



NATIONAL POST

October 16, 2015

## Refute of happiness: How our obsession with positivity is making us miserable - and insufferable

By Sharon Kirkey

*The joys of self-betterment are vastly overrated*

Toronto-born, Upper Canada College- and Harvard-educated psychiatrist Dr. Michael Bennett often found himself growing increasingly weary of the nattering - the self-obsessing by his patients, their over-belief in a cure for their problems/feelings/anxieties/behaviour if they only worked harder.

"At some point, I would say, 'to hell with your feelings,' " Bennett says over the phone from his office outside Boston, Mass.

"The abruptness of hearing a psychiatrist who is supposed to be a patient listener, who is supposed to say, 'Please, tell me more about that,' and, 'Oh, that must have been awful,' instead saying, 'So, what are you going to do about it?' ... It really got the conversation jumpstarted."

Bennett is co-author, along with his comedy writer daughter Sarah Bennett, of *F\*ck Feelings: One Shrink's Practical Advice for Managing All Life's Impossible Problems*, a profanity-laced takedown of the happiness-oriented self-help movement, its moralizing "one-name healers" (Oprah, Phil and Laura) and books that promise to make us brighter, shinier and happier.

According to the father-daughter duo, the joys of self-betterment are vastly overrated. Negative feelings, they argue, are seeded in our evolution, an adaptive response to warn us of danger and keep us "attached to our tribe." Instead of trying to be more blissed out, less wrought or angry, they argue, we should assume that we're going to have negative feelings and develop ways to behave like decent human beings despite them.

Bennett, who frequently swears - in good humour - with his patients, says profanity does away with any notion of "superficial empathy." It jars people out of their relentless self-examination and self-criticism, helps them accept what they can't change (about their personality, spouse, kid, feelings or "f-khead boss") and focus instead on how to deal with their problems.

The Bennetts say they aren't against happiness - who could be? But their book is

**Selected moments in human happiness**

**Circa sixth century BC**  
Siddhartha Gautama of

part of a rising pushback against the relatively recent psychological model of "positive psychology" and the notion that a perpetually upbeat outlook is entirely possible once we rid our "thought patterns" of all things negative and ugly.

The darker truth, they argue, is that the more we pursue happiness, paradoxically, the unhappier we become. The higher we set up the expectation, the more we beat ourselves up if when we fail to achieve it.

Or as University College London professor of psychology Adrian Furnham put it in an article last year in *Psychology Today*, "(Happiness) is like soap in the bath. The more you try to grab it, the more cloudy the water: the more difficult it is to find."

Still, we're being urged to embrace happiness everywhere we turn. In-store and online book aisles brim with titles offering a guide to the cosmos of contentment, from *The Happiness Hypothesis*, *Raising Happiness*, and *Hardwiring Happiness*, to Gretchen Rubin's two instalments, *The Happiness Project* and *Happier at Home*. Pharrell Williams' ebullient pop song "Happy" ("Clap along if you feel like happiness is the truth") was Billboard's No. 1 song last year. Diet and exercise books suggest that the only way to be really, truly happy is to "build your best-ever body!" while headlines trumpet studies claiming "positivity" and optimism over pessimism leads to healthier, and longer, lifespans.

According to scholar and author Christopher Lane, the "happiness" message wholly underpins the self-help movement, where people who succeed in "not being a victim" become winners, and the less successful, by implication, losers. It's bleeding into the corporate world, too, with its "happiness initiatives" and "chief happiness officers." We see it in the upbeat Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952), a classic, Lane says, of "Christian self-help" that sold more copies in the U.S. in the first two years of its release than any other book except the Bible and still sells more than 20,000 copies a year.

"Via religion, medicine, self-help and the business world, this thinking now saturates U.S. (and by extension, Canadian) culture," says Lane, author of *Shyness: How Normal Behaviour Became a Sickness*. And when we can't achieve it naturally, increasingly we're seeking chemical help. Canadians are among the highest consumers of anti-depressants and other mood-altering prescription drugs in the world, with an estimated nine per cent of the adult population in 2011 on antidepressants. Experts worry too many of us are swallowing the pills to deal with normal bouts of misery. It's like cosmetic pharmacology - using psychoactive drugs to feel "happier" about us.

But a recent spate of books challenge a model of psychology critics say has become massively oversimplified, and one-dimensional. *F\*ck Feelings* is the latest. The authors of *The Upside of Your Dark Side*, published late last year, argue humans have more to gain by tapping into our full range of emotions, while Barbara Ehrenreich's earlier *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America*, warned against the often manic and reckless optimism pervading North American culture.

The model that encourages the quest for happiness as an ultimate goal "assumes that we can, and should rid ourselves of difficulty, insecurity and pessimism" simply by altering our perspective, says Lane. "It assumes that we've little to learn from our darkest moments and that life itself should be as sunny as our relentlessly upbeat outlook."

Shakya, who later become known as Buddha, believes the path to happiness starts from understanding suffering. "If one speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness follows like a shadow."

#### **460 BC**

Socrates is the first known figure in the West to argue happiness is attainable through effort. He also plants the seeds of the inevitable backlash: "The secret of happiness, is not found in seeking more, but in developing the capacity to enjoy less."

#### **3rd century BC**

Aristotle, who believed happiness to be the byproduct of a good life, suggests that "Happiness depends upon ourselves."

#### **Early 18th century**

A view of happiness as synonymous with pleasure, to be pursued, takes hold. Political philosopher Jeremy Bentham declares that "the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong."

#### **1734**

Capturing a spirit of the time, poet Alexander Pope writes, "Oh happiness! our being's end and aim!"

#### **1776**

U.S. Declaration of Independence entrenches the right to "life, liberty and pursuit of happiness."

#### **Early 20th century**

Enlightenment ideals of happiness start applying to children, writes Peter N. Stearns in the Harvard

Not only is that approach absurdly unrealistic, Lane argues, "it also dramatically worsens self-reproach by making anything less than optimized happiness seem like a strange and peculiar failing on our parts, for which we alone are responsible."

And it fails to take into account humanity's darker sides. According to Edmonton native Dr. Frank Farley, horror, not happiness, is the central problem confronting the human race. Farley, a professor of psychology at Temple University in Philadelphia and a past president of the American Psychological Association argues that if psychology believes in a science of the human mind and human behaviour, the emphasis should be on "rolling back the horror that stalks the landscape," not on feeling happy.

According to the authors of *The Upside of Your Dark Side*, which is subtitled *Why Being Your Whole Self - Not Just Your "Good" Self - Drives Success and Fulfillment*, the omnipresent pressure to be happy is "one of the most toxic pieces of advice in modern psychology."

In Western cultures - particularly North America - positivity reigns, says co-author Dr. Todd Kashdan, a professor of psychology at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va. The message, he says in an interview, is, "If you can just have more positive emotions - be more optimistic, more cheerful - then all these other benefits will come to you: you'll find your purpose in life, you'll have more money, you'll have more friends, you'll be less likely to be divorced, you'll have better relationships with your kids."

But every emotion has an adaptive advantage, and to reject that is to tune out useful information. "Think of all the functional problems that human beings have had to deal with over their evolutionary history," he says. Self-preservation, being accepted into a tribe, reproducing, fending off romantic rivals - "We have been endowed with anxiety, anger, guilt, jealousy and other negative emotions over the course of evolution to get the best possible outcome in challenging situations when these problems arise."

Even children understand this now, thanks to Disney Pixar's latest, *Inside Out*, which stars five emotions of an 11-year-old girl. Riley is struggling with her family's move to a new city, and happiness tries her best to win out over the other emotions, particularly sadness - a state to be avoided at all costs. But in the end, (spoiler alert) it's sadness who saves the day, allowing Riley to be honest about how she is feeling and reconnect with her parents.

**Business Review.** An example from a child-rearing manual of the time: "Happiness is as essential as food if a child is to develop into normal manhood or womanhood."

### 1926

Birthdays become mandatorily happy, thanks to the new song *Happy Birthday*.

### 1943

Abraham Maslow records his now-famous hierarchy of needs, suggesting that when basic needs are taken care of, humans have more capacity for self-actualization - making sense of a postwar boom and corresponding upswing in self-help literature.

### 1963

Graphic artist Harvey Ross Ball is commissioned to improve morale at an insurance company, and creates the iconic yellow smiley face. He is paid \$45 for the illustration.

### 1998

Martin Seligman, founder of modern "positive psychology" movement, becomes president of American Psychology Association, declaring in a landmark speech that psychologists need to study what makes people happy.

### 2004

Seligman co-authors a positive counterpoint to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* called *Character Strengths and Virtues*.

### 2012

The United Nations launches its annual *World Happiness*

Report

**2014**

One high-profile study, part of a now-massive body of happiness research, suggests the two happiest ages of life are 23 and 69.

**2015**

An Amazon search for books with "happiness" in the title will return 40,000 hits, including The Happiness Project, The Happiness Mindset, The Happiness Advantage, Happier, The Art of Happiness and the How of Happiness.

**2015**

F\*ck Feelings joins a growing chorus against happiness as be all, end all - arguing that people should spend less time wallowing in happiness deficiencies and instead accept difficult realities.



Fotolia The more we pursue happiness, paradoxically, the unhappier we become, the Bennetts argue.

It may be a work of animated fiction, but it illustrates a truth, and other emotions are similarly functional. Recent studies have found that angry people are more creative, possibly because anger, in moderate doses, can be energizing and motivating. Envy and resentment, the research suggests, can also increase performance, even more than admiration. It lights a fire under us, Kashdan says.

Still, "There is a not-so-hidden prejudice against negative states, and the consequence of avoiding these states is that you inadvertently stunt your growth, maturity, adventure and meaning and purpose in life."

Yet still the siren call to be happy, to be better, beckons, and one of the killjoys of a "happy life" is social comparison, Kashdan says. We log on to Facebook and compare ourselves to others without appreciating that what we're seeing are only the edited "highlight reels" - the good parts, and none of the messy or ugly ones. "For already distressed individuals," University of Houston researchers reported in April in the *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, "this distorted view of their friends' lives may make them feel alone in their internal struggles, which may compound their feelings of loneliness and isolation." People may think, "My god, my life is so much worse than theirs."

But Facebook and Instagram are too easy targets, says Kashdan, arguing that social media is simply "an extension of everyday human interaction. What we do on Facebook is not unlike other situations where we are hyper focused on making a particular impression on other people to be more attractive," he says, even if we're not consciously aware of it. It's in the clothes we wear, the phones we buy, the groups we join to "showcase our emotional stability, social status and openness to experience," even if, inside, we're a blubbering, neurotic mess.

The more privileged our lives, the more material comforts we're surrounded by, the more we tend to "psychologize," says Kashdan - meaning dwell on our feelings and emotions and why we're not gloriously happy.

"We spend a lot of time thinking about what this distress means, where does it come from? What in my past went wrong that still has residual effects?"

No one doubts the validity of true, psychological dysfunction. Mental illness is undeniable. But our emotional reactions to the smaller pieces of daily tragedies and conflicts are more complex.

And the rumination, the tendency toward self-flagellation is one of the many factors driving the multi-billion-dollar self-help industry, with its motivational speakers and "pseudo-quasi gurus," as Kashdan describes them, promoting the magical and ever-changing formula to a happier life, a happier relationship.

Kashdan was one of the first converts to the relatively new field of "positive psychology," a movement born in the 1990s that shifted the focus away from pathologies, disorders and deficits, to happiness, wellbeing and resiliency.

Some, like Frank Farley, point out humanistic psychologists such as Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow had been "talking essentially positive psychology a long time ago." Dale Carnegie's insanely successful *How to Win Friends and Influence People* has sold more than 16 million copies since it was first published in 1936.

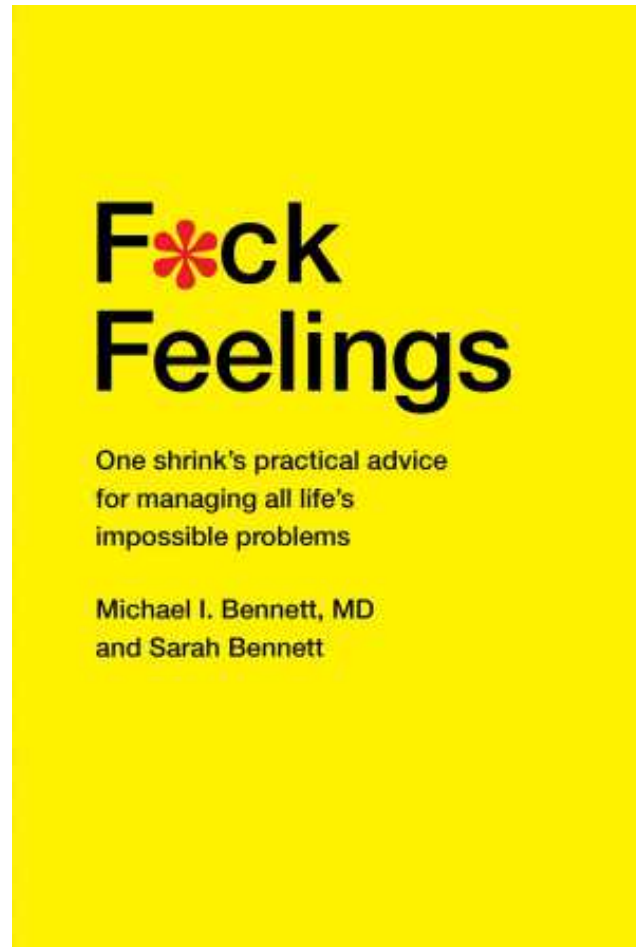
Nonetheless, positive psychology positioned itself as a new field of study focused largely on cultivating the best within people and to enhance our experiences at "love, work and play."

The emphasis turned to creating "positive" workplaces, "positive" family life and "positive" nations. After decades of Freudian psychoanalysis focusing on neuroses and pathologies, "I think the zeitgeist in psychology was ready for it," Farley says.

But Kashdan soon grew disenchanted with all this "gung-ho happiology," fearing it was breeding a kind of "smiling fascism."

Among his worries: When we're feeling positive, we tend to be more passive. "When we are happy, we are very

superficial in our thinking," he says. By contrast, "When sombre or sad, we're more concrete and detail-oriented." We're also less gullible.



Simon & Schuster

Positive moods can reduce our motivation levels, research shows. We're more likely to make errors in judgment. Our memory suffers; we're less attentive to detail. "But another element of chasing happiness is that difficult and challenging life events are the springboards to higher peaks," Kashdan says.

Negative feelings, argues renowned psychiatrist Dr. Allen Frances, are part of what makes us fully human.

Frances, who chaired the taskforce that wrote the fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, says the positive psychology field has produced some intriguing science, but the trouble is that it also lends itself to "the self-help, simple-minded, 'be happy,' superficial milieu" of pop psychology. Humans aren't suited for perfect happiness. We've evolved to a world that has always presented enormous challenges, he says. Humans are incredibly resilient, and "it would be silly to expect that people remain happy and joyful in the face life's challenges."

"The idea that there is this easy path to happiness and we should be following it is both mythical and destructive, and reduces the dignity of those people who do wonderful things in the world who aren't necessarily happy every minute," says Frances. "It's not respectful of the human condition."

Yet we still face this almost "moral demand" to be happy, and healthy, argue Carl Cederstrom and André Spicer in their new book, *The Wellness Syndrome*. Happiness, they write, has been positioned as a kind of "gigantic hi-fi that can be turned up, and made louder and richer. All you have to do is put your mind to it."

Jamie Gruman, chair of the Canadian Positive Psychology Association, gets where the criticism is coming from. He says critics are pushing back against what they perceive "as this ridiculous, naive, simplistic, childish view that life is all lollipops and rainbows."

But that's not how the field meant to position itself, says Gruman, an associate professor at the University of Guelph. It's not all about being positive, he says.

"I think that what they (the authors of *F\*ck Feelings*) are saying is partly true. It's definitely the case that there are a lot of people who over-think their problems and instead of getting on with life and figuring out strategies to handle the unavoidable difficulties of life, they want to just complain about them," says Gruman.

But he argues that a "good life" is about balancing the positive with the negative. "All emotions serve a purpose, and trying to run away from the sadness or the anger or despondency that's part of a normal, healthy existence is to undermine the richness of life."

Michael and Sarah Bennett, the authors of *F\*ck Feelings*, argue that there is no situation in life that cannot be endured once we stop replaying and obsessing over negative experiences.

Many people have less control over their basic behaviours than they deserve, they write. "Neuroscience seems to show that many emotional and behavioural problems we thought were based on bad parents or trauma are also caused by wiring that isn't reversible," they say.



In fact, researchers are increasingly trying to get beyond self-reports of subjective wellbeing ("on a scale of one to 10, how happy are you?"), and are searching instead for an underlying neural basis of happiness. Much of the work is focused on the brain's "reward centre," the nucleus accumbens, and a region that drives us to seek out and pursue rewards.

In the meantime, the Bennetts offer easily digestible suggestions on managing negative states or emotions, among them: "Act decently in spite of the way you really feel." "Get to know your inner asshole so as to reduce the likelihood it becomes outer."

F\*uck Feelings isn't an indictment of psychotherapy or others in the healing professions, the elder Bennett insists, as much as it is a "push for people to be more aware of the limits of treatment."

"Work hard to define the limits of what you can't control," he says he tells his patients, "and then work hard at taking courage in respecting yourself for doing the best with the rest."

National Post



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