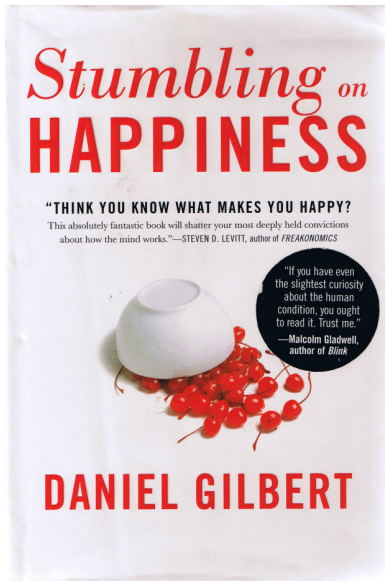


Stumbling on Happiness

by Daniel Gilbert (Knopf, 2006)

Summarized by Erik Johnson



This psychology book is funny because Gilbert is brilliant and witty. But despite his gift for making complex notions simple, many find this book hard going. It contains a lot of relationship tips but they're hidden amidst tales of clinical tests, complex explanations of how the mind works, and lines of argument that require concerted focus. This book summary is my attempt to make those relationship tips more accessible for everyone.

~~Erik Johnson

Foreword

Let's face it. We're not very good at predicting what will make us happy. We make choices we later regret, make plans we eventually find unsatisfying, and make decisions that leave us scratching our heads, "Why in the world did I do *that*?" Is this because our future selves are hard to please, or because our present selves are bad at predicting the tastes, preferences, and desires of our future selves? Just as eyesight can be fooled by optical illusions, foresight makes errors of judgment as well.

This isn't a book about how to become happy. This is a science book that explains why we're so bad at predicting what will make us happy.

PART I

PROSPECTION: "*The act of looking forward in time or considering the future.*"

Chapter One: Journey to Elsewhen

"*The human being is the only animal that thinks about the future.*" Squirrels don't store nuts for the winter because they contemplate the future; they act on impulse. Animals don't weep at the thought of growing old, smile as they contemplate a summer vacation, or turn down sweets because of the future consequences (unsightly weight gain).

The greatest achievement of the human brain is imagination: imagining things that don't yet exist. Imagining the world as it might be. We are anticipation machines. We plan the future and engage in nexting. This involves two things: immediate unconscious predictions ("*there's a snake so I better run*"), and conscious long range planning ("*considering the self's extended existence throughout time*").

The frontal lobe allows us to consciously think about the future before it happens: this is pleasurable ("*forestalling pleasure is an inventive technique for getting double the juice from half the fruit*"), protective (anticipating unpleasant events can minimize their impact), motivational (by imagining unpleasant tomorrows we avoid risky behaviors), and empowering (we want to control the experiences we are going to have simply because exercising influence is one of our fundamental needs).

The problem is we're terrible about predicting what will make us happy. Some futures are better than others but we can't tell which are which.

PART II

SUBJECTIVITY: “*The fact that experience is unobservable to everyone but the person having it.*”

Chapter Two: The View from In Here

Defining happiness is notoriously difficult. A set of Siamese twins joined at the forehead claim to be happy, joyful, playful and optimistic. Either they’re deluded or our definition of happiness is wrong. Gilbert suggests our definition is wrong. Happiness is a complicated word which usually involves three things.

1. Emotional happiness is a hard to describe feeling, a subjective experience, and a state of being. We are wired to pursue pleasure and avoid pain and suffering. “*I am happy when I feel kitten fur.*”
2. Moral happiness is that state we feel when we do our duty, live with virtue, and/or live up to our potential. Living this way is the cause of item 1, Emotional happiness. “*I am happy to help a little old lady across the street.*”
3. Judgment happiness is when we express our belief about the merit of a thing, “*I’m happy that crook got caught.*” One can say this without feeling emotional or moral happiness.

Because happiness is subjective we can’t be 100% certain that our experience of happiness is exactly like others’ experience of happiness. We can’t know for sure if one person’s claim to be happy is similar to our experience of being happy. We therefore can’t say Siamese twins (or paraplegics, or prisoners, or the terminally ill) are not happy when they say they are.

When two people compare their experiences of happiness and disagree about whose experience was truly happy, the difference can be explained in one of two ways. Either one person describes their happiness using a different *vocabulary*, or one person describes their happiness using different *experiences*.

A sip of water makes one person feel mildly satisfied (the *vocabulary* measurement). But if that person were dying of thirst, water would make them ecstatic (the *experience* measurement). Twins may use the word happy in ways we do not, but they have a unique life experience we’ve not had. These variables (*vocabulary* and *experience*) mean there is no foolproof way for accurately comparing the happiness of two people.

To make matters worse, we can’t be certain our past experience of happiness is 100% similar to our memory of that experience. We can be wrong in the present when we say we were happy or unhappy in the past. Memories of experiences are notoriously unreliable. Our past experience of happiness is sometimes as hard to measure as others’ experience of happiness.

Chapter Three: Outside Looking In

Experience means participating in an event. It comes from the word try. Awareness means observing an event. It comes from the word see. We can experience something without being aware of experiencing it (day dreaming while driving, doing daily mindless routines, etc). In the same way, we can experience feelings and not be aware that we’re experiencing them (*alexithymia*, the condition of having feelings without knowing it).

To nail down what happiness is, scientists measure the subjective experiences of many individuals, often, and under many different circumstances. After doing research on a large number of happy individuals scientists have come up with a roughly accurate index of what happiness is and how to achieve it. It’s not perfect, but it’s helpful in our journey of stumbling toward happiness.

PART III

REALISM: *“The belief that things are in reality as they appear to be in the mind.”*

Chapter Four: In the Blind Spot on the Mind’s Eye

A prisoner condemned to hang declares, *“This is the happiest day of my life.”* A wealthy industrialist commits suicide, clearly an unhappy action. We err if we assume these two men were not telling the truth about their feelings. We simply cannot know what it was like to be either of these two men.

We are equally inept at predicting our own happy futures. We can imagine what how a certain future might feel but we can’t know for sure. The same short comings we have about remembering the past apply to predicting the future as well.

We not only store millions of bits of data about an event in our brains; we store brief snippets of emotion about that event and recall those shorthand snippets (not the one million bits of data). Recalling those fragments feels like we’re recalling the whole event. Our brains re-weave (not retrieve) events for easy access. It fills in the gaps. The problem is, our brains sometime fill in the gaps with things that didn’t really happen.

Our eyes have blind spots and our brains fill in the gaps of those blind spots with info that’s not really there. Our brains invent things! The 1690 philosophy of realism (we see what’s out there) was replaced by the 1781 philosophy of idealism (our psychology combines with what we see to create a perception of what’s out there). This explains why two people can see the same thing and come to two different conclusions. The brain does this so fast that we’re rarely aware that it occurs.

When we imagine the future we automatically fill in details which we believe to be accurate. When we question the sanity of the condemned criminal and the suicidal magnate we do so because we fill in the blind spots with our own data. If we had the same background as each man (condemned criminal, wealthy magnate) it’s likely we too would face death with joy or be tempted to end it all.

Interestingly, the biggest error is not what we put into those blank spots but what we leave out.

Chapter Five: The Hound of Silence

When we imagine the future we fail to consider absences. That is, we visualize the future as though it contains only factors present today. We fail to imagine the factors that do not yet exist.

When we make a selection among options we consider positive attributes. When we deselect (cancel, return) an option we consider the item’s negative attributes.

Just as we do not remember every detail of past or current events, we fail to imagine every detail of future events. We tend to treat imagined future details as though they are going to happen AND we tend to treat the details that we leave out as though they will not happen. We fail to consider how much imagination fills and we also fail to consider how much it leaves out.

PART IV

PRESENTISM: *“The tendency for current experience to influence one’s views of the past and the future.”*

Chapter Six: The Future is Now

The long list of erroneous predictions scientists made about the future is entertaining (*man will never fly, people won't need computers*). People err when imagining the future because they fall prey to the tendency to fill in the holes in the future with data from the present. Just as the present colors how we view the past, it's difficult to imagine future feelings being different from how we feel today. When we're stuffed at Thanksgiving it's hard to imagine ever being hungry again. When we grocery shop while hungry it's hard to imagine not needing all the groceries in our cart. We're bad predictors of the future when we forget that our future selves will see the world differently than we see it today.

Our brains imagine the future by drawing from our memories. We simulate the future and note our emotional reaction to those simulations. We are able to PRE-FEEL events. However, imagining the future is difficult if we're preoccupied with the present. Thus, it's wise to plan your future when the weather is nice, when you're not stuffed or famished, and when things are relatively stable! Without realizing it gloomy skies, hunger pangs, and stress lead to gloomy imaginary futures. People who are unhappy today find it difficult to believe they will feel happy tomorrow. We cannot feel good about an imaginary future when we are busy feeling bad in the actual present.

Chapter Seven: Time Bombs

Variety is the spice of life, usually. New experiences are delightful, but not always. The same event occurring over and over leads to habituation and therefore our favorite foods, movies, and activities become less pleasurable through repetition. To feel happy we like a variety of new experiences to occur.

But when experiences are separated by weeks and months we don't need variety to spice up the experience. The mere passage of time increases their pleasure. Champaign and kissing at midnight would get boring if you did it every night. But Champaign and kisses on New Year's Eve makes them novel and enjoyable.

Lesson: If life gets boring make it spicy by either adding new and novel activities to your day OR put time between your routine activities. Fasting increases enjoyment of food, practicing sexual abstinence increases delight with your partner, and putting time between your vacations adds to their novelty.

PART V

RATIONALIZATION: "*The act of causing something to be or to seem reasonable.*"

Chapter Eight: Paradise Glossed

Most folks do pretty darn good when things go pretty darn bad. How? We learn to attach meaning to unalterable circumstances. One can experience a broken leg with acceptance or resentment. Either way the leg is broken. But we can choose whether we accept or resent this condition. Our brains are at liberty to interpret trials and tribulations any way they want.

Experiences are notoriously ambiguous. We don't know why they happened. If an optical illusion has two possible interpretations, life experiences have hundreds or thousands of possible interpretations. When potential experiences ("*Oh-oh, I might break my leg skiing and that would be a disaster*") become actual experiences ("*Yikes. I broke it; now what do I do?*"), our brains get busy looking for ways to think about the experience that will allow us to appreciate it ("*Looks like I get a much needed vacation from work!*"). Studies suggest that people are quite adept at finding a positive way to view things once those things are unalterable.

We experience the world as a mixture of stark reality AND comforting illusion. If we were to experience the world exactly as it is we'd be too depressed to get out of bed in the morning, but if we were to experience the world exactly as we want it to be we'd be too deluded to get out of bed in the morning (p. 161).

Chapter Nine: Immune to Reality

Our brains are adept at predicting how painful a future negative event will feel. But our brains are not good at predicting how resilient and adaptive we will be when that negative event occurs. Ironically, when something really bad happens it really stings and that jarring event triggers our psychological immune system which helps us rationalize, cope with, and adjust to the event. Smaller irritations “sneak under the radar” and do not trigger our psychological immune system. Thus, we deal better with big trials than littler ones!

We tend to generate a positive view of an action more than inaction.

We're more likely to look for and find a positive view of the things we're stuck with than of the things we're not. When we can't change our experience we look for ways to change our view of the experience. Oddly, when we imagine bad things occurring in the future we forget our adaptability.

Another way to take the sting out of present or imagined future trials is to explain them. “*X happened because of Y.*” Or, “*Z will happen because of W.*” If we have no clue why X or Z happened or will happen we'll be anxious and experience negative anticipation (worry). Thus, a good way to ameliorate the sting of negatives is to explain their causal factors.

Interestingly, explaining the causal factors behind good events reduces the pleasantness of those events. Gifts from a secret pal are often more meaningful, random surprises linger longer in our minds, and serendipities knock our socks off. Unexplained events have two qualities that make them impactful:

- 1) rare events have a greater emotional impact (we're awed by solar eclipse but only impressed by a sunset—despite the fact that sunsets are more visually spectacular).
- 2) Unexplained events are mysterious and stick in our minds longer. Uncertainty can preserve and prolong our happiness.

Conclusion: we often fail to realize our ability to generate a positive view of our current experiences and therefore forget we'll be able to do so in the future. It's difficult to predict accurately our emotional reactions to future events because it's difficult to imagine them as they will happen (we leave out crucial details). Our imaginations are as fallible as memory, eyesight, and hindsight. Foresight is just as foggy.

PART VI

CORRIGIBILITY: “*Capable of being corrected, reformed, or improved.*”

Chapter Ten: Once Bitten

Most of what we know is based on other's direct experience, second hand knowledge. Yet we rarely avail ourselves of the lessons others can teach us about happiness. We like to learn the hard way. We forget how good or bad things were in the past due to selective memory and therefore make bad predictions about

how we'll feel in the future when those same things happen again. This is why some of us keep making the same bad mistakes over and over.

We tend to remember things that are unusual and uncommon (where were you on 9-11?). Unlikely experiences can wreak havoc with our ability to predict future experiences. Things that stick in our memories seem to us to happen more often than they actually do. We remember the best of times and the worst of times instead of the most likely of times.

The ending of an event colors our whole experience of that event. If a marriage ends badly we tend to think the whole marriage was bad. If a good movie had a bad ending we tend to think the whole movie was bad. Hence, anticipating future happiness or sadness based on past experience is unreliable.

When we predict that an event will make us happy and later discover that the event didn't make us happy, months later when we recall whether or not that event made us happy we tend to remember (falsely) that it did make us happy! Thus, the theories that lead us to predict that an event will make us happy also lead us to remember (falsely) that it did make us happy. It is very hard therefore to discover that our predictions were wrong.

Chapter Eleven: Reporting Live from Tomorrow

Given these ten chapters and how unskilled we are at imagining and predicting what will make us happy, how then should we decide what to do? By asking others what makes them happy! The best way to predict our feelings (about an event) tomorrow is to see how others (experiencing the same event) feel today.

- 1) most of what we know is second hand knowledge anyway
- 2) we can ask others what it is/was like for them when they experienced things like marriage, having kids, restaurants, careers, hobbies, where to live
- 3) danger #1: we should not foolishly accept bad advice from others
- 4) danger #2: we should not foolishly reject good advice from others
- 5) we can avoid these dangers by evaluating the "truth" of the advice
- 6) distinguishing true statements (good advice) from bad statements (bad advice) look for:
 - accurate (how close to reality is that belief?)
 - popular (how wide spread is that belief?)
 - current (is your belief about your experience happening now?)

Using others to help us think clearly about the future can help us overcome the mistakes our brains make. Our imaginations fail to provide us with accurate previews of our emotional futures because we fill in and leave out important details about the future (REALISM), we project current feelings into the future that will not necessarily exist (PRESENTISM), and we forget that things will look differently once they happen (RATIONALIZATION). Interviewing others who are currently experiencing the futures we imagine for ourselves can correct each of these errors.

But we will rarely do so! Why? We still think our powers of evaluation are superior to others' (despite our repeated failures). We forget we're like most people and most people are like us! We think we're less biased, more unique, and basically more special than others.

We know ourselves intimately; we can only infer what others are like. It feels good to think of ourselves as special. We like to distinguish ourselves from others. We tend to assume others are more different than they really are, focus on how different others are, and overlook how actually similar people really are!