

WHY BE



By Vadim Liberman

HAPPY?

INSTEAD OF ATTACHING SMILEY EMOTICONS TO EVERY MOMENT OF OUR LIVES,

OLIVER BURKEMAN SUGGESTS, WE SHOULD WELCOME MORE NEGATIVITY.

SOMETIMES, THE GLASS IS MOSTLY EMPTY, SO STOP PRETENDING OTHERWISE. STOP ATTEMPTING TO MAINTAIN A SUNNY OUTLOOK ON THINGS. IN OTHER WORDS, QUIT TRYING TO BE SO OPTIMISTIC.

Those are recommendations you'll rarely hear from self-help gurus, but then, Oliver Burkeman, 37, is no Tony Robbins. In *The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking* (Faber & Faber), Burkeman rails against the persistent belief that we should purge negative thoughts from our minds. Instead, he recom-



mends accepting life's uncertainties, "the kinds of situations and emotions that we spend all our lives running away from." More broadly, Burkeman argues that we ought to drop the idea that relentless optimism and positivity is the exclusive path to happiness and success. He also points out that *The Antidote* isn't just a guide for people who can't stand positive thinking—it's also for people who love positive thinking but shouldn't.

Burkeman, who writes regularly for *The Guardian*, does not shy away from offering contrarian opinions and advice. He spoke by phone from his Brooklyn home about the problems with setting goals, failure, and, of course happiness—all of which just might bring a smile to your face.

LET ME START WITH AN OBVIOUS QUESTION: SHOULD COMPANIES WANT HAPPY EMPLOYEES?

Companies should be concerned about happiness, but they should understand that it's something that emerges from the right kind of environment. A crucial part of it comes from employees having a certain degree of autonomy and ability to pursue projects in the way they want to. It's about creating a climate in which people have meaning in their work rather than one in which they are relentlessly assaulted with targets to meet and all sorts of oppressive things—but once every month we're going to have a fun prize and everyone will get pizza. When companies relentlessly try to make things fun in the workplace and compel employees to really enjoy themselves, their attempts to impose an emotional state so directly are doomed to fail.

I ASK ABOUT HAPPINESS BECAUSE YOU CITE RESEARCH THAT SHOWS THAT HEALTHY AND HAPPY PEOPLE HAVE A LESS ACCURATE AND LESS OPTIMISTIC GRASP OF THEIR TRUE ABILITY TO INFLUENCE EVENTS.

The most immediate conclusion to draw from this research is that it's good to be deluded because if you're not deluded, you're depressed, but I think there's maybe a third option: finding a way of really understanding reality in a way that transcends those two oppositions to something where people are happy and see things accurately.

WHY, AS YOU ARGUE, DO PEOPLE TEND TO OVERVALUE THE WILLINGNESS TO FAIL?

We have a very warped sense of business success because of survivor bias. We only ever hear from the people who ended up successful, so the fact that they have a specific personality trait—a willingness to fail—does not tell you very much, because there might be thousands of people with that personality type who have failed. The willingness to take risks is something that any celebrity businessperson writing a biography boasts about—but most people fail, and they don't become celebrity businesspeople, so you never hear from them. This means you can't take the lessons of a Jack Welch. Successful executives don't know necessarily why they succeeded because they don't know all the other people who did the same things and failed. Any particular trait that you look for in someone you admire and want to emulate is vulnerable to the survivor bias, so it may not always be right to emulate others.

CAN YOU EVER LOOK TO EXAMPLES TO HELP YOU SUCCEED?

I don't think that by getting to know people who have succeeded or failed, you can learn general causal things, but you might be able to isolate specific things that had specific effects in specific contexts.

The survivor bias doesn't mean all knowledge is impossible, but it's a really strong reason to disregard on a general level lessons that get learned in a corporate culture and books that are based on interviewing a hundred millionaires to find out what it takes to become a millionaire. It's also a really good argument for a certain kind of humility among people who are successful. Are they sure that they can explain why they are successful and that luck didn't play a really big part in their success? It's about understanding the conditions of success and not having massively deluded beliefs about your talents.

THE IDEA OF POSITIVE THINKING, OF ALWAYS BEING OPTIMISTIC, IS NOT THE LIBERATION IT MASQUERADES AS.

THIS PLAYS INTO WHAT YOU CALL THE "CULT OF OPTIMISM."

Yes, I wrote this book as a skeptical—but hopefully not cynical—take on the self-help industry, which has a tendency to focus on clichéd positive thinking only. If the promises made by all the books and people encouraging positivity could be lived up to, I'd really like some of the stuff, but the idea of positive thinking, of always being optimistic, is not the liberation it masquerades as. I have a problem with an unfalsifiable ideology of positivity at all costs, this focus on positivity regardless of the results—that is, the belief that if all goes well on some given project, that proves that you were right to be optimistic, and if everything goes badly, that just means you

need more optimism. For someone with that belief, there's no situation that can ever disprove that philosophy. Barbara Ehrenreich has argued pretty persuasively that that may have contributed to the present financial crisis—bankers and homebuyers and politicians all thinking that if they really, really wanted things to work out, then they just would.

SO MUCH FOR THE SECRET!

Blind faith in this kind of idea is completely misplaced and not backed up by evidence. In fact, when experimental subjects are told of an unhappy event but then instructed to try not to feel sad about it, they end up feeling worse than people who are informed of the event but given no instructions about how to feel.

YOU'RE NOT CRAZY ABOUT SETTING GOALS. WHY?

There's quite a lot of evidence that the over-pursuit of goals, clinging too hard to them or setting them too rigidly, is detrimental. Being too focused on accomplishing goals can be really dangerous in lots of ways, not just those that involve cheating and fraud, but in just not getting things done. It's a question of being careful and not assuming that the more ambitious the goal and the bigger and more resources you focus on it, the better.

I use the extreme example of General Motors in my book. Years ago, the company set out to get 29 percent of the American car market. They printed little pins that said "29." Everything was focused on meeting this figure, regardless of what that entailed, so instead of developing new cars and a sustainable business model, they discounted and did whatever advertising they could, regardless of what that did to the brand, just to get to that figure. In the end, it didn't work.

**THERE'S QUITE A BIT OF EVIDENCE SHOWING
THAT PEOPLE DO BETTER WHEN
TOLD TO DO THEIR BEST IN CERTAIN
CONTEXTS THAN WHEN TOLD
TO MEET TARGET X.**



MIGHT THIS INDICATE THAT THE DIFFICULTY LIES IN TYPES OF GOALS RATHER THAN GOAL-SETTING IN GENERAL?

It's not that I think you should *never* have any goals—my problem is with this idea that goals are everything and it's *always* right to have them.

The most obvious conclusion from the GM example is not to set one really narrow, rigid target and then obsessively pursue it at the expense of everything else. But the more exciting idea is that setting *any* goal with a target is the problem; there might be context and circumstances in which not really having any clear idea at all of the way forward might be a better recipe of success. There's quite a bit of evidence showing that people do better when told to do their best in certain contexts than when told to meet Target X.

I WAS FASCINATED BY A STUDY THAT YOU CITE IN WHICH EMPLOYEES WERE ENCOURAGED TO THINK ABOUT HOW THEY WERE GOING TO HAVE A HIGH-ACHIEVING WORK-WEEK AHEAD ENDED UP ACHIEVING LESS THAN OTHERS WHO WERE ASKED TO SIMPLY REFLECT ON THE COMING WEEK, WITHOUT ANY GUIDELINES.

It's this idea that rehearsing something with a specific outcome in your mind is the way to bring it about. What you find in studies and real-life business settings is that sometimes having no such target is more effective, or that setting "process goals" is better. That

is, it's not that I'm going to have a really high-achieving week but that I'm going to spend the first hour of every day working on the toughest project. It's about the process. The parallel that you find in sports is that it's a popular myth that runners are told to imagine bursting through the finish line and everyone cheering. No, they are taught to try to achieve perfection in the *process*, one step at a time.

Research also shows that some entrepreneurs don't set detailed business plans—they change the way they are headed every week, every day. They're not put off by the fact that they don't exactly know where they're going. Likewise, we're better off spending less time on goal-setting and just getting on with the work. For instance, many companies will try to think of the ultimate idea and then go out and find all the people and processes and materials to bring it to fruition. Instead, companies should look at what's at their disposal—the equipment, people, the material—and then ask, "What can we make by combining these things?" You should not be like a gourmet chef saying you're going to make a gourmet dish and then traveling the world to find the ingredients. It's more about getting home at the end of the day, opening a cupboard and fridge, seeing what you've got, and going from there.

GETTING THINGS DONE, YOU ADD, NEED NOT REQUIRE MOTIVATION.

The problem is that *feeling* like doing something and *doing* it are two different things. Getting pumped up and psyched to do things is a very short-term thing. That's how people who run motivational seminars stay in business—you go and you leave feeling awesome. Then the feeling fades, and next time the seminar is in town, you go again. The whole notion of motivation in our culture reinforces this idea that you have to feel a certain way before you can do it. Motivation isn't actually an aid to getting things done. It's an extra barrier, an extra step. I managed to write this book by realizing that, as a master procrastinator, I didn't have to get up every morning thinking, "I want to do nothing more than write one thousand words today." I just did it.

LET ME END BY ASKING AN OBVIOUS QUESTION: HAS WORKING ON THIS BOOK MADE YOU HAPPIER?

I think I'm a bit happier. I've developed a resilience. I just want to get to the end of my life and feel like I fully experienced the highs and the lows instead of just managed to stick my fingers in my ears during all the lows. Whether that's happiness, I don't know. ■