



The Happiness Trap written by Russ Harris, MD  
A Book Review  
By Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones, Psy.D.

Dr. Russ Harris explains Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) in *The Happiness Trap*. Overall, *The Happiness Trap* is a very readable explanation of ACT with many useful tools for implementing the strategies in daily living. Each chapter has exercises to either understand the concepts, practice the strategies, or assesses the reader's thoughts and feelings on a particular topic. Throughout the book, there are references to [www.thehappinesstrap.com](http://www.thehappinesstrap.com) where there are FREE downloadable resource and questionnaires.

### **Chapter 1: How You Set Your Happiness Trap**

The first chapter describes the many myths by which people generally base their judgment of happiness. Dr. Harris examines each myth and how the myth contributes to our misery because we are not meeting these standards for happiness. He then debunks the 'truth' behind the myths.

Myth 1: Happiness is the Natural State for All Human Beings – This is the idea that everyone is walking around believing everyone is happy except for them.

Myth 2: If You're Not Happy, You're Defective – Dr. Harris suggests our minds have evolved to be on alert rather than focused on positive or happy thoughts, which results in thinking we're 'abnormal.'

Myth 3: To Create A Better Life, We Must Get Rid of Negative Feelings - Avoidance of negative feelings does not make them go away.

Myth 4: You Should Be Able to Control What You Think and Feel – Sometimes changing your thinking isn't enough and attempting to think and feel differently causes us to be overly focused on our problems. Common control strategies become problems when they are used excessively, inflexibly, or when they interfere with participation in life. Control strategies include 1)

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hiding/escaping, 2) suppression, 3) distraction, 4) arguing, 5) zoning out/numbing, 6) taking charge, and 7) self-bullying.

## **Chapter 2: Transforming Your Inner World**

The second chapter details the Six Core Principles of ACT and strategies for dealing with interfering behaviors. Through the development and utilization of the skills, we develop more psychological flexibility. According to Dr. Harris, psychological flexibility is the ability to adapt to a situation with openness, awareness and focus, and the ability to take effective action, guided by values.

The first four principles are essentially mindfulness skills. Dr. Harris suggests that it's not necessarily the acts or thoughts that create our problems but the activation of our 'struggle switch.' Our struggle arises from not accepting or dealing with our interfering thoughts or behaviors, or becoming overly focused on them, rather than the thoughts or feelings per se. It is the meaning we place on our thoughts or feelings that leads our emotional pain to become insufferable. The strategies to cope with this struggle include:

Defusion: Relating to our thoughts or feelings as just thoughts or feelings rather than truths, orders to be followed, or somehow more powerful than they really are.

Expansion (acceptance): Making room for unpleasant feelings and experiences so they become less frequent, intense, and shorter in duration. This does not mean unpleasant feelings or experiences go away.

Connection: Contact with the present moment rather than focus on what has happened in the past (regret) or what may happen in the future (anxiety).

The Observing Self: Focused awareness on your thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations without judgment.

Values: Clarifying and connecting to what is important and meaningful in life, which can motivate you to make important changes.

Committed Action: Just do it, again and again, until it starts to work better, or figure out something else to try.

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### **Chapter 3: Creating a Life Worth Living**

Valued living means that we're living in a way and doing things that are important to us. Values tend to be principle's we live by that do not have an end point whereas goals can be developed, achieved, and reset. We have to examine if our goals match up with our values.

Dr. Harris suggests that we complete a values assessment of how we want to live and be in our 1) relationships (family, romantic partnerships, friendships), 2) work and/or educational pursuits, 3) personal growth/health (spirituality, health and body, environment and nature) and 4) leisure time (creation, fun, community life). Then, we must determine whether we are living in accordance with our values. If we are not living by our values then we can create goals and develop a plan for action to work towards living a more valued life.

Once we have completed this assessment, we must determine what interferes with our ability to live according to our values. Dr. Harris suggests an examination of our FEAR – Fusion with thoughts or feelings, Excessive expectations, Avoidance of discomfort, and Remoteness from our values.

In order to work towards our goals and utilize our action plan, we have to be willing to look at ourselves and make changes.

Interested? Contact [drkatrina@kkjpsych.com](mailto:drkatrina@kkjpsych.com).

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