how bad things will really get, and even more so about how it would feel *if* they did. Also, with a little perspective, it's usually easy to see things could always *actually* be worse.

Lesson 3: Choosing and chasing goals might make us happy, but it might just as well make us miserable.

Why do skilled, experienced mountain climbers keep dying on Everest? Why do skilled, experienced executives keep setting audacious goals for their companies, only to drive those companies into the ground?

Once again, Burkeman argues that thinking positively, that is, imagining what kind of goal-driven success you want to have, does more harm than good. **Goals are just a particular kind of attempt to control the future.** And, as humans keep forgetting, our ability to control the future is extremely limited.

When you set a goal, you absorb it into your identity. This raises the stakes too much. The identity-based goal then causes people to take crazy risks and to pursue things even after they've become undesirable or outright impossible. Goal-chasers double down in the face of uncertainty, even when they should be changing course.

Most of us aren't trying to climb Mount Everest, of course. Maybe, you have some less dramatic personal and professional development targets in mind. But in any case, you'll be happier and healthier if you approach those goals with "improvisational flexibility," rather than desperate determination. Often, determination doesn't make you more successful, just a little more stupid.

The Antidote Review

The Antidote succeeds in throwing cold water on the pervasive idea that deliberate positive thinking will generally result in increased happiness. At the very least, positive thinking clearly doesn't work the way its admirers promise — it's not you, it's them! As it turns out, various forms of negative thinking provide a surprisingly more robust psychological foundation for withstanding the ups and downs of life. And that's a lesson worth remembering.

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Who would I recommend The Antidote summary to?

The 60-year old grouch, who's never been willing or able to think positively but has a great life anyways, the 35-year old woman, who's attracted to positivity-based life coaches and internet memes, so she can learn what she's getting herself into, and parents of all ages who want to model true resilience for their kids instead of pushing them into mindless optimism.