

## The Antidote - Oliver Burkeman (Quotations)

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These are the quotations from the book which is a criticism about the general self-help literature revolving around optimism and *positive thinking*. The book does not fill its premises strongly, but certainly has much fair criticism of the *positivity religion of the era*.

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[H]e would probably dismiss it as ‘negativity thinking’. To criticise the power of positivity is to demonstrate that you haven’t really grasped it at all. If you had, you would stop grumbling about such things, and indeed about anything else. (page 5)

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The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People essentially tells you to decide what matters most to you in life, and then do it; How to Win Friends and Influence People advises its readers to be pleasant rather than obnoxious, and to use people’s first names a lot. (page 8)

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There are good reasons to believe that the whole notion of ‘seeking happiness’ is flawed to begin with. (page 9)

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[T]he effort to try to feel happy is often precisely the thing that makes us miserable. (page 10)

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[L]earning to enjoy uncertainty, embracing insecurity, stopping trying to think positively, becoming familiar with failure, even learning to value death. (page 10)

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[W]hy a new generation of business thinkers are advising companies to drop their obsession with goalsetting and embrace uncertainty instead; (page 11)

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[T]he notion that in all sorts of contexts, from our personal lives to politics, all this trying to make everything right is a big part of what’s wrong. (page 11)

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I met modern-day Stoics, specialists in the art of failure, professional pessimists, and other advocates of the power of negative thinking, many of whom proved surprisingly jolly. (page 13)

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Our efforts at mental suppression fail in the sexual arena, too: people instructed not to think about sex exhibit greater arousal, as measured by the electrical conductivity of their skin, than those not instructed to suppress such thoughts. (page 17)

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A person who has resolved to ‘think positive’ must constantly scan his or her mind for negative thoughts – there’s no other way that the mind could ever gauge its success at the operation – yet that scanning will draw attention to the presence of negative thoughts. (page 17)

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[Y]ou may well fail, as a result of the very act of monitoring your success. (page 18)

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Wood’s hunch was that people who seek out affirmations would be, by definition, those with low self-esteem – but that, for that very same reason, they would end up reacting against the messages in the affirmations, because they conflicted with their self-images. (page 18)

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When things are going badly, after all, you need optimism all the more. (page 20)

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Smile or Die: How Positive Thinking Fooled America and the World.  
<[www.youtube.com/watch?v=u5um8QWWRvo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u5um8QWWRvo)>\_\_ (page 20)

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New Thought arose in rebellion against the dominant, gloomy message of American Calvinism, (page 21)

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New Thought imposed its own kind of harsh judgmentalism, replacing Calvinism’s obligatory hard work with obligatory positive thinking. (page 21)

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The first step is to learn how to stop chasing positivity so intently. (page 22)

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Walking into a job interview, you're surely better off to err on the side of assuming you can triumph. Preparing to ask someone on a date, it's surely advisable to operate on the basis that she or he might actually say yes. Indeed, a tendency to look on the bright side may be so intertwined with human survival that evolution has skewed us that way. (page 26)

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Healthy and happy people, research suggests, generally have a less accurate, overly optimistic grasp of their true ability to influence events than do those who are suffering from depression. (page 26)

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Far from becoming more motivated to hydrate themselves, their bodies relaxed, as if their thirst were already quenched. (page 27)

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Where was the merit in trying to convince yourself that things would turn out for the best, when there was so much evidence that they might not? (page 29)

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Ceaseless optimism about the future only makes for a greater shock when things go wrong; by fighting to maintain only positive beliefs about the future, the positive thinker ends up being less prepared, and more acutely distressed, when things eventually happen that he can't persuade himself to believe are good. (page 31)

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William Irvine argues is 'the single most valuable technique in the Stoics' toolkit'. He calls it 'negative visualisation'. (page 32)

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Psychologists have long agreed that one of the greatest enemies of human happiness is 'hedonic adaptation' (page 32)

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Thinking about the possibility of losing something you value shifts it from the backdrop of your life back to centre stage, (page 32)

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if you kiss your child, your brother, your friend remind yourself that you love a mortal, something not your own; it has been given to you for the present, not inseparably nor forever, but like a fig, or a bunch of grapes, at a fixed season of the year.' (page 32)

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If what you fear the most is losing your material wealth, he advises, don't try to persuade yourself that it could never happen. (page 34)

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'People throughout history have made this big mistake about happiness, and here we are, the Stoics, standing out on the fringe – beyond the fringe, really! – and shouting from over the horizon: "You've got it all wrong! You've got it all wrong!"' (page 36)

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They too held that the universe was God – that there was a grand plan, and that everything was happening for a reason. (page 37)

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[I]n everyday life: that whether or not there is some agency bigger than ourselves, controlling the way things unfold, each one of us clearly has very little individual control over the universe. (page 38)

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The only things we can truly control, the Stoics argue, are our judgments – what we believe – about our circumstances. (page 39)

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Maybe it's an opportunity to engage in the 'premeditation of evils': what's the absolute worst that could happen as a result of this? (page 40)

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Rather, he had been operating under the absolutist conviction that he needed their approval. (page 44)

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We elevate those things we want, those things we would prefer to have, into things we believe we must have; we feel we must perform well in certain circumstances, or that other people must treat us well. (page 44)

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[N]othing could be 100 per cent bad, he argued, because it could always conceivably be worse. (page 45)

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If you are tortured to death slowly, you could always be tortured to death slower.' (page 46)

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It turns infinite fears into finite ones. One of his clients, he recalled, found herself unable to pursue a romantic life because of an extreme fear that she might contract Aids from kissing, or even from shaking hands. (page 46)

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Back in the 1950s, that had certainly been what had appealed to Jack Kerouac, who embraced it with an enthusiasm he otherwise reserved for whisky and magic mushrooms. (page 49)

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The stock photograph most commonly used to illustrate such articles is of a woman in a leotard, on a beach; her legs are crossed and her eyes closed, and an insipid smile is playing on her lips. (page 49)

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To live non-attachedly is to feel impulses, think thoughts, and experience life without becoming hooked by mental narratives about how things ‘should’ be, or should never be, or should remain forever. (page 51)

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Ending the Pursuit of Happiness, and its author, a man named Barry Magid, argued that the idea of using meditation to make your life ‘better’ or ‘happier’, in any conventional sense, was a misunderstanding. (page 51)

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Magid objected to the notion that meditation had a point. If it did, he seemed to imply, that would make it just another happiness technique, a way of satisfying our desire to cling to certain states and eliminate others. (page 51)

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[W]hen I asked him a rambling question about Buddhism and non-attachment, he looked at me with mild amusement. Then he started talking about something else entirely. (page 52)

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‘The quintessential point,’ he told me, ‘is that if you flee it, it’ll come back to bite you. The very thing from which you’re in flight – well, it’s the fleeing that brings on the problem. For Freud, our whole psychology is organised around this avoidance. The unconscious is the repository of everything that we’re avoiding.’ (page 53)

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It wasn’t about escaping into ecstasy – or even into calmness, as the word is normally understood; and it certainly wasn’t about positive thinking. It was about the significantly greater challenge of declining to do any of that. (page 54)

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‘We do not try to forcefully detach ourselves from the feelings, thoughts and expectations that arise in our mind. We don’t try to force anything into or out of the mind. Rather, we let things rise and fall, come and go, and simply be ... there will be times in meditation when we’re relaxed, and times when our minds are agitated. We do not seek to attain a relaxed state, or to drive out our agitated and distracted mind. (page 58)

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Buddhism, though we think of it today as a religion, was originally just as much an approach to the study of psychology. (page 59)

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The Buddhist monk spending decades in meditation might be at one with the universe, but it’s not clear that the rest of us should want to emulate him. (page 62)

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To understand why, consider the most ubiquitous and frustrating barrier to getting things done: the near-universal curse of procrastination. (page 63)

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You are probably already much too familiar with the truth that most anti-procrastination advice just doesn’t work, or at least not for very long. (page 63)

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The problem is that feeling like acting and actually acting are two different things. (page 63)

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A person mired deep in procrastination might claim he is unable to work, but what he really means is that he is unable to make himself feel like working. (page 64)

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The problem, from this perspective, isn’t that you don’t feel motivated; it’s that you imagine you need to feel motivated. (page 64)

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If you can regard your thoughts and emotions about whatever you’re procrastinating on as passing weather, you’ll realise that your reluctance about working isn’t something that needs to be eradicated, or transformed into positivity. (page 64)

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‘Inspiration is for amateurs,’ the artist Chuck Close once memorably observed. ‘The rest of us just show up and get to work.’ (page 65)

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In some monasteries in the Zen tradition, a monk is charged with creeping up behind his fellow monks, and hitting them with a thin wooden stick, or keisaku, in order to snap them into exactly this kind of utter presence. (page 67)

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[W]as suddenly apparent to me that I spent my regular life in a state of desperate clinging to thinking, to trying to avoid falling into the void that lay behind thoughts. (page 68)

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A business goal would be set, announced, and generally greeted with enthusiasm. But then evidence would begin to emerge that it had been an unwise one – and goalodicy would kick in as a response. (page 73)

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‘The more uncertain climbers felt about their possible success in reaching the summit,’ as Kayes puts it, ‘the more likely they were to invest in their particular strategy.’ (page 75)

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It isn’t surprising, then, that it achieved the status of legend in the world of self-help, and in many corners of corporate life. The only problem is that it is indeed a legend: the Yale Study of Goals never took place. (page 77)

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Faced with the anxiety of not knowing what the future holds, we invest ever more fiercely in our preferred vision of that future – not because it will help us achieve it, but because it helps rid us of feelings of uncertainty in the present. (page 79)

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We fear the feeling of uncertainty to an extraordinary degree – the psychologist Dorothy Rowe argues that we fear it more than death itself – and we will go to extraordinary lengths, even fatal ones, to get rid of it. (page 79)

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[I]s alarming to consider how many major life decisions we take primarily in order to minimise present-moment emotional discomfort. (page 79)

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[T]his points to the troubling possibility that your primary motivation in taking the decision wasn't any rational consideration of its rightness for you, but simply the urgent need to get rid of your feelings of uncertainty. (page 80)

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Skinner observed, a pigeon would indulge in a 'post-pellet pause', relaxing after having attained a predetermined goal. (page 81)

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The drivers, it would appear, preferred the regularity and reliability of a predictable daily income to the uncertainty of remaining open to the possibility of earning more. (page 81)

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[C]learly defined goals seemed to motivate people to cheat. (page 82)

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Formulating a vision of the future requires, by definition, that you isolate some aspect or aspects of your life, or your organisation, or your society, and focus on those at the expense of others. (page 85)

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'I think of it like jazz, like improvisation. It's all about meandering with purpose.' (page 88)

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Almost none of them suggested creating a detailed business plan, or doing comprehensive market research to hone the details of the product they were aiming to release. (page 89)

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'Somebody once told me the only thing you need is a customer. Instead of asking all the questions, I'd try to make some sales.' (page 89)

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I think business plans are interesting, but they have no real meaning, because you can't put in all the positive things that will occur.' (page 89)

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One foundation of effectuation is the 'bird in hand' principle: 'Start with your means. Don't wait for the perfect opportunity. Start taking action, based on what you have readily available: what you are, what you know and who you know.' A second is the 'principle of affordable loss': don't be guided by thoughts of how wonderful the rewards might be if you were spectacularly successful at any given next step. Instead – and there are distinct echoes, here, of the Stoic



focus on the worst-case scenario – ask how big the loss would be if you failed. (page 90)

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‘The quest for certainty blocks the search for meaning,’ argued the social psychologist Erich Fromm. ‘Uncertainty is the very condition to impel man to unfold his powers.’ (page 90)

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Why are you unhappy? Because 99.9 per cent of everything you think, and of everything you do, is for yourself – and there isn’t one. – Wei Wu Wei, *Ask the Awakened* (page 91)

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Just because thinking is going on, that didn’t mean Descartes was justified in concluding that thinking is being done by one particular, unitary, thinking agent – by an ‘I’. (page 97)

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Never mind systematic doubt, Hume suggested: instead, simply try turning your attention inwards, and trying to find this thing you call your self. (page 97)

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‘Time isn’t precious at all,’ he writes, in *The Power of Now*, ‘because it is an illusion.’ (page 98)

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It was the first time he realised how closely identified he was with his thinking. (page 100)

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I realised that I hadn’t just thought those words, but mumbled them aloud. ‘Oh, my God, I’m already like her,’ I thought. (page 100)

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The way out of this trap is not to stop thinking – thinking, Tolle agrees, is exceedingly useful – but to disidentify from thoughts: to stop taking your thoughts to be you, to realise, in the words of *The Power of Now*, that ‘you are not your mind’. (page 102)

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What had happened, if his account is to be believed, was that he no longer mistakenly believed he was his thinking; he saw himself, instead, as the witness to it. (page 103)

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He seems to assume that when you stop identifying with your ego, you discover who you really are – that you discover your ‘deeper self’ or your ‘true Being’, which was hiding behind the fake self all along. (page 104)

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Better to drop the generalisations. Rate your individual acts as good or bad, if you like. (page 106)

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I exist because of you. (page 107)

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What exactly is your rationale for drawing a boundary between some of these molecules and others, so as to define some of them as ‘you’, and some of them as the world outside you? (page 107)

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Security is a kind of death, I think. – Tennessee Williams, ‘The Catastrophe of Success’ (page 112)

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(The terminology creates additional confusion, since you could argue that anyone who is able calmly to tolerate feelings of insecurity and vulnerability must already be, by definition, rather secure to begin with.) (page 119)

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One day, you fill up your church with kids – somebody who’s dirty, somebody who’s not eating – and then the organisation comes and sees the church is full, and they take photos to show their sponsors, and they give you money.’ He chuckled. ‘It’s all about the photos, you know?’ (page 123)

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[A]t the end of the day, it’s not about your conditions. It’s about taking whatever you have, and using it as best you can, together with your neighbours. In Kibera, it’s only with your neighbours that you’re going to get by.’ (page 125)

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International surveys of happiness – including several reputable research projects such as the World Values Survey – have consistently found some of the world’s poorest countries to be among the happiest. (page 126)

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‘Most products fail.’ According to some estimates, the failure rate is as high as 90 per cent. (page 137)

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Failure is everywhere. It's just that most of the time we would rather avoid confronting that fact. (page 139)

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[T]ruly embracing failure entails a shift in perspective far greater than what most such figures mean when they pay lip-service to the notion. (page 140)

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A fascinating series of studies of working scientists, conducted by the Irish-born researcher Kevin Dunbar, presents a very different picture – and confirms just how deeply and universally human the tendency to avoid confronting failure really is. Scientists, it transpires, may be just as bad as everyone else. (page 141)

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[T]hey chose to neglect their inexplicable results, focusing on their successes and avoiding dwelling upon their failures. (page 142)

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By the time reality sets in, McMath notes in *What Were They Thinking?*, it is quite possible that ‘the executives will have been promoted to another brand, or recruited by another company’. (page 143)

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[S]uccessful entrepreneurs possess perseverance and leadership skills, of course. What is less obvious – and much less boring – is what the speaker neglected to mention: that those traits are likely to be the characteristics of extremely unsuccessful people, (page 144)

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[W]illingness to fail is itself one of the personality traits we may come to over-value as a result of survivor bias. (page 147)

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[V]irtually any advice about how to succeed, in life or work, is at constant risk of being undermined by survivor bias. (page 148)

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To citizens of the success-oriented United States, the fondness for failure can seem like a more generally European eccentricity, frequently attributed to the end of empire. (page 152)

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Failure is a relief. At last you can say what you think. Still, it can be exceptionally (page 153)

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‘Downfall’, writes the American Zen Buddhist Natalie Goldberg, ‘brings us to the ground, facing the nitty-gritty, things as they are with no glitter. Success cannot last forever. Everyone’s time runs out.’ (page 154)

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Should you wish to encourage an incremental outlook rather than a fixed one in your children, Dweck advises, take care to praise them for their effort rather than for their intelligence. (page 155)

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The classic example of a person with a ‘fixed theory’ is the young sports star who is encouraged to think of himself as a ‘natural’ – but who then fails to put in sufficient practice to realise his potential. If talent is innate, his unspoken reasoning goes, then why bother? (page 155)

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The incremental mindset is the one most likely to lead to success – but a more profound point is that possessing an incremental outlook is a happier way to be, even if it never results in any particularly outstanding success. (page 155)

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I was set free, because my greatest fear had been realised, and I was still alive. [Failure] gave me an inner security that I had never attained by passing examinations (page 158)

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‘The most wondrous thing in the world is that although, every day, innumerable creatures go to the abode of Death, still man thinks that he is immortal.’ (page 158)

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‘At bottom,’ wrote Freud – sweepingly, as usual, but in this case persuasively – ‘no one believes in his own death.’ (page 159)

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War represents the ultimate clashing of rival immortality projects: if my sense of immortality relies on my nation’s triumph, and yours upon yours, we’ll fight longer and harder than if we were seeking only territory or power. (page 161)

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[Human conflicts] are life-and-death struggles – my gods against your gods, my immortality project against your immortality project.’ (page 161)

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Their responses to questions lend weight to the hypothesis that they are grasping hold of their immortality projects much more firmly than usual, in reaction against being reminded that they will die. (page 163)

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‘Disgust’, one such paper states, enables ‘humans to elevate themselves above other animals and thereby defend against death’. (page 164)

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[S]ince the time of the ancient Greeks, certain radical thinkers have taken the position that a life suffused with an awareness of one’s own mortality – as a matter of everyday habit, not just when direct encounters with death force our hand – might be a far richer kind of existence. (page 165)

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In fact, the ‘cult of optimism’, with its focus on positivity at all costs, can itself be seen as a kind of ‘immortality project’ – one that promises a future vision of happiness and success so powerful and all-encompassing that it might somehow transcend death. (page 165)

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She was part of a contemporary movement among philosophers who felt that they were returning the discipline to its Socratic roots, as a therapeutic practice intended to soothe the soul, not just an academic exercise in theory-spinning. (page 166)

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Before him, the philosophical consensus on death, broadly speaking, was that it wasn’t really final: the best argument for not being scared of it was that a glorious afterlife might follow. (page 167)

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Yalom is talking about a transformation that redefines what constitutes the ‘important stuff’. When you really face mortality, the ultimate and unavoidable worst-case scenario, everything changes. ‘All external expectations, all fear of embarrassment or failure - these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important,’ Apple’s founder Steve Jobs once said, in a speech that was speedily co-opted by several gurus of positive thinking, though in truth its message struck fatally at the heart of theirs. (page 171)

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Sometimes, the most valuable of all talents is to be able not to seek resolution; to notice the craving for completeness or certainty or comfort, and not to feel compelled to follow where it leads. (page 181)

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The point here is not that negative capability is always superior to the positive kind. Optimism is wonderful; goals can sometimes be useful; even positive thinking and positive visualisation have their benefits. The problem is that we have developed the habit of chronically overvaluing positivity, and of the skills of ‘doing’, in how we think about happiness, and that we chronically undervalue negativity, and the ‘not-doing’ skills, such as resting in uncertainty or getting friendly towards failure. (page 182)

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‘Proficiency and the results of proficiency’, wrote Aldous Huxley, ‘come only to those who have learned the paradoxical art of doing and not doing, of combining relaxation with activity, of letting go as a person in order that the immanent and transcendent Unknown Quantity may take hold.’ (page 184)

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When you really try to answer, rationally and in detail, the question ‘What’s the worst that could happen?’, the answer is sometimes pretty bad. But it is finitely bad, rather than infinitely terrifying, so there is always a chance of coping with it. (page 185)