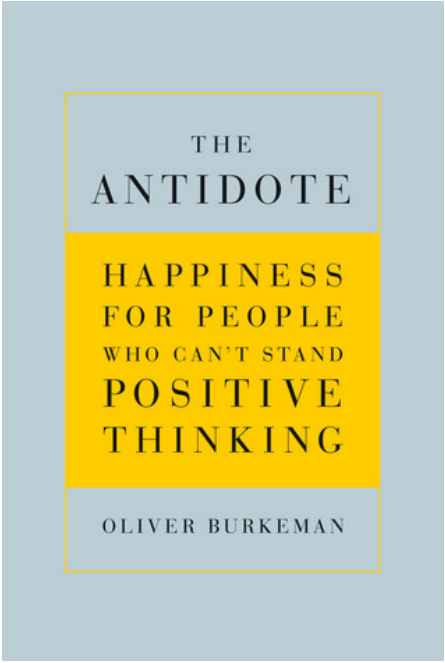

The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking

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Self-help books don't seem to work. Few of the many advantages of modern life seem capable of lifting our collective mood. Wealth—even if you can get it—doesn't necessarily lead to happiness. Romance, family life, and work often bring as much stress as joy. We can't even agree on what "happiness" means. So are we engaged in a futile pursuit? Or are we just going about it the wrong way?

Looking both east and west, in bulletins from the past and from far afield, Oliver Burkeman introduces us to an unusual group of people who share a single, surprising way of thinking about life. Whether experimental psychologists, terrorism experts, Buddhists, hardheaded business consultants, Greek philosophers, or modern-day gurus, they argue that in our personal lives, and in society at large, it's our constant effort to be happy that is making us miserable. And that there is an alternative path to happiness and success that involves embracing failure, pessimism, insecurity, and uncertainty—the very things we spend our lives trying to avoid. Thought-provoking, counterintuitive, and ultimately uplifting, *The Antidote* is the intelligent person's guide to understanding the much-misunderstood idea of happiness.

The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking Details

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From Reader Review The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking for online ebook

Ms. Smartarse says

Originally published as The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking

I have always had a sort of love-hate relationship with positive thinking.

On the one hand, telling myself that things'll work out somehow, helped silence my panic-stricken rants. Interestingly enough, these rants where mostly fueled by reckless lack of studying for some of the most difficult exams of my life.
On the other hand, everyone's luck runs out EVENTUALLY, and no amount of believing in oneself would magically fill one's mind with heretofore unknown Computer Networking theory.

...additionally, I've always found sarcasm a much cooler approach to life.

No Mr. Wilde, I (still) don't believe that sarcasm is the lowest form of wit.

In theory, a book (sub)titled *Happiness for people who can't stand positive thinking* should've been perfect for me. I had got to the point of having a knee-jerk reaction of scoffing at even the most *minor* whiff of positivism. So it came as a complete shock, when the book's first chapter put me firmly down in the dumps, complete with a heavily secured lid.

All it took, was reading a few small anecdotes about some well-known (to people OTHER than me, of course) motivational speakers, who sooner or later ended up going bankrupt. I was depressed, scared shitless, and also on the brink of starting a new job I wasn't entirely sure I had chosen wisely. So I hid... by which I mean, I spent the following month attempting to glare ~~the book on~~ my nightstand into submission.

This had about the same effect, as John Oliver and Rachel Dratch cursing Lupus into submission, pictured here below for your convenience.

In the end, the looming 1-month deadline I had set myself, was nearly upon me, so I sucked it up and finished the book in under half a day. And strangely enough, I had ~~never~~ rarely felt better.

It had opened my eyes to what it meant to be a stoic - by no means one of those Hindu enlightened person to walk on hot coals. And most definitely not a saint who will suffer abuse till the end of time. Accepting that things are bad, doesn't stop you from removing yourself from being under their influence.

Then there was the absolutely perfect chapter on meditation. I could literally relate to every single piece of frustration, acceptance, and calmness of the author. It was no wonder, seeing as my first (and only) attempt at meditation had gone something like: "*breathe iiiiii- IWantToBuyALamp -in, hold your breath, breathe oooooouu- StopPicturingLampShadesDammit -uut...*".

To be fair, this wasn't one of those books that I could just... *get*. Aside from the fearful first chapter, there was this chapter on getting over oneself. Literally. In a nutshell: I am me, but not really, but me and my environment, but also not really either, but yes, but no, but... yadda yadda yadda.
I (*yes* I, ME along with MYSELF) gave up at that point, and continued reading the rest of the chapter just nodding along mentally: "*Whatever you say, buddy. By the way, how much more till the next chapter?*"

Score: 4/5 stars

By the end of it I actually felt good about stuff: like the book, myself, the world in general, etc. So I didn't know if things would work out. I still wasn't sure about my new job, or even... anything really. However I also wasn't feeling the need to ruminate over the fact that (some) of my randomly set goals were nowhere near complete.

In conclusion: No, I'm not *cured* after reading this book. Nor do I keep remembering it periodically... unless of course I'm reviewing it, and even then I need to look at the table of contents for help. Still, it was one heck of a feel-good book, and I didn't even have to shelve it under *guilty pleasure*.

Marie Murrell says

This might be my favorite self-help book of all time. In a nutshell, rather than trying to force ourselves to be cheerful when we don't feel cheerful by thinking positively, it suggests we think of the worst thing that can happen and realize that whatever that worst thing is, it isn't likely to be the end of the world. On procrastination, it suggests we stop trying to feel motivated and just do what we have to do--moods and actions don't have to be related. On goals, it explores whether goal striving brings happiness or might actually be counter productive. As someone who has spent the last 30 years reading self help books with optimism of making meaningful changes that will transform me into the person I wish to be, this is a welcome change of pace. Over the past few weeks, I've been just accepting whatever mood I'm in and getting on with what I have to do in my day, and I feel happier already. An added bonus is that when I ask myself what the what is the worst thing that will happen if I don't do something like flossing my teeth, I find that while it isn't the end of the world, I really prefer not to have them all rot and fall out, so I am, ironically, finding the motivation after all. There is much, much more, but I find it interesting that the one book that basically tells us to quit trying is impacting me.

Marcus says

The Antidote starts off by talking about the positive thinking movement, moves on to Seneca and the Stoics then dips into Buddhist meditation, pauses to to criticize goal setting then stops in for a visit with Eckhart Tolle. Burkeman then writes about how we overvalue safety and undervalue failure then ends with a chapter on how we approach death, including an interesting visit to Mexico on the Day of the Dead.

Every chapter is well written and provides sufficient insight into each of the various subjects the book touches on. In the end, it's all pulled together nicely and makes a good case for finding peace and happiness by focusing on being okay with life as it is rather than constantly worrying about what it could be or should

be. It's a good introduction to alternatives to positive thinking, but *The Antidote* never goes deep enough into any one subject to make it a memorable book or one that is worth re-reading.

Also...the cover endorsement "elegant and erudite" by Jonah Lehrer is unfortunate.

Antigone says

Looking at life directly is a lot like looking at the sun directly and should come with similar warnings. Damage will be done. Which is not to say that you shouldn't do it, or that anything could prevent some of us from doing it frequently and with great determination. But it would have been nice to have had some sort of cautionary word, some small piece of been-there-done-that warrior's wisdom; something graspable beyond the rather underwhelming bromide: *Ignorance is bliss*. Because by the time I realized ignorance was most assuredly the way to go? It was far, far too late for me. So any whisper of an antidote at this stage of the game is going to find me raising a swift hand to call that bartender forth. Two fingers, sirrah, and make it neat.

Burkeman calls it happiness, but one could just as easily allude to this as a quest for the means of contentment, a sturdy satisfaction, a brief bit of regularly-experienced peace with the world and living in it. His British mind is possessed of the same existential unease that afflicts a good portion of thinking people, and he's willing to sample our culture's many remedies to locate his relief. From motivational seminars to monasteries, experimental psychologists to business consultants, he does the legwork few find the time or inclination to do, and brings to it a wonderfully complex combination of intelligence, wit and curiosity.

A good sense of the tone can be gained from his foray into motivational speaking and the prevalence of forced optimism - this insistence on ridding ourselves of every negative thought. Here, he suggests, is a version of Dostoevsky's infamous parlor game: Do not think of a white bear for the next few minutes. The image of the white bear soon becomes a torment. By demanding we repel every sour idea and insert a sweet one in its place, we are left in a constant state of vigilance and flight; marshaling our energies not toward beneficial outcomes but toward guarding against our natural inclination to adequately assess risk. We stop asking ourselves: What's the worst that could happen? That's a fundamentally sound method of formulating judgment which we end up running away from to our cognitive detriment.

Stoicism and Buddhism get a fair amount of attention (and engagingly so), as do the fears surrounding sickness, ageing and death (which lie at the root of what most of us are trying so futilely to escape). The anecdotes are relevant, the transitions seamless, the concepts evolving slowly enough to provide the anchorage needed during a confrontation with the sort of ideas most people I know try desperately to avoid.

I was pleased to have found this. Thoughts were provoked.

Richard says

The subtitle here is the hook: “Happiness for People Who Can’t Stand Positive Thinking”. Many of the ideas

presented within these pages were already at least vaguely familiar to me, especially those of the Stoics and at least some of the Buddhists. But, really, the word “happiness” is out of place. Even before the Stoics existed, wise Greeks had recognized “call no man happy until he is dead,” and Burkeman’s thrust here is that striving for happiness is almost certainly a bad idea.

A better goal is “acceptance”, and several variations on that are presented. This is a very good (albeit not perfect) book, illustrating several schools of thought that bear on the issue of happiness — or contentment, or acceptance; there are definite nuances.

An amusing and snarky appraisal of the world of self-help books and motivational speakers starts the book, but it starts delivering strongly in chapter two, *What Would Seneca Do?* If you look up “stoicism” in a dictionary, you really aren’t likely to get a good grip on the concept. The first definition Google hands out is “the endurance of pain or hardship without a display of feelings and without complaint”, but there is a fundamental flaw in that, which is that “display” isn’t the point. The second definition refers to the philosophy of Zeno, the Greek founder of the the school, and tells us Stoics will be “indifferent to the vicissitudes of fortune and to pleasure and pain.” That still seems a bit off, but that might have to do with five hundred years of evolution from Zeno to Marcus Aurelius.

Burkeman zeroes in on the same thing that Shakespeare put in the mouth of Hamlet: “for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.” When you are stuck on a plane with a crying baby in the seat behind you, what makes it unbearable isn’t inherent in the baby’s act, but in your reception of it. A Stoic will observe and negate that aspect of that reception, which makes it much easier for that “hardship” to be “endured”. Not easy, no; but there’s a trick that helps. The subtitle of the chapter is *The Stoic Art of Confronting the Worst-Case Scenario*.

Ponder the difference between a terrible situation and a merely undesirable one, and the latter becomes much easier to tolerate. He extensively quotes the renowned psychologist Albert Ellis. “Even if you were murdered, ‘that is very bad, but not one-hundred percent bad,’ because several of your loved ones could meet the same fate, ‘and that would be worse. If you are tortured to death slowly, you could always be tortured to death slower.’” So that crying baby could have been accompanied by an older kid kicking the back of your seat, and parents who are discussing the wit and wisdom of, say, a political pundit whom you despise. And the flight could be from New York to Sydney, instead of merely to Los Angeles.

This trick comes into play later on, as well. The motivational gurus would have us only think positive thoughts, but the lesson here is that we could easily be better off by examining the negative — that worst-case scenario. After all, someone fixated on the best outcome imaginable will be disappointed much more often. It could be asserted that focusing on the positive helps one push harder to attain one’s goals, but the evidence for that is pretty weak. A later chapter (*The Museum of Failure*) reminds us of the effect, here, of the survivor’s bias: people that don’t succeed seldom are eager to talk about it, so we get the distorted of what conditions pertain to success.

I found the next chapter, on the Buddhist take on this problem, to be moderately enlightening. I’ve always been attracted to Buddhism, and in the past year or so I’ve realized why. When I think of Buddhism, I pretty much narrow it down to Stoicism-plus-Meditation. There are quite obviously many ways in which this is gonna be wrong, but I’m comfortable with it. There are aspects that completely repel me (“To the Buddha the entire teaching is just the understanding of *dukkha*, the unsatisfactory nature of all phenomenal existence, and the understanding of the way out of this unsatisfactoriness.” I mean, I just don’t think existence is all that bad. I suspect things were worse in India twenty-five centuries ago, though.)

I'm not sure how accurate he is, but Burkeman explains a key difference between the acceptance of the Stoic and that of the Buddhist.

> *The perfect Stoic adapts his or her thinking so as to remain undisturbed by undesirable circumstances; the perfect Buddhist sees thinking itself as just another set of circumstances, to be non-judgmentally observed.*

Got it? One is saying, "Meh, could be worse. I'm not gonna let this bother me," and the other, "Oh, observe, young grasshopper: your mind is experiencing pain because of that arrow sticking out of your thigh. Interesting, is it not, what tricks the material world plays upon us?"

But I don't think that all of existence is suffering, and I plan to continue to perceive bad and good as judgmentally distinct. So, given that, I'm firmly in the Stoic camp, right? Well, remember part of that definition? "Indifferent to the vicissitudes of fortune and to pleasure and pain." I don't really want to be indifferent for pleasure. Next time I've got a dentist jabbing my mouth with sharp things, I'll try to use the ~~Jedi~~ ~~Vulcan~~ Stoic Mind Trick to remain unperturbed by my suffering. But next time I'm up in the mountains, gawping at the magnificence of snowmelt crashing over granite cliffs, I certainly don't want to preceive that as merely "another set of circumstances". To the analytically inclined, my goal would be to focus this skill more on the unpleasant side of the Gaussian distribution of life experiences.

The next few chapters engage in some specious over-intellectualizing along with some very good stuff. The central idea returns, more or less, to the introductory chapter's dismissal of striving for happiness, although the goal being strived for shifts to "security" or "success", etc. To strive is, obviously, not the same as to attain. And for many goals, the dilemma is that the act of striving can work against the attainment. The author interviews the security expert Bruce Schneier (whose fairly recent book I gave five stars to, and I'll plug here) in noting that the efforts of the developed world to *feel* safe in the last dozen years has almost certainly rendered us objectively less safe, in addition to other costs, some of them worse. A visit to the staggeringly poor slum of Kibera (part of Nairobi) helps remind us that happiness doesn't correlate strongly with wealth, and (surprise!) those who see wealth as a primary goal are probably among the least happy of all of us.

The bad logic comes in when he tries to make the case that *we are all one*. Well, he denies that precise formulation, but there's a lot like that. I mean stuff like this: "There cannot be a 'you' without an 'everything else', and attempting to think about one in isolation from the other makes no sense." I don't want to belabor this review with that, though. The book is very good in spite of it, so just wade through the mystical junk and everything will be fine.

When you get to the Museum of Failure, he's back on pretty firm ground. The chapter ends with an excerpt from the famous commencement speech J.K. Rowling made at Harvard in 2008 (text, video), in which she talks up the benefits of failure. Burkeman rightly differentiates two ideas. Those that think like our sneered-at motivational speakers will argue that failure is inevitable on the way to the top, and expecting it and getting over it is healthy. Living in San Francisco, I swear almost every time I hear an entrepreneur speak they're touting their failures like merit badges. But that still focuses on the striving, not on acceptance, and for most of us there is no pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. The other perspective is the one that Rowling also points to: absolute failure is liberating. (Yeah, duh, it is indeed a little ironic, given that it liberated Rowling to become staggeringly successful and wealthy.) You can think of it as something like "there's no way to go but up!", but that isn't the point. If your goal is still "up", then you've missed the point.

The book ends well with the last chapter, *Memento Mori*. Death is, after all, the ultimate failure. Steve Jobs is quoted, aptly: "Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking

you have something to lose. You are already naked.” This returns nicely to the lessons of the Stoics; the Roman general who chose to have a slave walk behind him in his victory parade whispering “Look behind you! Remember that you are a man! Remember that you’ll die!” was probably a Stoic.

Burkeman visited Mexico during the Día de los Muertos festivities in order to witness a culture that retains greater intimacy with death. This is timely, of course, since Hallowe’en is just days away, and here in San Francisco we take this holiday very seriously. I’ve decided I’m going to visit the Mission District tomorrow and pick up some sugar skulls and maybe some tequila.

I can recommend this book pretty highly. But, apropos that closing chapter, I also recommend you download and listen to the Radiolab from this past January on “The Bitter End”, and make your plans accordingly: remember that you will die.

Oh, and a bit of humor: Burkeman begins his tale by studying how motivational speakers (and self-help authors) typically worship at the alter of success and optimism (and how this is ephemeral blah blah blah), and later examines how accommodating oneself to failure and eventual death can be psychologically beneficial. So I was primed and amused when this showed up within my event horizon:
?

Stephanie says

I did like this book, but i wanted more from it. It seemed disappointingly minimal. The author unfortunately followed the pattern that is becoming really commonplace and boring in nonfiction books of talking to a handful of people, each of whom represents a different aspect of the topic at hand, and going out to a few select places in the world to experience the subject firsthand. And then using that smattering of information as a basis for an entire way of thinking about the world.

I really like Burkeman's ideas, but i'm not convinced that any of them do actually lead to personal happiness. As much as i'd love to believe that there is a "negative path to happiness," i haven't seen or been shown (or experienced) that that is in reality where said path leads. Pursuit of Happiness, as much as i did not love it, seemed more useful in that it presented actual statistics about which life factors are positively correlated with overall happiness. But we all know that correlation does not imply causation, so i was hoping that The Antidote would tell me why David G. Myers's observations aren't so useful after all. Instead it has given me some things to ponder, which is not at all a bad thing and does in fact go right along with the message of the book. There is no quick and easy fix for happiness. It takes a lot of delving into not entirely pleasant thoughts.

And yet... we're not supposed to think of happiness as a destination. Happiness is the journey itself, or some such. Like i said, i'm left with a lot of things to ponder. Which is certainly something that i like.

Bonny says

I used to do the lab. work for a local group of oncologists, and one evening I heard someone crying in the

waiting room. The rest of the staff had left and the doctors were doing rounds, so I went to see what was going on. I found a patient sitting there, crying quietly. She had been in remission twice, but had recently relapsed. She said she needed to talk to one of the doctors because she didn't know what she was doing wrong. When we talked further, she said she had been using some visualization tapes, where you are directed to imagine that lasers or your vigilante white cells are killing your tumor. She had also been using some "positive thinking for cancer patients" tapes where you are told to repeat, "I am healthy" and "I am cancer-free." She was incredibly upset, not so much by the cancer, but because she felt that her inability to cure herself with positive thinking meant that she was doing something wrong and it was her fault. For me, that moment confirmed that positive thinking, used in the wrong circumstances and for the wrong reasons, can do more harm than good. *The Antidote* explores that interesting idea.

Oliver Burkeman is not out to bash positive thinking, but rather to explore "the negative path", the idea that the more we search for happiness and security, the less we achieve them. This is done through chapters on Stoicism, the ways goals can be counterproductive or destructive, insecurity, the non-attachment of Zen Buddhism, failure, and our fear of death. He presents ideas about what might make our lives less unhappy, but this isn't in the typical self-help form of strict rules or a program to be blindly followed.

The conclusions Burkeman seems to come to are to embrace insecurity, and stop searching for happiness and quick fixes. Rather than thinking about everything in a positive way, it is much better to see things realistically, accurately, and truthfully. That is a philosophy I wholeheartedly agree with.

Brendon Schrodinger says

People often remark on how happy I always appear.- most of the time I have a smile on my face. And I must admit that my moods are fairly stable. But I'm definitely not one for always looking on the bright side of life, and I wouldn't call myself an optimist at all. I'm also very sceptical, especially about psychological strategies to 'get the most out of life'. I have encountered 'postive psychology' in my education studies and while I must admit that some aspects my be helpful, I cringe at the whole 'put a smile on your face and deal with it' kind of attitude. Positive psychological strategies come across as selfish, ignorant and just plain putting your head in the sand sometimes.

So I came across this book on Audible and gave the demo a listen. The narrator, also the author, was not annoying and the short piece seemed to be intelligent. Therefore, on a whim, I purchased it.

This book is a pleasant surprise and helped me expand on my own personal psychological beliefs and consolidate others. It seems that I'm a Stoic and there was fascinating chapter on Stoicism. There are various chapters on other psychological theories and practices that are far removed from the positive, yet provide a basis for a fruitful and wonderful life all the same.

Oliver also deconstructs positive psychology and argues that it just doesn't work. After all, it's been out there for several decades, it produces hundreds of self-help books a year and pays the coffers for gurus the world over. But we are not happier.

This book also struck a chord after reading Chris Hadfield's An Astronaut's Guide to Life on Earth which had some great and inspirational sections on his philosophy. A lot of what Oliver talk about is linked to Chris Hadfield's view on life and also my own.

So I'd recommend this for the people out there who feel like slapping self-help gurus, see the self-improvement section of the library and bookstore as a waster of good space and people who just want to live their life with all emotions and not be forced to feel like they should be living in a Coca-Cola commercial. It's a great little book to help you with new ideas and say that you are not a freak and nothing is wrong with you. I think I'm going to read up more on Stoicism.

Henrik Lindberg says

It's such a turnoff with self-help books that start out with ridiculing self-helps books only to try to paint themselves in a different light. Turnoff and common, that is. This book is no different. It becomes especially obnoxious when the author denounces other authors lack of rigor only to himself use ancient Greek philosophy and Alan Watts as backbones to his arguments. Now, stoicism and Buddhist metaphysics are favorite subjects of mine. My problem with the book is not lack of rigor but the inconsistency between what the author argues one should expect from others and what he does himself.

I'd imagine that this book can serve as an overview and an introduction to another way to view life. Once one is somewhat familiar with the subject, I'd instead recommend to read primary sources and more focused commentary on them, for example Seneca, A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy, Les sagesses antiques, and of course Alan Watts.

Jason Pettus says

(Reprinted from the Chicago Center for Literature and Photography [cclapcenter.com]. I am the original author of this essay, as well as the owner of CCLaP; it is not being reprinted illegally.)

I know this is going to come as a shock to many of you, but I am not exactly an "Up With People" kind of guy, and the relentless forced positivity within a certain section of the liberal arts these days, despite being done for the most noble intentions, tends to wear me out. So thank God, then, for the newish *The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking* by philosopher and participatory journalist Oliver Burkeman; he instead looks at the many groups over the last several millennia, from the Stoics of ancient Greece to the Buddhists of Asia, the Rationalists of the Enlightenment, and even such modern figures as Alan Watts, to show that maybe it's actually pretty healthy to sometimes picture the worst-case scenario, to embrace the failures you make, and to always carry with you a finely tuned daily awareness of your own imminent death. As these groups have each independently proven, he shows through a series of fascinating trips to various contemporary communities, tribes and experts around the globe, it can actually be really healthy for humans to understand their boundaries, to know which things they can reasonably accomplish and which they can't, and to know when to let go of an obsessive desire for a goal before that goal instead kills you; and in the meanwhile, he cites modern study after modern study that are each starting to show how much damage the "power of positive thinking" can have, from increased frustration over challenges to the body giving up on a challenge after enjoying it too much in an idealized version in one's head, even to the kinds of fatalistic embrace of violent quick-change solutions that always come with fascist administrations in times of crisis. (It's not a coincidence that Nazi-era Germans and Bush-era Americans were both obsessed with new-age beliefs.) A fresh splash of water in a lobotomizingly peppy world of endless Tony Robbinses and Deepak Chopras, this will absolutely change the way you look at the world if you're one of those people receptive to its message, and it comes strongly recommended whether to read or to simply carry to your next

corporate-job-mandated "Unleash The Power of Positivity!" seminar at your local sports arena.

Out of 10: **9.7**

Lylah says

Calling this book life changing would be a little hyperbolic, calling it perspective changing would not.

Oliver Burkeman, a Brit, starts by looking at what's wrong with America's billion dollar self-help/motivational industry. There's the expensive seminars (which corporations, the military and government agencies pay for their employees to attend) where an 80-year-old tycoon with an orange faux tan lets you in on his secret to success: banish the word "impossible" from your vocabulary! Then there's "The Secret" itself: an Oprah-fueled industry of books, web sites and seminars that tell people they can have whatever they want if they just believe! Come from the ghetto or the trailer park? You too can end up like Oprah if you just believe it hard enough! And there's the recent research that seems to show the more people use these kinds of self-help techniques, the more unhappy they seem to become.

Burkeman, a bit of a curmudgeon by nature, sees through the snake oil peddlers all too easily, but longs for some alternative that might bring a sense of fulfillment or contentment to his life, so he sets out to explore how cultures throughout history have defined and pursued happiness. He finds some fascinating things, which the book lays out in subsequent chapters.

I found that I was in familiar territory in a number of the chapters, having studied Buddhist philosophy and meditation techniques as well as cognitive behavioral therapy. Perhaps not just coincidentally, there is overlap between those techniques and philosophies like Stoicism, which Burkeman covers (Buddhist style meditation gets its own chapter). I had to hold my skepticism in check for the chapter on the self that included a big dose of Eckhart Tolle, since until now I had thought of Tolle as squarely in Oprah/Secret territory. A lot of Tolle's philosophy overlaps with the Buddhist concept of the self as illusory. Try to define your "self" and put boundaries around it and it becomes very elusive. Is the self your body? Is it your thoughts? If this thing is elusive or illusory, why do we spend so much time obsessing about its esteem and why does it need help? Other chapters deal with embracing insecurity, failure and other "negative" emotions (rather than repressing them, which research suggests is what "positive thinking" causes many people to do)as part of a full and rich human experience of life. The ultimate message behind at least one chapter is that if you are feeling insecure, depressed, fearful or unmotivated just STFU and keep driving, a very complex philosophy that has intuitively gotten me through some of the worst days of my life.

I work in a library and have so much free information at my fingertips on a daily basis that I rarely buy books, but I will probably pick up a copy of this one. It's the kind of book I see myself coming back to as the years go on.

Diane says

What a clever and amusing and interesting and thoughtful book! I need more adjectives to describe how much I enjoyed this look at happiness in the modern world.

Oliver Burkeman is a journalist who was skeptical of the "cult of optimism," and he digs into the research on positive thinking and talks to various experts in the field. The first thing he learns is that you can't suppress negative thoughts — suppression doesn't work. Whatever idea you are trying to squash down will only continue to pop up.

One of my favorite chapters was about goal setting, and how becoming obsessed with achieving goals can sometimes have damaging consequences, such as a financial crisis, or in the case of some Mount Everest climbers, even death. Another interesting chapter was on stoicism, and on recognizing that things could always be worse. There were also good sections on overcoming fear of failure and embarrassment.

There were so many fascinating parts of this book that I think I'll have to reread it. I listened to this on audio, and I enjoyed Burkeman's narration. I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in popular psychology research.

Favorite Quote
"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 visualization have their benefits. The problem is that we have developed the habit of chronically overvaluing positivity and 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. To use an old cliche of therapy-speak, we spend too much of our lives seeking 'closure.' Even those of us who mock such cliches are often motivated by a craving to put an end to uncertainty and anxiety, whether by convincing ourselves that the future is bright, or by resigning ourselves despondently to the expectation that it won't be. What we need more of, instead, is what the psychologist Paul Pearsall called 'openture.' Yes, this is an awkward neologism. But its very awkwardness is a reminder of the spirit that it expresses, which includes embracing imperfection and easing up on the search for neat solutions."

Sanjay Gautam says

Murphy's Law symbolize the error-prone nature of people and processes. This book shows how possibly the culture of positive thinking and cult of optimism can go wrong and how Murphy's law is applicable to it. **Anything that can go wrong, will.**

The book remains true to its title. It is really meant for the people who can't stand 'positive thinking', 'cult of optimism' kind of approaches to happiness. What this book does is that it shows a new and counter-intuitive approach to happiness- **NEGATIVE PATH to HAPPINESS.** The negative path to happiness involves embracing failures, insecurity and uncertainty in one's life.

The best thing I liked about the book is that the way in which author has shown the limits, disadvantages and futility of these popular cult of positive thinking and optimism kind of approaches (without being sarcastic :p).

To quote an example from book:
"It is not certitude, comfort or any desired mental state (such as, calm) as we normally think of them, but rather the ' strange, excited comfort of being presented with, and grappling with, the tremendous mysteries life offers'."

Ultimately, what defines the cult of optimism and positive thinking (even in most mystically new age reforms) is that it abhors a mystery. It seeks to make things certain, to make happiness permanent and final. And it is precisely this that hurts and makes people prone to suffering.

One line from Murphy's law sums this up: Once a job is fouled up, anything done to improve it only makes it worse. Read the book to find it how.

Its highly recommended for those who really can't stand positive thinking and want something more worthwhile and satisfying.

Carlo says

This is a very good book to which I keep coming back in the couple of months since I read it. What makes it great is its insistence of not having a one-size-fits-all formula to feeling happiness (or a better and delicious word used here and elsewhere is, if I may capitalise it, Eudaemonia), let alone exposing the tenuous and very subtle nature of what we usually call happiness, which among many things is mainly sensed in hindsight. The idea that there is no single solution for our problems, happiness or otherwise, is in itself I think a great service to the reader. This, in addition to differentiating between our thoughts about things like work, security, distress, death etc. rather than the things in themselves is quite worthwhile. Many schools of thoughts like Buddhism and Stoicism are discussed at length, and many interesting people are met in the very journalistic though enjoyable writing of Burkeman, with his signature approach which is more of a syncretism of different views on the question of living a full and somewhat meaningful life.

If there's one book you gotta read on feeling happy (whatever that means for you), make it this one. It is that good!

Alannah Clarke says

I would not be the type of person to read self-help books at all but when the challenge came up for me to read something completely new, I took the chance to dive right in. I have to say that this was the perfect book for me to start with. I would say I was pretty much in the same boat as the author, Oliver Burkeman, who was skeptical of the whole optimism cult. Because I was listening to the book instead of reading it, I felt like I was sucked into the book so much quicker. I ended up feeling like a lot of what Burkeman was trying to say, really applied to me. I found his research on the world's happiest countries very interesting. If you are the type of person who doesn't believe in self-help books, I would tell you to try this out.

Emma Sea says

Excellent book. The writing is highly engaging, and Burkeman gives enough information to be interesting, without overloading the reader, and incorporates just the right amount of personal narrative. The book is easy to just fall into, and, while still thought-provoking, doesn't require the reader to sit for ten minutes rotating a concept until its in the right position for comprehension.

I think it's got the wrong title, because this makes it sound like pop-psychology, and this is much more than that. I guess a book called "A summary of some of the main humanist philosophical approaches to the human condition, that might suggest to the reader some alternative frameworks for a 'meaningful' life" would not be a best-seller.

P.S. Lulz at that blurb; "a radically new path to happiness." Seneca died in 65 CE. Stoicism is literally thousands of years old. I guess they really are going for that endlessly-reinventing self-help market.

Seamus Thompson says

This might be the only (so-called) self-help book that includes a quote from The Wire at the beginning of a chapter -- and surely that's a good sign.

I'm not someone who reads a lot of self-help books. I don't read them at all, really, though living in Southern California for a couple decades meant inevitable contact with self-help gurus and enthusiasts. Positive thinking, visualization and imitating the habits of successful people have always struck me as somehow deficient tactics but I never really bothered to think through my objections with any degree of thoroughness -- let alone formulate an alternative. In fact, if anything, I have been prone to blaming myself for not feeling able to buy into such ideas.

I would have been content if this book had been what I expected: an acerbic expose of self-help hokum. Instead, it proved to be much more: a cogent synthesis of a number of philosophical and psychological notions and approaches that offer a healthier, more realistic, way of living a happier life. Drawing from Stoicism (the real thing, not the straw man version most of us hear about), Buddhism, and psychological studies that are critical of so-called positive thinking, what I found most striking about The Antidote was how often it seemed to articulate and complete my own half-formed ideas. Forcing yourself to "think positive" often makes failure that much more devastating; setting long-terms goals often means scuttling your well-being in the drive to achieve (and doubling down at the very moment it might make sense to abandon a bad idea); trying to feel motivated can create an extra thing to be frustrated and depressed about; there is comfort and relief to be found in contemplating worst-case-scenarios and even death itself rather than trying to emphasize the positive at all costs . . . and on and on.

To be clear: the approaches (note the plural) outlined in this book are not meant to help you achieve happiness in some defined, end-of-the-line, concrete sense. Instead it is a toolkit, a series of ways to approach life more realistically and genuinely. Somehow the positive-thought advocates have created the sense that their approach is about embracing life when, in fact, the opposite is true: their approach involves ignoring and denying much of what makes life what it is. What this book tries to do is offer some ways of finding happiness (rather than Being Happy) by taking in the totality of our lives rather than filtering out whatever we perceive as an obstacle to our goals.

Laura Leaney says

This is a friendly little book that purports to be an anti-"self-help" book - although I have more than a sneaking suspicion that it IS a self-help book. My guess is that Oliver Burkeman is preaching to the choir, to

use an old cliché, because I doubt any individual feeling the rosy after-glow of a Get Motivated! seminar will pick it up for an afternoon's reading. I bought the thing after reading a review in the Los Angeles Times, thinking it would offer a humorous take on our cultural obsession with happiness and Looking On the Bright Side.

He does. But the author also discusses some very interesting philosophies by current and ancient thinkers. I appreciated his take on Stoicism (I'm a personal fan of Epictetus), Buddhism, Freud, et cetera. And I agree with him when he writes that maybe our definition of "happiness" is screwed up.

He also comments on "the hidden benefits of insecurity" - and quotes Tennessee Williams: "Security is a kind of death, I think." This struck a chord with me.

Oliver Burkeman is no expert philosopher, but the compilation of authors he cites form a powerful argument for embracing ambiguity and uncertainty (which includes our fear of death). All the goal setting we do, all the positive visualizations, are attempts to nail down a secure surprise-free future. This is probably not news to most people. Yet, I enjoyed reading the various experts quoted in the book. I found much of the book engaging, and not negative at all.

I cannot vouch for the scholarship though - I just don't know enough - but I can tell you that the book stays on the surface of things. If you really want to know what the Greek stoics believed, you'll have to read them as directly as you can (albeit in translation). Buddhist beliefs, same. Alan Watts, same. Still, there's a lot of great ideas in this little book that can get you thinking - maybe get you to the library to check out a philosophy book.

Caroline says

Curmudgeonly Brit that I am, I enjoyed this book a lot. I read it at a gallop. I found it wonderfully provocative. I could have filled its margins with comments, heavily pressed into the paper, and accompanied by lots of exclamation marks.

The general drift of the book is that the roaring ra-ra-ra of positive thinking does not work. Day by day, in every way, we are NOT getting better and better. The author, Oliver Burkeman, a Guardian journalist covering psychology, says that instead we need to cultivate an attitude of reasonable pessimism. We need to distance ourselves from the ructions of our emotions and embrace the essence of the human condition - uncertainty and death. Surprisingly, he feels, therein lies the path to happiness - or at least the path to detachment, acceptance and contentment.

He discusses the Stoics, Buddhist philosophies and practices, and societies which embrace uncertainty rather than avoiding it. He talks of the merits of meditation, and of our current (misplaced) obsession with setting ourselves goals.

He also interestingly talks a lot about how most self-help books try and change our mindset. If we procrastinate...self help books will give us exercises to try and get us in the mood for doing what we have to do. That is the essence of how they work. Burkeman on the other hand supports the Buddhist approach of accepting one's moods as they are, and doing what one has to do in spite of how one is feeling. He cites Anthony Trollope, who unfailingly used to write for 3 hours each morning, before going off to his day job. He wrote 47 novels during his lifetime. He also quotes the artist Chuck Close: "Inspiration is for amateurs.

The rest of us just show up and get to work."

But - but, but, but... I think this approach to life is only feasible if you are naturally a disciplined person. My father was. He was a Trollope through and through. I on the other hand am a jelly person. I need gentle encouragement and lots of treats in order to do anything. Strangely though this doesn't stop me aligning myself with the rather Spartan ideas put forward in the book.

I also find meditation awfully difficult. I have tried it on and off for about 40 years, and always get fed up with it after just a short time.

Finally, far from being the detached and philosophical being glowingly described by the author, I'm an old drama queen, who bangs the table about injustices, and get very upset when things go wrong.

For me that is the missing chapter in this book. Whilst I greatly admire a lot of what the author said, his ideas and suggestions are very much geared up to a certain sort of personality - and I am not that personality. The book was very interesting indeed,but it isn't going to alter the lifestyle or perspectives of an emotional jellied wimp like myself.

Charlou says

OK - So I will admit I picked this up because of my cynicism. I'm just not one of those "happy" people that are all the rage right now.

I kept reading because this book is so much more. How wonderfully validating this book was. (That is why we read self-help books, right? Not to change, but to validate who we are.) At some point I had realized that while I'm not one of the "happy' type, I am a content person when I'm not feeling bad about myself for not being "happy." The constant pressure to be happy, the pressure to reach lofty goals, and positive thinking no matter what may not be getting us where we need to be. We have much to learn from the logic of the Stoics and the mindfulness of the Buddhists. Or, if you are the "happy" type and it's working for you, go for it. Just please be respectful of my way of thinking.

The point here is not that negative capability is always superior to the positive kind. Optimism is wonderful; goals can sometimes b useful' even positive thinking and positive visualization have their benefits. The problem is that we have developed the habit of chronically overvaluing positivity and 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.

Do not worry about us negative people. We just get there in a different way.
