

2.

Hooked

A Hollywood script lives or dies by its ‘hook’, the simple premise that captures the audience’s interest, sets the story in motion and drives the action forward. A hook necessarily involves conflict, and seeing how the conflict gets resolved is why, once we’re hooked into a movie, we stay engaged and keep watching.

As a psychologist, I find that the books and movies that hook me most are the ones in which the conflict – or at least a big part of it – exists within the hero’s own nature. A struggling actor doesn’t understand women until, desperate for a job, he pretends to be a woman in real life (*Tootsie*). An ingénue fears commitment (*Runaway Bride*). Or, in one of the truly great hooks of all time – a skilled assassin gets hit on the head, wakes up in the middle of a guns-blazing intrigue and has no idea who he is or what he wants (*The Bourne Identity*).

We may not drive convertibles past palm trees or take meetings with movie stars, but each of us, in our own way, is a Hollywood screenwriter. That’s because, every minute of every day, we’re writing the scripts that get screened at the cinema inside our heads. Only in our own life stories, getting hooked doesn’t imply the excitement of being on the edge of your seat. It means being caught by a self-defeating emotion, thought or behaviour.

The human mind is a meaning-making machine and a big part of being human involves labouring to make sense of the billions of bits of sensory information bombarding us every day. Our way of making sense is to organize all the sights and sounds and experiences and relationships swirling around us into a cohesive narrative: *This is me, Susan, waking up. I am in a bed. The small mammal jumping on me is my son, Noah. I used to live in Johannesburg, but now I live in Massachusetts. I have to get up today and prepare for a meeting. That’s what I do. I’m a psychologist and I meet with people to try to help them.*

The narratives serve a purpose: we tell ourselves these stories to organize our experiences and keep ourselves sane. The trouble is, we all get things wrong. People without a realistically consistent story, or a story completely divorced from reality, may be labelled 'psychotic'. But while most of us may never hear voices or have delusions of grandeur, in scripting our own stories we all take liberties with the truth. Sometimes we don't even realize we're doing it.

We then accept these persuasive self-accounts without question, as if they were the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. These are stories that, regardless of their veracity, might have been scribbled on our mental chalkboards when we were eight, or even before we could walk or talk. We crawl into these fables and let a sentence or a paragraph that may have originated thirty or forty years ago, and has never been objectively tested and verified, represent the totality of our lives. There are about as many of these confused scenarios as there are people:

'My parents got divorced right after I came along, so I'm responsible for my mother's alcoholism.'

'I was the introvert in a family of social butterflies, which is why nobody loves me.'

Ad infinitum.

We create these stories every day on a smaller scale, too. I know I've done it. Here's an example:

A few years ago, a colleague casually informed me in a voicemail that he was going to borrow – another word would be 'steal' – a concept of mine to use as the title of his forthcoming book. He hoped I 'wouldn't mind', he said, not asking permission but calmly stating a fact.

Hello! Of course I minded! He was using *my* concept, one I'd planned to use myself. I cursed the day I'd mentioned it to him in an unguarded moment at a conference. But what could I do? Professionals can't go screaming at each other.

I buried my anger and did what most people would do: I called my spouse to vent. But my husband, Anthony, is a physician, and upon answering the phone he said, 'Suzy, I can't talk. I have a patient in the operating room, waiting for an emergency procedure.' So here I was, 'wronged' for a second time, and in this case by my own husband!

The logic of the situation – saving his patient's life did matter more than talking to me right then – did nothing to calm my rising anger. How could

my husband treat me this way – the one time I really needed him? That thought quickly morphed into ‘He’s never really there for me.’ My anger swelled, as did my plan to ignore his call-back when it came. I was hooked.

That’s right. Instead of having a conversation with my colleague in which I expressed calmly, but in no uncertain terms, my disapproval of his actions and tried to figure out a satisfactory resolution, I spent two days in a snit, giving my guiltless husband the silent treatment because he was ‘never there for me’!

Brilliant, yes?

It isn’t just that these dubious, not-always-accurate stories we tell ourselves leave us conflicted or waste our time or result in some chilly days around the house. The bigger issue is the conflict between the world these stories describe and the world we want to live in, the world where we could truly thrive.

During the average day, most of us speak around 16,000 words. But our thoughts – our internal voices – produce thousands more. This voice of consciousness is a silent but tireless chatterbox, secretly barraging us with observations, comments and analyses without pause. Moreover, this ceaseless internal voice is what literature professors call an unreliable narrator – think Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*, or Amy Dunne in *Gone Girl*. As with these two characters, whose accounts of events can’t be entirely trusted, our own internal narrator may be biased, confused or even engaged in wilful self-justification or deception. Even worse, it will *not shut up*. You may be able to stop yourself from sharing every thought that pops into your head, but stopping yourself from having those thoughts in the first place? Good luck.

While we often accept the statements bubbling up from within this river of incessant chatter as being factual, most are actually a complex mixture of evaluations and judgements, intensified by our emotions. Some of these thoughts are positive and helpful; others are negative and unhelpful. In either case, our inner voice is rarely neutral or dispassionate.

For example, right now, I’m sitting at my desk, writing this book and progressing rather slowly. ‘I’m sitting at my desk.’ That’s a simple thought grounded in fact. So is: ‘I’m writing a book.’ So is, ‘I’m a slow writer.’

Okay, so far so good. But from here, it’s all too easy for my factual observations to slip over into the realm of opinion. The story I tell myself

could easily develop a hook, leaving me hung up on a dodgy, unexamined idea, flailing like a bass that's about to be some fisherman's dinner.

'I'm *too* slow at writing' is the self-critical evaluation that can all too quickly follow 'I'm a slow writer.' Another, 'I'm slower than most other writers', turns the fact-based thought into a comparison. 'I'm falling behind' adds an element of anxiety. And then the damning judgement to sum it all up: 'I've been kidding myself about how much I can write before this deadline. Why can't I be honest with myself? I'm done for.' Which is a long way from my fact-based starting point: I am sitting at my desk, slowly writing a book.

To see just how effortlessly people can slide from fact to opinion to judgement and anxiety, try this brain-bouncing exercise. Think about each of these prompts, one at a time:

Your mobile phone.

Your house.

Your job.

Your in-laws.

Your waistline.

When you free associate, some of your thoughts may be factual. 'I had dinner with my in-laws last week' or 'I have a project due on Monday.' But then see how quickly those pesky opinions, evaluations, comparisons and worries enter in:

My mobile phone ... needs an upgrade.

My house ... is always a mess.

My job ... is Stress Central.

My in-laws ... spoil the kids.

My waistline ... gotta get back on that diet.

In workshops, I sometimes ask people to anonymously list difficult situations and the thoughts and emotions that tag along with them. Here are some unhelpful 'self stories' one group of high-flying executives recently came up with and the situations that inspired them:

- Someone else succeeds: 'I'm not good enough. Why wasn't it me?'
- Working full-time: 'My life's a failure. Everything around me is a mess, and my children resent me for missing out on all the fun we could be having together.'

- Performing a difficult task: ‘Why the hell is this taking so long!? If I had any talent I’d be able to do it faster.’
- A missed promotion: ‘I’m an idiot, and a wuss. I let myself get cheated.’
- Being asked to do something new: ‘I’m terrified. This is never going to work.’
- A social engagement: ‘I’m going to freeze up and everyone’s going to think I was raised in a cave.’
- Receiving negative feedback: ‘I’m going to get fired.’
- Meeting up with old friends: ‘I’m a loser. They’re all living way more exciting lives than I am. And making more money!’
- Trying to lose weight: ‘I’m a disgusting pig. I should just give up. Everyone in the room looks better than me.’

And here’s a clue to why this progression from neutral thought to fish on a line is so easy:

‘Mary had a little _____.’

‘Lamb’, right? Not too tough. The word popped into your head automatically.

What makes getting hooked almost inevitable is that so many of our responses are just as reflexive.

The hook is usually a situation you encounter in your day-to-day life. It might be a tough conversation with your boss, an interaction with a relative that you’ve been dreading, an upcoming presentation, a discussion with your significant other about money, a child’s disappointing report card or maybe just ordinary rush-hour traffic.

Then there is your autopilot response to that situation. You might say something sarcastic, or shut down and avoid your feelings, or procrastinate, or walk away, or brood, or have a screaming fit.

When you automatically respond in whatever unhelpful way you do, you’re hooked. The result is just as predictable as the word ‘lamb’ that popped into your head after ‘Mary had a little ...’ The bait hook is dangling right there in front of you, and you snap at it without a moment’s hesitation.

Getting yourself hooked begins when you accept thoughts as facts.

‘I’m no good at this. I always screw it up.’

Often, you then start avoiding situations that evoke those thoughts.

'I'm not even going to try.'

Or you may endlessly replay the thought.

'The last time I tried it was so humiliating.'

Sometimes, perhaps following the well-meaning advice of a friend or family member, you try to will these thoughts away.

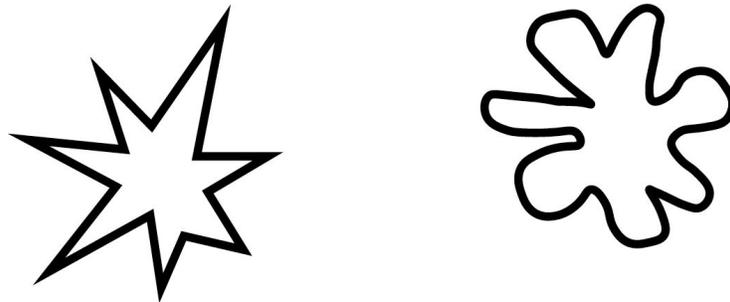
'I shouldn't have thoughts like this. It's counterproductive.'

Or, soldiering on, you force yourself to do what you dread, even when it's the hook itself, not anything you genuinely value, that's driving the action.

'I've got to try. I've got to learn to like this, even if it kills me.'

All this internal chatter is not only misleading, it's exhausting, sapping important mental resources you could put to much better use.

Adding to the 'hooking' power of our thoughts is the fact that so many of our mental habits are actually hardwired to merge with our emotions and produce a turbocharged response.



Suppose for a moment you're taking a class to learn a new intergalactic language. In that language one of the figures above is called 'bouba' and the other is called 'kiki'. The teacher asks which you think is which. Chances are you'd pick the shape on the left as 'kiki' and the one on the right as 'bouba'.

The creators of this experiment, V. S. Ramachandran and Edward Hubbard, found that 98 per cent of people saw it that way. Even two-year-olds who hadn't yet learned language patterns and didn't speak English made the same choice. From Ramachandran's campus at the University of California, San Diego, to the stone walls of Jerusalem, to the isolated shores of Swahili-speaking Lake Tanganyika in central Africa, this is a universal preference woven into the brain. Regardless of language, culture or alphabet, within seconds of being shown the nonsense symbols, the human

hearing centres identify the word 'kiki' as having a sharp inflection, and the word 'bouba' as being softer and more rounded.

[This association of a certain shape with a certain sound](#) is thought to take place in part because the angular gyrus, the brain region in which the judgement occurs, sits at the crossroads of our touch, hearing and vision centres. It engages in sensory blending, integrating sounds, feelings, images, symbols and gestures, and might even account for our ability to think in metaphors. 'That's a loud shirt,' we say, or 'That's sharp cheese,' even though the tacky Hawaiian shirt makes no noise and the hunk of Cheddar you're enjoying won't slice off your finger any time soon. (Patients with damage to the angular gyrus might be able to speak perfect English, but not to grasp metaphors. This is also true of lower primates, who have an angular gyrus about one-eighth the size of ours.)

Our capacity for sensory blending doesn't just help poets and writers come up with engaging turns of phrase. It also, unfortunately, sets us up to get and stay hooked. That's because we don't experience our thoughts with a flat, Mr Spock-like neutrality: 'I just had the thought that I am being undermined by a rival. How interesting.'

Instead, thoughts come fully accessorized with visual images, symbols, idiosyncratic interpretations, judgements, inferences, abstractions and actions. This gives our mental life a vibrant intensity, but it can also take away our objectivity and leave us at the mercy of intrusive ideas – whether they're true or not, and whether they are helpful or not.

In court, judges tend to allow juries to see autopsy photos, but rarely crime scene photos. That's because chaotic, violent, bloody images pack an emotional wallop that judges often fear will overwhelm the jury's hoped-for logical, neutral deliberations. Autopsy photos are taken in bright light on a steel table – all very clinical. But crime scene photos can include little details that humanize the victim – her child's picture on the blood-splattered dresser, the untied shoelace of his well-worn running shoes – or that dramatize the victim's suffering. Such emotionally evocative images could 'impassion' jurors and push them toward a retaliatory mindset: 'The victim was just like me. The defendant has a pretty good alibi, but somebody has to pay for this outrage!'

The vivid Technicolor nature of our cognitive processing, blended with and ramped up by emotion, is an evolutionary adaptation that served us well when snakes and lions and hostile neighbouring tribes were out to get us.

Under threat from an enemy or a predator, your average hunter-gatherer couldn't afford to waste time with Spock-like abstraction – 'I am under threat. How should I evaluate my options?'

The kind of responses our ancient ancestors needed to stay alive required that they feel danger viscerally, grasping the meaning in a way that led automatically to a predictable response driven by the endocrine system's fuel-injection process: the fight-or-flight response.

When I was in my twenties and living with my mother for a year, a friend and her boyfriend were raped and beaten in their apartment by a gang of criminals who broke into their home and lay in wait for them to return from a date. Horrific crimes like this were, as I've mentioned, all too common in Johannesburg. After it happened, I was on edge more than ever.

One night, I got completely lost driving home and ended up in a very dangerous neighbourhood. As I made my way home, I started to worry that I was being followed. But by the time I got home, I couldn't see anyone. I went indoors, planning to return to my car to collect my luggage. Thirty minutes later, as I emerged from the house and walked toward the car, things seemed safe and fine. Then I heard a guttural sound. I looked up. Two men were coming toward me, guns in hands. My emotions were so heightened by my recent hours of fear, coupled with the memory of my friends' attack, that without a second's delay I started screaming. Loud, colourful and aggressive profanities tumbled out of my mouth (I'm not a prude, but believe me, they were way too vile to repeat here.) The men, caught off guard, stared at me in their own fright. (I can only imagine what was going through their minds, seeing this crazy woman on the loose!) Then they scrambled back into the bushes from where they'd come and disappeared down the road. To this day I am grateful to my brain's sensory blending: see, remember, feel, hear, and react – all at once.

This incredible blending facility, however, also predisposes us to getting hooked. In today's world, thankfully, most of our problems, even most of our threats, are vague and long term. It isn't, 'Aaaaah! A snake!' It's, 'Is my job secure?', 'Am I going to hit retirement with enough savings set aside?', 'Is my daughter so hung up on that no-good Petersen kid that her grades are starting to slip?' But because of the emotions associated with our thoughts, even the mildest 'slice of life' scenarios projected in our heads – a couple getting older, a teenage girl in love – become triggers that can evoke an

autopilot response of high anxiety, dread and the feeling of immediate threat.

Here's how a random thought can turn into a persistent hook:

Internal Chatterbox + Technicolor Thought Blending + Emotional Punch = Hooked

1. It starts when we listen to our **Internal Chatterbox ...**

I haven't spent any mother-daughter time with Jane for a few days. I'm just not around enough. I need to be with her more. But how do I manage that with everything I've got going on at work? I just can't keep up. Michelle Smith seems to have the time to create special moments with *her* daughter. She's such a good mother. She really has her priorities straight. What's wrong with me? I've got it all wrong.

2. Thanks to **Technicolor Thought Blending, the chatter blends with memories, visual images and symbols ...**

Just look at my little girl. She's growing up so fast. I can almost smell the snack my mother used to make for me when I got home from school. I should bake treats for Jane. I can already see her, finishing school and leaving home – with that no good Ricky Petersen! – and hating me. Why is this client emailing me about work on a Saturday? I'm going to give that jerk a piece of my mind right now. And NO, JANE. I CAN'T TAKE YOU SHOPPING. WHAT PART OF 'I HAVE TO WORK' DO YOU NOT UNDERSTAND?

3. Add the **Emotional Punch ...**

I can't believe I just snapped like that at my beloved child. I feel so guilty. I'm going to die alone because my daughter hates me. I

used to love my job, but now I hate it; it's robbing me of my family time. I'm a rotten, miserable failure. My life is a waste.

An emotional punch is just one of the many 'special effects' that give such enormous power to the scripts we write to make sense of our lives, even when the plot is pure fiction. [The poet John Milton summed it up in the seventeenth century](#): 'The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.' And yet, in the world of punchy aphorisms there's also: 'If wishes were wings then pigs would fly.' Meaning that, yes, the mind creates its own universe, but no, we can't solve our problems through affirmations and positive thinking alone. And the fact is, New Age-y solutions that put Smiley Face stickers over our problems can make those problems worse. So the question for us now is, who's in charge – the thinker or the thought?

Then again, part of our problem might be simply the way our thoughts are processed.

THINKING FAST AND SLOW

In 1929, the Belgian painter René Magritte poked the art world in the eye with a canvas called *The Treachery of Images*. You've probably seen it: a tobacco pipe floats above the legend *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*. Translation: 'This is not a pipe.'

At first you might think the artist was simply being, well, a surrealist, provoking his audience with the absurd. But in fact, his assessment was an important cautionary tale about how we process information and how the way our minds race ahead and cut corners can sometimes cause us to jump to false conclusions, or get stuck in harmful cognitive ruts.

What we're looking at when we observe *The Treachery of Images* is pigmented oil brushed on to canvas in a way that makes us think of a pipe. But Magritte is absolutely right: it's *not* a pipe. It's a two-dimensional representation of our idea of a pipe. And the only way you could smoke it would be to rip up the canvas and stick the pieces into a real pipe. In his own way, Magritte was saying that the image is not the thing, [or, as the philosopher Alfred Korzybski](#) put it, 'The map is not the territory.'

Humans love to create mental categories and then fit objects, experiences and even people into them. If something doesn't fit in a category, it goes into the category of 'things that don't fit'. Categories can be useful, as when you classify stocks into high-risk and low-risk, which makes it easier to pick investments that might suit your financial objectives.

But when we become too comfortable with – and habituated to – rigid, pre-existing categories, we're using what psychologists term '*premature cognitive commitment*', which is a habitual, inflexible response to ideas, things and people, even ourselves.

These quick and easy categories, and the snap judgements they lead to, are often called heuristics, but 'rules of thumb' works just as well.

[Heuristics range from reasonable prohibitions](#) – 'I don't eat mezes from outdoor cafes in Istanbul in August' – to pernicious blinders like racial or class prejudice and to self-limiting fun stealers like 'I don't dance.'

As with the tendency of our thoughts to blend with our emotions, the tendency to fit what we see into boxes for easy sorting – and then to make quick gut decisions about them – evolved for a reason. Life is just a hell of a lot easier when you don't have to analyse *every* choice. (Think of those trendy restaurants where the waiter keeps asking you ever more exquisitely detailed questions about your preferences until you want to scream, 'Just bring me the damn salad! Dump mayonnaise on it! I don't care!') We would all be stuck in paralysis through analysis without our own personal rules of thumb, which allow us to get through the routine stuff without expending a lot of mental energy.

Heuristics kick in the moment we meet someone and immediately begin to determine whether we want to get to know her better or steer clear. And as it turns out, we are very good at instinctively sizing up people. The evaluations we make in these scant few seconds, based on very little evidence, are usually pretty accurate, and studies have shown that a subject's first impressions of an unknown person often prove consistent with personality assessments made by the person's friends and family.

Millennia ago, being able to size up strangers on the spot helped humans form bonds of trust that reached beyond blood relatives. That, in turn, led to the development of villages and towns and societies, i.e. civilization.

If human beings lacked the predictive ability of heuristics ('strong handshake, nice smile – seems like a nice guy') and needed to consciously

process every facial expression, conversation and piece of information anew, we'd have no time for actually living life.

Unfortunately, though, our snap impressions can be wrong. They can be based on unfair and inaccurate stereotypes or manipulated by con artists. And once established, they can be tough to reconsider and change. When we make quick judgements, we often overvalue the information that is readily available and undervalue subtleties that might take a while to dig out.

In *Thinking Fast and Slow*, [the psychologist Daniel Kahneman](#) described the human mind as operating in two basic modes of thought. *System 1* thoughts are typically fast, automatic, effortless, associative and implicit, which means they are not available to immediate introspection. They often carry a lot of emotional weight and are ruled by habit and, as a result, are very good at getting us hooked.

System 2 thoughts are slower and more deliberative. They require much more effort and a deeper level of attention. They are also more flexible and amenable to rules that we consciously establish. It is these System 2 operations that allow us to create the space between stimulus and response that Victor Frankl spoke of, the space that provides for the full expression of our humanity, and allows us to thrive.

I remember once watching the television host Bill O'Reilly talking with David Letterman. The conservative pundit posed a question and then began to badger the comedian saying, 'It's an easy question!'

Letterman responded, 'It's not easy for me because I'm thoughtful.'

Dave got a big round of applause.

As mentioned, quick, intuitive System 1 thinking can sometimes be powerful and accurate. Dr Gerd Gigerenzer, the director of the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin, and one of the scientists whose work was discussed in Malcolm Gladwell's bestseller *Blink*, is a social psychologist known for his work on intuitive thinking. [He describes these kinds of 'gut responses'](#) as something of a mystery, even to the person feeling them. All we know is that they rely on simple cues in the environment, while filtering out other information that our conditioning or life experience (or obliviousness, or habit) tells us is not necessary.

Some intuitive responses arise from practice and skill. There's the chess master who can glance at someone else's game in progress and rattle off the

next dozen moves, or the coronary care nurse who can spot a heart attack a mile away, or the firefighter who knows when it's time to evacuate – now!

But [System 1 gut responses have a dark side](#). When heuristics begin to dominate the way we process information and behave, we wind up applying our rules of thumb in inappropriate ways, which makes us less able to detect unusual distinctions or new opportunities. We lack agility.

The average moviegoer, immersed in watching a film, can miss details and errors in story or scene continuity, such as when an actor is holding a coffee cup in a close-up, but not in a wide shot two seconds later. [In the lab, researchers have had participants watch short videos](#) that contain deliberate continuity errors. During a filmed scene of conversation in which the camera switches back and forth from one speaker to the other, for example, one of the characters' clothing keeps changing. Or a character stands up to answer the phone, the camera angle changes, and in the next shot the character is being played by an entirely different actor. On average, two-thirds of participants watching don't notice these errors, even when the main character is the one who's replaced.

[The same researchers behind these experiments did another study](#) in which an experimenter stopped individual students on a campus to ask directions. While the student and the researcher conversed, two other members of the research team walked between them carrying a wooden door. In a sleight-of-hand move worthy of Penn and Teller, the team members used the opportunity to switch places, so that when the visual barrier (the door) was removed, the original seeker of directions had been replaced by a different person. Astoundingly, half the students in the experiment failed to notice the switch and wrapped up the conversation as if nothing had happened.

[A tragic, real-life example of this phenomenon took place in Boston](#) in the pre-dawn hours of a January day in 1995 as a police officer named Kenny Conley was pursuing a shooting suspect up and over a chain-link fence. Officer Conley was so focused on catching his bad guy that he failed to notice something else happening at the scene: other cops were savagely beating another man they assumed was a suspect – but who was, in fact, an undercover officer. Later, in court, Conley testified that he ran right past the place where the brutal assault of his colleague took place, but with his tunnel vision directed on his own task, he didn't even notice.

The lesson: once our minds slip into default mode, it takes a great deal of flexibility to override this state. This is why specialists are often the last ones to notice common sense solutions to simple problems, a limitation economist Thorstein Veblen called the ‘trained incapacity’ of experts. Inflated confidence leads ‘old hands’ to ignore contextual information, and the more familiar an expert is with a particular kind of problem, the more likely he is to pull a prefabricated solution out of his memory bank rather than respond to the specific case at hand.

In another study, psychology professionals were asked to watch an interview conducted with a person they were told was either a job applicant or a psychiatric patient. The clinicians were instructed to apply their expertise and evaluate the interviewee. When they believed the interviewee was applying for a job, the professionals characterized him as normal and fairly well-adjusted; when told that he was a patient, however, they described this same person as distressed and impaired. Instead of paying close attention to the actual person in front of them, the clinicians relied on the superficial cues that, through their experience, allowed them to make diagnoses ‘in their sleep’. Truth be told, they might as well have been asleep.

In general, experts – or people who are highly regarded in any field – are often hooked on their own self-importance. But sometimes status or accomplishment in one realm has no relevance in another. A group of stockbrokers I once met at a conference all agreed surgeons were notoriously bad investors because they would listen to investment advice only from another surgeon. The irony is that the stockbrokers in their consensus of the surgeons’ poor investment prowess were also using a very blunt rule of thumb. And CEOs on corporate team-building retreats out in the wild often assume that they should be in charge, failing to consider that the young guy who works in the mail room and is just out of the army might be better equipped to lead an exercise that involves climbing rocks and dangling from ropes.

People who are hooked into a particular way of thinking or behaving are not really paying attention to the world as it is. They are insensitive to context – what is *really* taking place, as opposed to what they *think* is taking place. Rather, they’re seeing the world as they expect to see it or because they’ve organized it into categories that may or may not have any bearing on the situation at hand.

People who die in fires or crash landings often do so because they try to escape through the same door they used when they entered. In their panic, they rely on an established pattern instead of thinking of another way out. In the same way, our suffering, our disengagement, our relationship challenges, and our other difficulties are almost never solved by thinking in the same old, automatic way. Being emotionally agile involves being sensitive to context and responding to the world as it is right now.

We certainly don't want to put an end to the thoughts and emotions coursing through us, because that would mean the end of *us*. But once again, the question is, who's in charge – the thinker or the thought? Are we managing our own lives according to our own values and what is important to us, or are we simply being carried along by the tide?

When we are not in charge of our own lives, when we're not acting according to our own thoughtful volition and with the full range of options that a perceptive intelligence can conjure, that's when we get hooked.

THE FOUR MOST COMMON HOOKS

Hook 1: Thought-blaming

- 'I thought I'd embarrass myself, so I didn't mingle at the party.'
- 'I thought she was being aloof, so I stopped sharing information on the project.'
- 'I thought he was going to start in on our finances, so I walked out of the room.'
- 'I thought I would sound stupid, so I didn't say it.'
- 'I thought she should make the first move, so I didn't call.'

In each of these examples, the speaker blames his or her thoughts for his or her actions – or inactions. When you start thought-blaming, there's not enough space between stimulus and response, in Frankl's terms, for you to exercise real choice. Thoughts in isolation do not cause behaviour. Old stories don't cause behaviour. *We* cause our behaviour.

Hook 2: Monkey Mindedness

‘Monkey mind’ is a term from meditation used to describe that incessant internal chatterbox that can leap from one topic to the next like a monkey swinging from tree to tree. Maybe you have a fight with your significant other (though it could just as easily be your parent, a child, a friend or a colleague) and he stomps out of the house. As you ride the train to the office, you find your mind buzzing: ‘Tonight I’m going to tell him just how frustrated I feel when he criticizes my parents.’ This anticipatory thought turns into a mock conversation in your head as you plan for the interaction. He might say something else nasty about your parents, so you’ll respond with a comment about his loser brother. You forecast what you think he might say and you plan your responses. By the time you get to work, you’re completely worn out from the intense argument you’ve had – inside your own head.

When we’re in monkey-mind mode, it’s easy to start ‘awfulizing’ – imagining worst-case scenarios or making too much of a minor problem. It’s a huge sap of our energy and a complete waste of time. Even more than that, when you’re spinning these imaginary dramas in your head, you aren’t living in the moment. You’re not noticing the flowers in the park or the interesting faces on the train. And you’re not giving your brain the neutral space it needs for creative solutions – maybe even the solution to whatever it was you were fighting about in the first place.

Monkey mind is obsessed with the push of the past (‘I just can’t forgive what he did’) and the pull of the future (‘I can’t wait to quit and give my manager a piece of my mind’). It’s also often filled with bossy, judgemental inner language, words like ‘must’ and ‘can’t’ and ‘should’ (‘I must lose weight’, ‘I can’t fail’, ‘I shouldn’t feel this way’). Monkey mind takes you out of the moment and out of what is best for your life.

Hook 3: Old, Outgrown Ideas

Kevin desperately wanted to be in a serious relationship. On the surface he was fun and frivolous. But deep down he was closed and distrustful, and kept women at arm’s length. Predictably, all of his relationships fizzled. Kevin told me his father had been an abusive alcoholic who would mock and beat him for his shortcomings, sometimes in front of his friends. As a child, Kevin learned not to show sadness or share vulnerabilities because

his father would use them against him. The lesson was, if even the people you're closest to will turn on you, it's better to remain detached from your feelings and from everyone around you. Kevin's behaviour was completely functional when he was a small child; it protected him emotionally and it kept him safe physically. But that was then.

Twenty years down the road, Kevin's distrust was constricting him like a too-small pair of shoes. He behaved as if he were still living his childhood trauma each day. What he needed was the emotional agility to adapt to the very different, much more positive circumstances of his adult life. His old uncomfortable thought process simply didn't serve him anymore.

One of my coaching clients, Tina, had recently been passed over for a promotion to CEO of a large financial services company. At the start of her career, she worked as a trader in New York in a hard-hitting and male-dominated environment. On the trading floor, she learned that talking about her personal life was taboo and that she needed to show she was just as tough as the rough 'n' tumble guys around her. This worked for her on the trading floor, and she loved her job, but when she moved to a new organization, she realized that people didn't want to follow an automaton. She needed to show some emotion and authenticity, but struggled with allowing herself to get close to anyone. Like Kevin, she was living out an expired story. What got her this far wasn't going to take her any further. She needed the agility to adapt to changing circumstances.

Hook 4: Wrongheaded Righteousness

They say in a court of law you never get justice; if you're lucky, you just get the best deal possible. In so many other areas of life, we hang on too long to the idea of justice, or of vindication, or of having it proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that we are *right*. Anyone who has been in a romantic relationship for more than a few months knows the moment in an argument, especially with a loved one, when you realize ... ahh ... the troubled waters have calmed, some kind of understanding – a truce, perhaps – has been reached, and the best thing you could do now would be to shut your mouth, let it go, turn off the light and go to sleep. Then something compels you to say just one more thing to demonstrate that, in fact, you were right and your spouse was wrong – and all hell breaks loose again.

That same need to have the rightness of your cause validated, or your unjust treatment confirmed, can steal years from your life when you let it persist. In many families, and in many parts of the world, feuds have endured for so long no one can actually remember the original misunderstanding. Ironically, this merely prolongs the sense of injustice, because you're depriving yourself of other good things that you value, such as the warm connection of family or friends. I love the phrase often used to describe this type of self-defeating phenomenon: 'cutting off your nose to spite your face.'

*

The ancient Greek master of paradox, Heraclitus, said that you can never step into the same river twice, meaning that the world is constantly changing and thus always presenting us with new opportunities and situations. To make the most of it, we must continually break down old categories and formulate new ones. The freshest and most interesting solutions often come when we embrace 'the beginner's mind', approaching novel experiences with fresh eyes. This is a cornerstone of emotional agility.

A generation or two ago, society was pretty set on what constituted 'male activities' and 'female activities'. Now, you could get punched in the nose for assuming such a rigid distinction. Similarly, some of us tend to pigeonhole ourselves, failing to recognize our own worth as an individual, seeing ourselves narrowly and exclusively as a rich person, or a fat person, or a geek, or a jock. We learned a long time ago that the self-categorization of 'Mr Johnson's wife' was a limiting and losing proposition. But so is 'CEO', or 'man among men', or 'smartest kid in the class', or even 'Olympic athlete'. Things change. We need flexibility to ensure that we can change too.

Emotional agility means being aware and accepting of all your emotions, even learning from the most difficult ones. It also means getting beyond conditioned or pre-programmed cognitive and emotional responses (your hooks), to live in the moment with a clear reading of present circumstances, respond appropriately and then act in alignment with your deepest values.

In the chapters that follow, I'm going to show you how to become an emotionally agile person who lives life to the fullest.



3.

Trying to Unhook

The count will vary depending on which expert you ask, but for our purposes, let's say [there are seven basic emotions](#): joy, anger, sadness, fear, surprise, contempt and disgust. As we've already seen, all these emotions are still with us because they've helped us survive through millions of years of evolution. And yet five of them – anger, sadness, fear, contempt and disgust – are clearly on the not-so-comfortable end of the affective spectrum. ('Surprise' can go either way.)

What does it mean that most of our emotions reflect the dark side of human experience? If so many of our emotions are troubling, and yet helpful enough to make the cut of natural selection, doesn't that mean that even the dark and difficult feelings have a purpose? Is that why we shouldn't try to avoid them but rather accept them as a useful – though sometimes uncomfortable – part of our lives?

Yes.

Precisely.

But learning to accept and live with *all* our emotions is not what most of us do. Most of us use default behaviours that we hope can deflect or disguise our negative feelings so we won't have to face them. Others settle deeply into these feelings and struggle to get beyond them. Or we attempt to cope with difficult times and difficult emotions through cynicism, irony or gallows humour, refusing to admit that anything is worth taking seriously. (But as Nietzsche said, loosely translated, 'A joke is an epitaph for an emotion.') Still others try to ignore their feelings and, like that more contemporary philosopher, Taylor Swift said, 'shake it off'. When we try to 'unhook' simply by killing off our feelings, the real victim is our own well-being.

To see where your responses fit within the spectrum of these less-than-effective solutions, try these scenarios on for size:

1. Your boss makes a change that upsets you. You are most likely to:
 - A. Ignore your frustration and anger. It'll go away eventually, and you have other stuff to deal with.
 - B. Think long and hard about what you'd like to say to your boss, rehearsing the 'I'll say ...' and 'he'll say ...' lines over and over in your mind.
 - C. Spend some time thinking about why the change upsets you, make a plan to talk this through with your boss and then get back to work.

2. Your three-year-old leaves his toys on the floor. You come home from a tough day at work, trip over them and yell at him. Afterward, you are most likely to:
 - A. Brush away your frustration, telling yourself – 'It's fine, I just had a long day.'
 - B. Chastise yourself all evening for yelling at your son, wonder why you always respond this way and conclude you are the world's worst parent.
 - C. Sit down with your spouse to discuss your day, realizing your reaction to your son came from your frustration with your boss. Give your son a hug and an apology, and put him to bed.

3. You're going through a painful romantic breakup. You:
 - A. Go out drinking with friends to distract yourself. You might even meet some new people. That will help numb the pain.
 - B. Sit at home alone wondering what you could have done differently. Why are you so bad at relationships?
 - C. Feel upset for a while. Write about the experience or talk to your friends, and learn from it.

If you answered A to most of these questions, you are a Bottler. Bottlers try to unhook by pushing emotions to the side and getting on with things. They're likely to shove away unwanted feelings because those feelings are uncomfortable or distracting, or because they think that being anything less

than bright and chipper is a sign of weakness, or a sure-fire way to alienate those around them.

If you're a Bottler who hates work, you might try to rationalize away your negative feelings by telling yourself, 'At least I've got a job.' If you're unhappy in your relationship, you might immerse yourself in a project that just *has* to get done. If you're losing yourself in the busyness of caring for others, you might push your sadness or stress aside by reminding yourself that your 'time will come'. If you're leading team members who are deeply anxious about budget cuts and proposed restructuring, you might tiptoe around those subjects for fear of opening up an emotional can of worms.

Even with the important caveat that people don't always behave according to the gender norms found in research, it usually comes as no surprise to my clients when I tell them that [men are more likely to bottle than women are](#).

When I first began studying psychology in the nineties there seemed to be a cottage industry producing books that explored gender differences in emotional style. *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, written by relationship counsellor John Gray, sold ten million copies. Another hugely successful book from that era, *You Just Don't Understand*, by linguist Deborah Tannen, explored the different ways men and women use language to communicate, or more precisely, to *not* communicate.

[Today, you can see a parody of these stereotypical communication styles](#) in the online comedy clip 'It's Not About the Nail'. In this video, a young woman appears on the screen, lamenting her frustrations to her boyfriend. 'There's all this pressure, you know?' she says. 'I can feel it in my head. And it's relentless. And I don't know if it's ever going to stop.'

The camera pans to the left, and we see a nail sticking out of her forehead.

Her boyfriend tells her matter-of-factly, 'You do have a nail in your head.'

'It's not about the nail!' she cries. 'Stop trying to fix it. You always do this. You always try to fix things when all I need you to do is listen.'

He sighs and tries again. 'That sounds really hard. I'm sorry.'

'It is. Thank you,' she says. She leans in to kiss him and the nail slams further into her forehead.

'Ow!'

The video is funny because it holds a nugget of cultural truth: men are usually seen as task-focused fixers, and women as more emotional beings. And the blond boyfriend in the video displays classic bottling behaviour – tie it up, push it forward, move on. Action, action, action! His girlfriend does, after all, have a nail in her head, and it behoves him to point this out and find a solution.

The problem with bottling is that ignoring troubling emotions doesn't get at the root of whatever is causing them (yes, the nail is causing the pain, but how did the nail get in her head in the first place?). The deeper issues remain.

More than once, I've met bottlers who find themselves, years later, in the same miserable job, relationship or circumstance. They've been so focused on pushing forward and doing what they're 'supposed to' that they haven't been in touch with a real emotion in years, which precludes any sort of real change or growth.

Another aspect of bottling behaviour is trying to think positively, to push the negative thoughts out of your head. [Unfortunately, trying *not* to do something takes a surprising amount of mental bandwidth.](#) And research shows that attempting to minimize or ignore thoughts and emotions only serves to amplify them.

[In a ridiculously simple but very famous study](#) led by the late social psychologist Daniel Wegner, subjects were told to avoid thinking about white bears. They failed miserably. Later, in fact, when the ban was lifted, they thought about white bears much *more* than a control group that hadn't started out under the 'no thoughts about white bears' sanction. Any dieter who has dreamed of chocolate cake and chips understands the counterproductive nature of 'just don't think about it' and other avoidance strategies.

This is the irony of bottling. It feels like it gives us control, but it actually denies us control. First, it's your emotions that are calling the shots. Second, the suppressed emotions inevitably surface in unintended ways, a process that psychologists call *emotional leakage*. Perhaps you're angry with your brother. You try to suppress it. Then, after a glass of wine at a family reunion dinner a snarky comment slips out of your mouth. Now you have a major family drama on your hands. Or you ignore your disappointment over a failed promotion at work, and then a few days later find yourself bawling

like a baby while watching *Armageddon* for the tenth time. This is the risky business of bottling.

Bottling is usually done with the best intentions, and to the practical person it does feel productive. ‘Think positive’, ‘forge forward’ and ‘get on with it’, we tell ourselves. And *poof*, just like that, the unwanted emotions seem to vanish. But really they’ve just gone underground, ready to pop back up at any time, and usually with surprising and inappropriate intensity created by the containment pressure they’ve been under.

It’s no surprise, either, that bottling can have a negative effect on relationships. ‘We just had a massive fight and he heads off to work as if nothing had happened,’ says the beleaguered wife of the bottler. ‘He just doesn’t care!’

In one study, **researchers found that bottling increases** other people’s blood pressure, even if those people don’t know that the bottler is bottling. Wait until the divorce lawyers get hold of that research! ‘Your honour, my client’s husband is going to give her a heart attack because he refuses to express his feelings.’

SPIRALLING IN ANGST

If your choice was B for most of the three scenarios I presented a few pages back, you’re a brooder. And just as bottlers are more likely to be men, **brooders are more likely to be women**.

When hooked by uncomfortable feelings, brooders stew in their misery, endlessly stirring the pot around, and around, and around. Brooders can’t let go, and they struggle to compartmentalize as they obsess over a hurt, perceived failure, shortcoming or anxiety.

Brooding is a cousin of worry. Both are intensely self-focused and both involve trying to inhabit a moment that’s not now. But while worry looks forward, brooding looks back – an even more pointless exercise. Brooders lose perspective as molehills become mountains and slights become capital crimes.

But brooders are ahead of bottlers in one respect: in their attempt to solve their problems, brooders are at least ‘feeling their feelings’ – that is, aware of their emotions. Brooders may not be in danger of emotional leakage, but they might drown in a flood. When you brood, your emotions don’t gain strength by being pressurized in a bottle, but they do gain strength. For

brooders, emotions become more powerful in the same way a hurricane does, circling and circling and picking up more energy with each pass.

The psychologist Brad Bushman did a study in which he asked students to pour their hearts into a piece of writing. Then he had ‘another student’ offer a withering critique. In fact, the ‘other student’ was Bushman, and the criticism was the same to everyone: ‘This is one of the worst essays I have read.’

The feedback had the desired effect: it made the participants really, really angry. Then Bushman asked the subjects to spend some time hitting a punchbag. He instructed one group to think about their anger (that is, to brood) while they smacked the bag. He even gave them a fake photo of the ‘critical student’ to give a little extra juice to their jabs and upper cuts. He encouraged a second group to distract themselves (that is, to bottle) by thinking about improving their physical fitness while they punched. He had a third, control group sit quietly for a few minutes while he pretended to repair his computer.

After the punching session, each participant was given an air horn and invited to blast the people next to them – a measure of aggressive behaviour. All three groups were still angry, but the control group showed the least amount of aggression, blasting the horn the least often. The bottlers displayed more aggression (and more horn blasting) than the control group. But those in the brooding group were the angriest of all, and they were most aggressive in blasting their neighbours with horrendous, ear-splitting noise.

Like bottlers, brooders usually have the best of intentions. Ruminating on troubling feelings offers a comforting illusion of conscientious effort. We *want* to deal with our unhappiness or to learn how to cope with a difficult situation, so we think it through – then think and think and think some more. At the end, we are no closer to resolving the issue at the core of our distress.

Brooding also makes you more likely to blame yourself with questions like ‘Why do I always react like this?’ and ‘Why can’t I handle this better?’ Like bottling, it takes up massive amounts of intellectual energy. It’s exhausting and unproductive.

Brooding isn’t always a solo activity. When you go out with a friend and have a big, fat moan about how your widowed father is mismanaging his finances, you’re doing what’s called co-brooding. When you find yourself complaining to an office-mate for the umpteenth time about your boss’s

tone, you're doing the same. **We might think that these venting sessions** will make us feel better, but given that there's no forward movement or resolution, the end result is you're likely to feel even more annoyed at your father, or so infuriated by your boss you can't concentrate.

Remember how we talked about the way bottlers affect the people who love them? Brooders are similarly hard to deal with but it's because they tend to dump their real, heavy emotions on others. They want to talk it out with those close to them but even their nearest and dearest get empathy fatigue eventually, tiring of a brooder's constant need to talk about fears, worries and struggles. Moreover, **the brooder's self-focus leaves no room for anyone else's needs**, so listeners often ultimately walk away, leaving the brooder feeling both frustrated and alone.

And then, of course, brooders can slip into the trap of 'misery-about-misery' anxieties, in which they worry about all their worrying.

In psychology, just as there is System 1 and System 2 thinking, **there are also Type 1 and Type 2 thoughts**. Type 1 thoughts are the normal human anxieties that come up as you tackle life's everyday obstacles: the big project at work, the crazy schedule, last night's fight, parenting concerns. Type 1 thoughts are straightforward: 'I'm worried about X' or 'I'm sad about Y.'

Type 2 thoughts happen when you enter the mental house of mirrors and start to layer in unhelpful thoughts *about* the thoughts. 'I worry that I worry so much' or 'I'm stressed about being stressed.' To our troubling emotions we add guilt for having them. 'Not only am I worried about X or sad about Y, but also I have no right to be.' We're angry at our anger, worried about our worry, unhappy about our unhappiness.

It's like quicksand. The harder you struggle with your emotions, the deeper you sink.

*

Whatever we may think we're accomplishing by bottling or brooding, neither strategy serves our health or our happiness. It's much like taking an aspirin for a headache: the medicine relieves your pain for a few hours, but if the source of the headache is lack of sleep, a knot in your neck, or a horrendous cold, that headache will return with full force as soon as the analgesic wears off.

Bottling and brooding are short-term emotional aspirin we reach for with the best of intentions. But when we don't go directly to the source of our difficult emotions, we miss the ability to really deal once and for all with what's causing our distress.

If I held a stack of books away from my body, with my arms straight out in front of me, I'd be okay for a few minutes. But after two minutes ... three minutes ... ten minutes ... my muscles would begin to shake. This is what happens when we bottle. Trying to keep things at a stiff arm's length can be exhausting. So exhausting, in fact, that we often drop the load.

But when I hold the books tight to my body, hugging them as if to crush them, my arm muscles will also begin to shake. In this position, my arms and hands are clenched, closed and unable to do anything else. This is what happens to us when we brood.

In both cases, we lose our ability to be fully engaged with the world around us: to hug our children, to be present with a colleague, to create something new or to simply enjoy the smell of the newly mown grass. **Openness and enthusiasm are replaced by rules**, confining stories from the past and invidious judgements, and our ability to solve problems and make decisions actually declines. These rigid postures stop us from being agile when we need to deal with life's stressors.

Now, the occasional brood or bottle, or even a flip back and forth between the two now and then, won't kill you (this is a book on agility, after all). Indeed sometimes these coping strategies may be the best course of action. For instance, if your beloved unceremoniously dumps you the night before your bar exam, it might just be most effective to shove your distress aside so you can concentrate on the task at hand. (If this has actually happened to you, by the way, you have my sincerest sympathy.)

It's when these strategies are used as default coping methods, as they often are, that they become counterproductive and actually embed the hooks deeper and deeper.

*

We learn to brood or bottle early in life, and if you have children, it's worth pausing for a moment to think about the content of your conversations with them.

[The unwritten rulebook about emotions](#) (and how men and women should respond to them) contains what psychologists call *display rules*. ‘Big boys don’t cry’ and ‘We don’t do anger here. Go to your room and come out when you’ve got a smile on your face’, are examples of the imposition of display rules. I’ll never forget the day we buried my father. Well-meaning family and friends told my twelve-year-old brother that he shouldn’t cry because he needed to focus on looking after our mother, my sister and me.

[We learn these rules from our caregivers](#) and, in turn, we often unintentionally pass them down to our own children. For example, we’re much more likely to ask boys about tasks (‘What did you do at school today?’, ‘How was the game?’, ‘Did you win?’) whereas we tend to ask girls about emotions (‘How did you feel?’, ‘Did you have fun?’). Children quickly internalize these rules, which, as we’ll see in Chapter 10, don’t always serve them.

HOOKED ON HAPPINESS

Brooding and bottling aren’t the only unproductive ways people cope with life’s stresses. Another common strategy is the belief, in one form or another, that all will be well if we can just ‘keep on smilin’.

Despite what it says in the Hollywood script, Forrest Gump did not actually invent the Smiley Face. But after fifty years and hundreds of millions of ‘Have a Nice Day’ buttons, T-shirts and coffee mugs, that bright yellow circle with the schematic grin and black-dot eyes is as iconic as the Union Jack.

In the digital age, the Smiley Face has morphed into the emoticons and emojis that pop up everywhere (in fact, I’ve just discovered that if I try to go old-school and type a colon followed by a right parenthesis, my computer changes it to a J whether I want it or not). And with each advance – or some might say regression – in our consumer culture, in which marketers hustle to fulfil desires we didn’t even know we had, the blissed-out Mr Smiley becomes ever more the Holy Grail: the organizing principle of our existence.

Wait. Isn’t happiness why we’re here? Isn’t happiness good for us?

Well, that depends.

A few years back, [two researchers at the University of California at Berkeley](#), LeeAnne Harker and Dacher Keltner, searched the records of Mills College, a nearby private women’s school, and inspected the

yearbook photos from 1958 and 1960. As nearly every happiness researcher will tell you, genuine and false smiles activate different muscle groups, so the two scientists examined the look on each student's face to see whether her *zygomaticus major* or *orbicularis oculi* muscle was at work. When we give an authentic, teeth-baring, bright smile that produces 'crow's feet', both muscles are at work. But the *orbicularis oculi* cannot be contracted voluntarily so if we put on a fake happy face this tiny muscle, located near the eyes, stays still. This gave Harker and Keltner a pretty good idea of how genuinely positive each student was feeling at the time her photograph was taken.

Thirty years later, the students who'd exhibited the sunniest and most genuine yearbook smiles in that fraction of a second as the shutter clicked were doing much better than those who had offered smiles that were a little less real. The genuine smilers had more satisfying marriages, greater feelings of well-being and were more content. *Click.*

Given a choice, we'd probably prefer to be happy all the time, and there *are* advantages to that pleasurable state. More 'positive' emotion is linked with a lower risk of various psychological illnesses, including depression, anxiety and borderline personality disorder.

Positive emotions also drive us to success, help us make better decisions, reduce the risk of disease and allow us to live longer. In some cases, they even help broaden how we think and act by directing our attention to new information and opportunities. [They help build vital social](#), physical and cognitive resources that lead to positive outcomes and affiliations.

With all this, you might presume happiness ranks right up there with food and sunshine in its contribution to human well-being. But as our increasingly obese, melanoma-afflicted society has come to understand, it is possible to have too much of a good thing. [And research shows it's possible not only to be too happy](#), but also to experience the wrong types of happiness, and to go about trying to find happiness at the wrong time and in the wrong ways.

I'm not saying it's better to go around in a funk all the time, but I hope to get you to keep the pursuit of happiness in perspective and to see your 'negative' emotions in a new and more accepting light. In fact, I strongly submit that describing them as 'negative' only perpetuates the myth that these useful – albeit sometimes challenging – feelings are, you know, negative. If I can persuade you otherwise, I'll be happy (but not too happy.)

When we're overly cheerful we tend to neglect important threats and dangers. It's not too big a stretch to suggest that being excessively happy could kill you. You might engage in riskier behaviours like drinking too much ('A fifth round, on me!'), binge eating ('Mmm, more cake!'), skipping contraceptives ('What could possibly go wrong?') and using drugs ('Let's party!'). [An excess of freewheeling giddiness](#) and a relative absence of more sober emotions can even be a marker for mania, a dangerous symptom of psychological illness.

People with high happiness levels sometimes exhibit behaviour that is actually more rigid. That's because mood affects the way our brain processes information. When life is good, and we feel great, and when the environment is safe and familiar, we tend not to think long and hard about anything too challenging – which helps explain why [highly positive people can be less creative](#) than those with a more moderate level of positive emotion.

Not to stereotype the happy among us but when we're in an 'everything is awesome!' mood, we're far more likely to jump to conclusions and resort to stereotypes. [The happy more often place disproportionate emphasis](#) on early information and disregard or minimize later details. This often takes the form of the halo effect, in which, for example, we automatically assume that the cute guy we've just met at the party is kind, just because he wears cool clothes and tells a funny joke. Or we decide that the bespectacled, middle-aged man with a briefcase is more intelligent or reliable, say, than the twenty-two-year-old blonde wearing hot pink Juicy Couture shorts.

Our so-called [negative emotions encourage slower, more systematic cognitive processing](#). We rely less on quick conclusions and pay more attention to subtle details that matter. (Okay, the guy is hot, and he seems into you, but why is he hiding his wedding-ring hand behind his back?) Isn't it interesting that the most famous, fictional detectives are notably grumpy? And that the most carefree kid at school rarely achieves the highest grades in the class?

'Negative' moods summon a more attentive, accommodating thinking style that leads you to really examine facts in a fresh and creative way. It's when we're in a bit of a funk that we focus and dig down. People in 'negative' moods tend to be less gullible and more sceptical, while happy folk may accept easy answers and trust false smiles. (Is that show of pearly whites below the pencil-thin moustache just the zygomaticus major, or is

the orbicularis oculi also involved?) Who wants to question surface truth when everything is going so well? So the happy person goes ahead and signs on the dotted line.

*

The paradox of happiness is that deliberately striving for it is fundamentally incompatible with the nature of happiness itself. Real happiness comes through activities you engage in for their own sake rather than for some extrinsic reason, even when the reason is something as seemingly benevolent as the desire to be happy.

Striving for happiness establishes an expectation, which confirms the saying that expectations are resentments waiting to happen. That's why holidays and family events are often disappointing, if not downright depressing. Our expectations are so high that it's almost inevitable we'll be let down.

[In one study, participants were given a fake newspaper article](#) that praised the advantages of happiness, while a control group read an article that made no mention of happiness. Both groups then watched randomly assigned film clips that were either happy or sad. The participants who had been induced to value happiness by reading the article came away from viewing the 'happy film' feeling less happy than those in the control group who had watched the same film. Placing too high a value on happiness increased their expectations for how things 'should be', and thus set them up for disappointment.

In another study [participants were asked to listen to Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*](#), a piece of music so discordant and jarring that it caused a riot at its 1913 debut. Some participants were told to 'try to make yourself feel as happy as possible' while they listened to the music. Afterward, they evaluated themselves as being less happy compared with a control group that was not chasing Mr Smiley.

[The aggressive pursuit of happiness is also isolating.](#) In yet another study, the higher the participants ranked happiness on their lists of objectives or goals, the more they described themselves as lonely on daily self-evaluations.

Happiness also comes in a variety of cultural variations that opens up the possibility of being happy in the wrong way. In many Western cultures,

happiness tends to be defined in terms of personal accomplishment (including pleasure), whereas in East Asia, happiness is associated with social harmony. In the United States, Chinese-Americans prefer contentment, while Americans with European backgrounds prefer excitement. Japanese culture is built around loyalty with its connection to guilt, whereas American culture embraces more socially disengaged emotions such as pride or anger. **To be happy within a given culture depends** more than a little on how in sync your feelings are with that culture's definition of happiness.

In short, chasing after happiness can be just as self-defeating as the bottling and brooding we talked about earlier. All these coping mechanisms arise from discomfort with 'negative' emotions and our unwillingness to endure anything even remotely associated with the dark side.

Good News About Bad Moods

While it's rarely fun to be in a bad mood, and it's certainly not healthy to constantly stew in 'negative' emotions, here's what experiences of sadness, anger, guilt or fear can do:

- 1. Help us form arguments.** We're more likely to use concrete and tangible information, be more attuned to the situation at hand and be less prone to making judgemental errors and distortions, all of which lends an aura of expertise and authority that can make us more persuasive as writers and speakers.
- 2. Improve memory.** **One study found that shoppers remembered** significantly more information about the interior of a shop on cold, gloomy days, when they were not feeling so exuberant, than on sunny and warm days when life felt like a breeze. Research also shows that when we're in a not-so-good mood we're less likely to inadvertently corrupt our memories by incorporating misleading information.

- 3. Encourage perseverance.** After all, when you already feel great, why push yourself? **On academic tests, an individual in a more sombre mood** will try to answer more questions – and get more of them right – than he or she might when feeling cheerful. It might actually be a good idea, then, for your university-bound son or daughter to be in a slight funk at exam time. (Knowing most teenagers, you're probably already in good shape on that aspect of test preparation.)
- 4. Make us more polite and attentive.** **People in less exuberant moments** are more cautious and considered, and more likely to engage in non-conscious social mimicry (in which we mirror another person's gestures and speech without knowing it), a behaviour that increases social bonding. When we're feeling great we're much more assertive, which often means we're focused more on me-me-me and might ignore what others have to offer or are going through.
- 5. Encourage generosity.** **Those in negative moods pay more attention to fairness**, and are more apt to reject unfair offers.
- 6. Make us less prone to confirmation bias.** **In a study of people with strong political opinions**, those who were angry chose to read more articles that disagreed with their positions, instead of practising confirmation bias, the common tendency to seek out information that supports what we already believe to be true. After exploring these contrary views, they were more willing to change their minds. It seems that anger produces a 'nail the opposition' mentality that encourages us to explore what the other guy has to say in order to tear it apart, ironically leaving the door open to being persuaded.

THE UPSIDE OF ANGER (AND OTHER CHALLENGING EMOTIONS)

Pretending to be happier than we are is a losing proposition, and pushing ourselves to be more ‘genuinely’ happy is definitely self-defeating, partly because it raises impossible expectations, and partly because our own false smiles and eagerness to grab all the gusto deprives us of the benefits of negative emotions.

It’s usually when we get knocked down a few pegs that more of the subtle, sometimes painful but potentially important underlying details in life come to the fore. Not surprisingly, great writers from the Greek tragedians to the romantic poets to the authors of those huge nineteenth-century Russian novels have found much that was instructive and valuable on the dark side of the human emotional scale. It was our old friend John Milton who, in *Il Penseroso*, exclaimed ‘Hail divinest melancholy’.

Our raw feelings can be the messengers we need to teach us things about ourselves and can prompt insights into important life directions. I saw this when a client came to me with ‘an anger problem’. The two of us worked together to examine his feelings and sort them out. He realized that maybe he didn’t have an ‘anger problem’ so much as he had a wife who was placing near impossible demands on him. By accepting and understanding his difficult emotions, rather than trying to suppress or fix them, he began to improve his marriage, not by remaking himself, but by learning to set better boundaries for what was acceptable behaviour.

In addition to anger (aka wrath), one of the other seven deadly sins, envy, gets an unnecessarily bad rap. In truth, envy can be a strong motivator – even stronger than admiration – driving us toward self-improvement. [One study showed that students who expressed benign envy](#) toward a more successful student showed more motivation than those who expressed admiration. The envious participants ramped up their schoolwork and performed better on various verbal tasks.

Other ‘bad’ emotions are useful for different reasons. [Embarrassment and guilt can serve important social functions](#) in fostering appeasement and furthering cooperation. Sadness is a signal to ourselves that something is wrong – often that we are looking for a better way to be here and participate. And outward expressions of sadness signal to others that we could use some help. [Suppress the sadness under a veil](#) of false cheer and you deny yourself the self-directional guidance, and maybe also the helping hand.

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As you may recall, when we ran through the list of common, everyday scenarios of being 'hooked', there was always an option C. That approach is neither bottling nor brooding, but rather being present and having an open heart to all your emotions in a curious and accepting manner.

That's where we're going to turn next, to show you the methods that actually work to get 'off the hook' and into a healthier and, yes, happier, way of living.