

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

# Stumbling on HAPPINESS

"If you have even the slightest curiosity about  
the human condition, you ought to read it. Trust me."  
—MALCOLM GLADWELL, AUTHOR OF *BLINK*



DANIEL GILBERT

## Stumbling on Happiness

*Daniel Todd Gilbert*

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# Stumbling on Happiness

*Daniel Todd Gilbert*

## Stumbling on Happiness Daniel Todd Gilbert

• Why are lovers quicker to forgive their partners for infidelity than for leaving dirty dishes in the sink? • Why will sighted people pay more to avoid going blind than blind people will pay to regain their sight? • Why do dining companions insist on ordering different meals instead of getting what they really want? • Why do pigeons seem to have such excellent aim; why can't we remember one song while listening to another; and why does the line at the grocery store always slow down the moment we join it? In this brilliant, witty, and accessible book, renowned Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert describes the foibles of imagination and illusions of foresight that cause each of us to misconceive our tomorrows and misestimate our satisfactions. Vividly bringing to life the latest scientific research in psychology, cognitive neuroscience, philosophy, and behavioral economics, Gilbert reveals what scientists have discovered about the uniquely human ability to imagine the future, and about our capacity to predict how much we will like it when we get there. With penetrating insight and sparkling prose, Gilbert explains why we seem to know so little about the hearts and minds of the people we are about to become.

## Stumbling on Happiness Details

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## From Reader Review Stumbling on Happiness for online ebook

## Amir Tesla says

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It's better to be a human unsatisfied than being a pig satisfied.

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Hatred seems to operate the same glands as love (graham Greene)

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When we imagine the future, we often do so in the blind spot of our mind's eye, and this tendency can cause us to misimagine the future events whose emotional consequences we are attempting to weigh.

When we imagine the future, there is a whole lot missing, and the things that are missing matter a lot.

In a study when volunteers are asked to "imagine a good day," they imagine a greater variety of events if the good day is tomorrow than if the good day is a year later. When we spy the future through our prospectoscopes, the clarity of the next hour and the fuzziness of the next year can lead us to make a variety of mistakes.

**Presentism: The tendency for current experience to influence one's views of the past and the future**

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When college students hear persuasive speeches that demonstrably change their political opinions, they tend to remember that they always felt as they currently feel...

**Presentism in the future:** If the past is a wall with some holes, the future is a hole with no walls.

And yet, for some reason, when our bellies are stuffed with mashed potatoes and cranberry sauce, we can't imagine being hungry? How come?

We can't see or feel two things at once, and the brain has strict priorities about what it will see, hear, and feel and what it will ignore. Imagination's requests are often denied. Both the sensory and emotional systems enforce this policy, and yet, **we seem to recognize when the sensory**

systems are turning down imagination's requests but fail to recognize when the emotional system is doing the same.

**Habituation:** ?????? ???? ?? ?????? ?????? ?? ?? ??????? ?????? ???? ?????? ?????? ?? ?? ??????. ???? ?? ?????? ????  
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When episodes are sufficiently separated in time, variety is not only unnecessary—it can actually be costly.

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

Most stimuli are ambiguous—that is, they can mean more than one thing—and the interesting question is how we disambiguate them—that is, how we know which of a stimulus's many meanings to infer on a particular occasion. Research shows that context, frequency, and recency are especially important in this regard.

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Studies suggest that we are quite adept at finding a positive way to view things once those things become their own ...

**Psychological Immune System:** ????? ??? ?????? ?? ??? ?? ??? ?????? ? ?????? ?????? ??? ?? ??? ??? ?????? ?????? ?????? ?????? ?????? ?????? ?????? ?????? ??? ?? ??? ?????? ????. ?????? ?????? ?? ?????? ?????? ?? ?????????? ?? ?????? ??? ?? ??? ?????? ?????? ?????? ?????? ?????? ?????? ?????? ??? ?? ??? ?????? ?? ?? ???? ?????? ?? ?????? ??? ?? ?????? ??? ?? ?????? ??? ?? ?????? ??? ?? ...  
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## Scott says

Combining the rigor of scientific inquiry with the affability of a humorist, this remarkable book examines the brain's systematic inability to reliably predict what will make us happy. Gilbert shows how neurological structures that allow us to store and re-imagine information may serve us all too well, creating a persuasive yet fundamentally distorted picture of what we want and why we want it. A life-changing book, or at least ought to be. This, more than any other recent read, is the one I'm recommending to all my friends and family.

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## Maggie Campbell says

"No one likes to be criticized, of course, but if the things we successfully strive for do not make our future selves happy, or if the things we unsuccessfully avoid do, then it seems reasonable (if somewhat ungracious) for them to cast a disparaging glance backward and wonder what the hell we were thinking."

"This is when I learned that mistakes are interesting and began planning a life that contained several of them."

"Surprise tells us that we were expecting something other than what we got, even when we didn't know we were expecting anything at all."

"Studies such as these demonstrate that once we have an experience, we cannot simply set it aside and see the world as we would have seen it had the experience never happened."

"Nothing *more* than feelings? What could be more important than feelings?...Indeed feelings don't just matter- they are what mattering *means*."

"And the thing that's wrong with both of us is that we make a systematic set of errors when we try to imagine 'what it would feel like if.' Imagining 'what it would feel like if' sounds like a fluffy bit of daydreaming, but in fact, is one of the most consequential mental acts we can perform, and we perform it every day. We make decisions about whom to marry, where to work, when to reproduce, where to retire, and we base these decisions in large measure on our beliefs about how it would feel if this event happened but that one didn't. Our lives may not always turn out as we wish or plan, but we are confident that if they had, then our happiness would have been unbounded and our sorrows thin and fleeting."

"Your mistake was not in imagining things you could not know- that is, after all, what imagination is for. Rather, your mistake was in unthinkingly treating what you imagined as thought it were an accurate representation of the facts. You are a very fine person, I'm sure. But you are a very bad wizard."

"We cannot feel good about an imaginary future when we are busy feeling bad about an actual present."

"Presentism occurs because we fail to recognize that our future selves won't see the world the way we see it now. As we are about to learn, this fundamental inability to take the perspective of the person to whom the rest of our lives will happen is the most insidious problem a futurian can face."

"If negative events don't hit us as hard as we expect them to, then why do we expect them to?"

"The world is this way, we wish the world were that way, and our experience of the world- how we see it, remember it, and imagine it- is a mixture of stark reality and comforting illusion. We can't spare either. If we were to experience the world exactly as it is, we'd be too depressed to get out of bed in the morning, but if we were to experience the world exactly as we want it to be, we'd be too deluded to find our slippers...We cannot do without reality and we cannot do without illusion. Each serves a purpose, each imposes a limit on the influence of the other, and our experience of the world is the artful compromise that these tough competitors negotiate."

"No one likes to feel that they are being duped, even when that duping is a pleasure."

"In the long run, people of every age in every walk of life seem to regret NOT having done things much more than they regret things they did...Because we do not realize that our psychological immune systems can rationalize an excess of courage more easily than an excess of cowardice, we hedge our bets when we should blunder forward."

"The fact that the least likely experience is often the most likely memory can wreak havoc with our ability to predict future experiences."

"In short, the production of wealth does not necessarily make individuals happy, but it does serve the needs of an economy, which serves the needs of a stable society, which serves as a network for propagation of delusional beliefs about happiness and wealth."

"Because if you are like most people, then like most people, you don't know you're like most people."

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### **Caitlin says**

April 2007, first impression: So far, this book is witty, eye-opening and really fun. Also really well researched. He references Daniel C. Dennett in the first five pages, so how could I not love it?

May 2007, upon completion: Update...

Ultimately, I decided to give this book three stars because I believe that it is a ballsy and well-executed attempt to take on an impossibly difficult problem (happiness - that's a biggie). For the most part, I admire Gilbert's methods, though they ALL become incredibly frustrating somewhere around page 200. The book is witty, incredibly well researched, and Gilbert is (mostly) unwilling to extrapolate the massive amounts of data he compiles into proscriptive solutions for finding happiness.

Fortunately, these make the book:

- \* pretty easy to follow
- \* informative and enlightening (if you're not already familiar with most of the research - some of the psychological effects he outlines are well-known to the point of being cliché, but many are either head-scratchers or jaw-droppers on their own merits or are interpreted here in interesting ways which bolster his mostly critical (rather than constructive) thesis)
- \* very NOT another preachy or rosy-tinted self-help franchise (yet).

Unfortunately:

- \* the tone ultimately makes the book repetitive and tiresome (much like being in the room with an otherwise intelligent person who laughs a little too much at their own jokes)
- \* the research often obfuscates rather than elucidates already fuzzy points (again, he makes his criticisms clear, but sometimes it's unclear what he is actually trying to \*say\* by pointing them out)
- \* for most of the book it seems as though he's really verging on some great ideas, but doesn't want to stick his neck out for them, which leaves the reader exhausted trying to generate their own implications and solutions for the problems he identifies...

You can read the rest of my review here (it was too long for goodreads):

<http://caitfish.livejournal.com/14552...>

And a subsequent review after some more thought:

<http://caitfish.livejournal.com/14589...>

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### **Rebecca says**

This is another one of those books, like *Blink* or *Outliers*, where an author applies science in an unorthodox way, flings a bunch of interesting anecdotes and studies at you, and pretends to draw more conclusions than are actually warranted. You can tell because the cover is completely white with a single, extra shiny object slightly off-center and the title in a trendy modernist color.

I'll give Gilbert this--he's an unusually witty writer. I literally laughed out loud throughout this book. But I think in the end, it's fluff--in one ear and right out the other. I'm still not sure what I've actually absorbed.

Gilbert's basic thesis boils down to the fact that the trait that lets us build civilizations--imagination--constantly deludes us into misjudging what will make us happy. Which is good for civilization-building--without it, we'd probably be scratching our privates in a jungle with the bonobos. But since it's not something we can turn off, or are willing to, it means we'll all spend our lives chasing phantoms, trying to please a future self who will wonder what we were thinking.

I don't recall any glaring flaws in his argument, although there's not much that can easily be used to refute it here. If there's research counter to his results, it's not like I know what it is. For once, there are no sweeping pronouncements made--he pretty much shrugs his shoulders and says that it's human nature to be a little bit delusional, and there's really nothing to it. Kind of refreshing, actually.

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### **Inder says**

Is it just me, or is the author of this book unusually cocky in his writing style? Gilbert reiterates a bunch of basic ideas that any normal, reasonably intelligent person should already have arrived at (like, you shouldn't judge another person's life without all of the facts, and, wow, things never turn out quite how you plan them) and then acts like he's discovered a new planet. His tone is one of an utterly brilliant professor talking down to his idiotic, simple students.

I was actually, mildly offended by this book, and as you can probably tell by the rest of my selections, I am not easily offended. I'm happy to read all about views I disagree with, just don't treat me like an idiot! This book just wasted my time. I was so infuriated with it that my husband had to remind me that it's just a book and I could put it down if it was so bad - but I couldn't stop, because it just got worse and worse!

Even the forward to the book, with acknowledgements, is cocky beyond belief. Gilbert first says "Actually, I wrote this book all by myself, without any help," before acknowledging that he borrowed lots from his students' research. What? Unbelievable!

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### **Carmen says**

*When we imagine future circumstances, we fill in details that won't really come to pass and leave out details that will. When we imagine future feelings, we find it impossible to ignore what we are feeling now and impossible to recognize how we will think about the things that happen later.*

Forgive my rather "meh" response to this book. And it was a very bored response. But that isn't the book's fault, it's my fault.

If you have a background in psychology, a degree in psychology, or work in the field of psychology, this book will be old hat to you. Gilbert presents these studies and experiments and psychological insights that will be stunning and revolutionary to anyone who is uneducated in psychology, but to someone who has been trained in psychology, there is absolutely nothing new to offer here.

This is NOT a self-help book. I know it looks like a self-help book and is titled as a self-help book, but it is really a psychology book. This book will NOT help you be any happier in your life. Gilbert's whole main point is that your brain acts and reacts in ways that are beyond your control. Even when you are told about them and warned about them, you can't stop them. So no self-help here. Instead, this is a look into psychology and a bit of neuroscience (but only the most minuscule bit).

Gilbert discusses things like resiliency, selective memory, and expectations about the future.

I really enjoy psychology books, but I felt this one did not offer anything new to anyone with a psychological degree or education.

If you DO NOT have training in psychology - I would recommend this book. It will be interesting to you, Gilbert makes some great points, and he is funny. I mean, actually very amusing and lighthearted. And you will learn some psych basics without boring texts or going to class.

But if you ARE someone with a psych background, skip this - you will be bored out of your skull, and Gilbert will just be telling you what you already know.

Recommendations for people who already have tons of psychology knowledge:

A First-Rate Madness: Uncovering the Links Between Leadership and Mental Illness EXCELLENT

On Depression: Drugs, Diagnosis, and Despair in the Modern World EXCELLENT

## The Sibling Effect: What the Bonds Among Brothers and Sisters Reveal About Us

The Compass of Pleasure: How Our Brains Make Fatty Foods, Orgasm, Exercise, Marijuana, Generosity, Vodka, Learning, and Gambling Feel So Good - I gave this four stars, it's not five-star material.

## Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things

## The Steal: A Cultural History of Shoplifting

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### Foster says

I just finished Daniel Gilbert's new book, and it's highly recommended. Next time in Cambridge, I'll be asking him to join me at Grafton Street for a Guinness (you'll get this if you read the book).

He uses one of the most humorous and accessible non-fiction, science-related writing styles to explain a whole genre of psychological, psychiatric, and philosophical research. His basic message is that we are crap at remembering our past happiness, and also terrible at making decisions that would increase our future happiness. His advice – trust the testimony of others when deciding what choices to make.

Here are some choice bits from the book, but again – I recommend you take the time to enjoy it for yourself!

“[When we ask kids what they want to be when they grow up] they generally come up with things like “the candy guy” or “a tree climber.” We chuckle because the odds that the child will ever become the candy guy or a tree climber are vanishingly small...But notice that while these are the wrong answers to our question, they are the right answers to another question, namely, “What do you want to be now?”...At some point between our high chairs and our rocking chairs, we learn about later.”

“When we think of events in the distant past or distant future we tend to think abstractly about why they happened or will happen, but when we think of events in the near past or near future we tend to think concretely about how they happened or will happen.”

“The point here is that we generally do not sit down with a sheet of paper and start logically listing the pros and cons of the future events we are contemplating, but rather, we contemplate them by simulating those events in our imaginations and then noting our emotional reactions to that simulation. Just as imagination previews objects, so does it prefeel events.”

“Among life's cruellest truths is this one: wonderful things are especially wonderful the first time they happen, but their wonderfulness wanes with repetition...Psychologists call this habituation, economists call it declining marginal utility, and the rest of us call it marriage...One way to beat habituation is to increase the variety of one's experiences. Another way...is to increase the amount of time that separates repetitions of the experience.”

“As soon as our potential experience becomes our actual experience...our brains get busy looking for ways to think about the experience that will allow us to appreciate it.”

“Research shows that when people are given electric shocks, they actually feel less pain when they believe they are suffering for something of great value...If you've managed to forgive your spouse for some

egregious transgression but still find yourself miffed about the dent in the garage door...then you have experienced this paradox."

"Inescapable circumstances trigger the psychological defenses that enable us to achieve positive views of those circumstances, but we do not anticipate that this will happen."

"Uncertainty can preserve and prolong our happiness, thus we might expect people to cherish it. In fact, the opposite is generally the case...Our relentless desire to explain everything that happens may well distinguish us from fruit flies, but it can also kill our buzz."

"Because we tend to remember the best of times and the worst of times instead of the most likely of times, [experience] does not always pay clear dividends."

"In short, the production of wealth does not necessarily make individuals happy, but it does serve the needs of an economy, which serves the needs of a stable society, which serves as a network for the propagation of delusional beliefs about happiness and wealth."

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### **Lubinka Dimitrova says**

A wickedly funny, deeply educating and eye-opening book. I'll continue to fool myself that I know what I'm doing, feeling, seeing and thinking, but thanks to this book, I hope that I'll increase the basic level of happiness to which all people seem to revert to eventually.

I immensely enjoyed the brilliant writing and the wit of the author, which definitely added to the pleasure of reading this book.

"Despite the third word in the title, this is not an instruction manual that will tell you anything useful about how to be happy... Instead, this is a book that describes what science has to tell us about how and how well the human brain can imagine its own future, and about how and how well it can predict which of those futures it will most enjoy... Weaving together facts and theories from psychology, cognitive neuroscience, philosophy, and behavioral economics, this book allows an account to emerge that I personally find convincing but whose merits you will have to judge for yourself.

There is no simple formula for finding happiness. But if our great big brains do not allow us to go surefootedly into our futures, they at least allow us to understand what makes us stumble."

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### **Lena says**

This is pretty much the opposite of a self-help book. Instead of telling you how you can be happier, Harvard Psychology professor Gilbert talks about why we are so bad at predicting what will make us happy in the first place. Gilbert is a smooth and entertaining writer, and he does a good job of explaining in detail the cognitive errors we make in trying to predict our future happiness. For those who hope to gain some practical value from the book, Gilbert also outlines one technique that has been effective in predicting future happiness, but then goes on to discuss the reason why the vast majority of humans won't use it. Still, I found the book more uplifting than depressing, as there's something comforting about knowing that everyone else

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makes the same kinds of mistakes that I do, and the mind is much more skilled at finding happiness in unexpected places than we imagine.

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### **Ron says**

Gilbert's argument in this book is the best endorsement for reading other people's reviews of the book, because if what he says is accurate, they are more reliable indicators of customer satisfaction than how customers imagine they'll feel after making any purchase. If that seems like a no-brainer, then you won't find yourself greatly illuminated by this book. While I'd still give this book 4 stars for its often interesting survey of cognitive research about the behavior of imagination in predicting future happiness and/or regret, any reasonably introspective person of a certain age will have already made many of these observations by paying attention to their own lives and the lives of other people.

Malcolm Gladwell has given a celebrity review of this book, and Seth Godin's blurb on the back cover compares Gilbert to Gladwell, but don't be fooled - they're in a different league. Don't expect Gladwell's kind of science writing, with its brilliance of speculation and the implications of fascinating research results. Gilbert wants to tickle your funny bone, too, like he's entertaining a lethargic class of undergraduates. As others have noted, that tone wears thin after a while.

Will you be happy after you read this book? Maybe some, maybe not much. Now you know . . .

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### **kareem says**

We have brains that allow us to predict the future  
We predict the future based on past memories

BUT our past memories are fallible: we tend to fill in details in our memories - we remember things not as they actually happened, but as we think they happened when we think about them in the future.

AND we predict poorly because

1. we fill in details that will never come to pass (we are optimists!)
2. we leave out (often unpleasant) details that do come to pass

ALSO when thinking about the future, we find it impossible to leave out how we are feeling now, and impossible to recognize how we will think about things that happen later.

SO how to make better predictions and thus be happier?

#### **ASK PEOPLE WHO HAVE DONE WHAT YOU ARE THINKING ABOUT DOING**

"when people are deprived of the information that imagination requires and are thus forced to use others as surrogates, they make remarkably accurate predictions about their future feelings."

We Don't Do This.

WHY?

- because we assume we are unique little snowflakes:
- we attribute other people's choices to attributes of the chooser ("Phil picked English because he's a literary type"), but attribute our choices to options ("I picked it because it is easier than economics")
- recognize our decisions are influenced by social norms ("I was too embarrassed to raise my hand because I was super confused", but don't recognize others' decisions are based on the same factors ("No one else raised a hand because nobody else was as confused as I")
- Our choices reflect our aversions ("I voted for kerry b/c i can't stand bush") but assume others' reflect their appetites ("if Leon voted for Kerry, it's because he likes him")

## ALSO

- even though we aren't special, the way we know ourselves is -- we experience our own thoughts and feelings but must infer those of others
- we enjoy thinking of ourselves as special -- we want to fit in, but not too well
- we tend to overestimate *\*everybody's\** uniqueness -- despite having very similar characteristics (breathe oxygen, mostly water-based, big brains, etc) we focus on differences to decide who to hang out with, hump, and do business with. we are obsessed with differences and thus overestimate how different people are.

so, ask other people who have had similar experiences to predict how happy you'll be!

"surrogation is a cheap and effective way to predict one's future emotions, but because we don't realize just how similar we all are, we reject this reliable method and rely instead on our imaginations, as flawed and fallible as they may be."

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## Trevor says

Years ago there was a poster that appeared around Melbourne of a young man with one of those far away looks in his eyes. The photo in the poster was extreme close up and the expression on the young man's face was that which I believe only comes from religious ecstasy or a particularly transporting bowel movement. In bold type under this young man's face was the single word Happiness. Below this in smaller type was Transcendental Meditation. I figured we were talking religion rather than laxative in this particular case.

I remember thinking when I first saw this poster that if THAT is happiness then I would rather be un-happy (or perhaps that should be non-happy? Hard to say).

This book made me happy. At times it made me use the laugh I generally only reserve for a Wodehouse Wooster novel. The guy who wrote 50 Psychology Classics got me onto him by comparing him to Bryson. Actually, Bryson can be a little more surreal in his humour – particularly in Notes from a Big Country – but I still LOL-ed.

Premise of the book. Why is it that we prove to be remarkably hopeless at judging what later versions of ourselves will like or want? We marry people we think we will be happy with in old age only to toss them in mid-life. We study to be idealists and philosophers only to end up cynical readers of psychology. Why are we so hopeless at working out what will make us happy?

The answer this book provides isn't going to win it the Dr Phil 'Put a Smile on Your Dial' Award for best self-help book. But it might just help you to understand why we tend to be unimpressive at knowing what is going to make us happy.

This really is a wonderful book. The discussion on conjoined twins saying they are ‘happy’ and our normal responses to hearing this (‘the poor wee things, they can’t know any better, imagine them thinking they are happy’) made me cringe as only a patronising overstatement of what I was thinking myself can do.

About 10 years ago I went to a high school reunion. I knew it would be a mistake and I wasn’t disappointed. What was interesting was that I’ve always seen myself as quite different from everyone I went to school with. But that afternoon I found I was as bland everybody else. Everyone, it seemed, had two kids, lived within 5 kilometres of school and worked in the city. Whatever details separated us, what united us seemed much more obvious. I’ve never felt more like a cog in a machine.

But I walked out of there and went back to believing I’m an individual and remained contented in my own non-identity with those around me. This book has had much the same effect as that high school reunion. In fact, the lesson of this book is that we are much more like everyone else than we like to imagine – and it is this disinclination to admit to it that is one of the major reasons why we are so terrible at predicting what future events will be like for us.

For example, tomorrow you are going to go blind – how do you think you are going to feel? I guess the words, “Not particularly delighted”, don’t quite cover it. But this book points out that we generally think we are going to feel infinitely worse than we actually end up feeling. We think we would ‘rather be dead’ – whereas people who end up blind generally don’t end up killing themselves over it.

And if we underestimate how unhappy we will be if bad things happen to us we also overestimate how happy we will be when good things happen to us.

This book doesn’t really offer any answers – if you are looking for the answer to the question what is happiness you will probably have to turn to your guru of choice. What this book does do is show how we are remarkably consistent at fooling ourselves in ways that have negative effects on our happiness and shows some ways we may be able to take control.

I don’t want to spoil this for you – but the bit about the people in the old people’s home who had control over when young visitors would come see them was one of the saddest things I’ve read in a long time. Is there anything sadder than our unintended consequences when they cause infinite harm to others? When, ‘but I really didn’t mean it’ just doesn’t sate our despair.

If I have a preference for people it is for people who make me laugh. It is a sad fact that I’m more likely to think someone is ‘on the money’ if they also make me smile. Of course, there probably is no relationship at all between the worth of an argument and how often the writer makes me smile – but you’ll never convince me of that. This is a wonderful book and well worth reading. I’ve started to watch the You-Tube Video Richard attached – it looks great, but it is too late for me now. There will be time for such a word. Oh, and that is the other reason why I loved this book. Each chapter starts with a remarkably apt quote from Shakespeare. Got to love someone who quotes Shakespeare at you and does so in context.

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## Guy says

First thing you need to know about this book: it’s cognitive psychology, not self-help. To Gilbert’s credit, he states this clearly early on... but by then, for many purchasers, it will be too late, since the cover fairly shouts

"Self-Help!!".

So, to be clear: "Stumbling on Happiness" won't do much to help you be happy, but it will help you understand some of the many reasons as to why, despite our best efforts, we so often fail to be so.

But only some of the reasons, and frankly only some of the simpler and more basic ones. Gilbert is interested in, and explains well, how the brain works to construct reality as we experience it... and how some common mistakes we make can therefore be understood. He has nearly nothing to say, however, about the social and cultural context in which people live, and the many and various ways in which the wider world influences our happiness (or lack thereof).

Ultimately therefore, this is akin to reading a book about what optical illusions tell us about the brain's visual system, rather than a critical analysis of painting that explains why we perceive one work as a masterpiece and the next as merely ordinary. And this matters, because creating happiness is not just a question of the plumbing of the brain (although it is clearly important to understand this too); it is more like creating a masterpiece.

Last complaint: despite a fairly engaging style and some humour, this is closer to being an academic thesis than a popular science book. I felt it could have been boiled down to about fifty pages without losing much. There are some interesting and amusing studies and anecdotes... but there are many more that just make the same or closely related points over and over.

Bottom line: interesting, but somewhat misleading and not a must-read.

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## Thomas says

Note: the title reads *Stumbling On Happiness*, not *Stumbling Onto Happiness*. Thus, Daniel Gilbert's book does not go into self-help. Rather, it delineates the many errors we humans make when solidifying decisions and how our minds trick us into choosing things that might not lead us to happiness in the long run.

A few cool concepts stood out to me when reading *Stumbling On Happiness*: how we kind of suck at predicting our future emotions because our present state influences us so much, how certain societal ideas like needing money or wanting kinds propagate even if they do not make us happy, and how the brain constructs experiences based on biased memories as opposed to objective truths. Gilbert writes in a witty, smart, and accessible way. He incorporates psychological research, philosophy, cognitive neuroscience, sociology, behavioral economics, and more to strengthen his points. The broad scope of this book makes it appealing to individuals with a wide array of interests, spanning hard and social sciences.

I only wish that Gilbert had tied all his ideas together with a little more incisiveness. At times it felt like he just listed experiments and made some general comments about them instead of tying them altogether. Even though this book circumvents the self-help genre, I wanted to read more solid connections between Gilbert's remarks and how they relate to happiness. *Stumbling on Happiness* could have used a stronger thesis: it reads fine as a general list of cognitive fallacies we make, and it could have been even better with a dose of additional punch.

Overall, recommended to those intrigued by the book's synopsis, this article about happiness, or those intrigued by cognitive psychology. A well-researched book with some witty, substantial ideas, even if not all

of them will stay in my memory (as Gilbert himself suggests).

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