

How to Have a Good Night's Sleep By Robin Phillips¹



You Could Feel Like a Lottery Winner Without Winning the Lottery

What if I told you there is an activity you can do for free that dramatically increases your levels of physical and emotional well-being? What if I also told you that the mental and emotional results of this activity, when measured on tests for psychological well-being, are comparable to a person winning a lottery jackpot of around \$200,000?

It gets even better. This activity I'm referring to doesn't involve taking any drugs or doing anything unhealthy. In fact, the activity is actually *good* for you. Are you ready?

The activity I'm talking about is sleep.

¹ Some of this information previously appeared in an article I published by The Association for Advanced Training in the Behavioral Sciences (www.aatbs.com/).

We all know that sleep is important, but what many people don't realize is just *how* important sleep is for self-care. Many people also don't realize that there are a number of specific steps a person can take to improve the quality of their sleep.

In this booklet I will be exploring some of the steps you can take to increase your sleep quality. To start with, however, let's consider how a good night's sleep is so crucial for physical, mental, psychological, and emotional health.

Why Sleep is Fundamental for Self-Care

Researchers at the University of Warwick spent four years studying the sleep patterns of more than 30,500 people. Their research, which was published in the journal *Sleep*, found that getting good quality sleep is comparable to the mental and physical benefits associated with winning \$200,000 in the lottery.

Dr Nicole Tang, from Warwick's Department of Psychology, found that what is more important than the hours someone spends asleep is the quality of their sleep. Working to increase sleep quality over time is directly correlated with well-being and improved scores on the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ), which is used by health professionals to monitor psychological well-being. The people who were surveyed showed a 2-point change in the GHQ after improving their sleep—an increase equivalent to those who won the lottery or those who took an eight-week course in mindfulness-based cognitive therapy.

The darker side of the research is that lack of good sleep is correlated with worse medical and emotional states. Lack of quality sleep is also correlated with a decrease in one's ability to perform everyday activities.

Cheap Method for Raising Well-Being

Science Daily summed up the recent research:

“Dr Tang's research proves that improving the quality and quantity of sleep amongst the population—as well as discouraging the use of sleep medication—is an effective, simple and cheap method of raising the health and well-being of society as a whole.”

It seems counterintuitive that something as ordinary as sleep could bring such enormous benefits. As humans, we tend to value things that are hard, expensive, or unusual. Thus, we instinctively expect that something like winning the lottery, or taking an eight-week mindfulness course, will bring enormous benefits. By contrast, sleep is so ordinary that we take its benefits for granted.

Sleep and Memory

Many students skip out on sleep to study. For many of us, when we think about preparing for tests, often the first thing that comes to mind is cramming at night. The problem with skipping sleep to study is not simply that it's unhealthy, it's also self-defeating. This is because it is during sleep that your brain is able to consolidate memories, including memories of the material you've studied that day.

It's when a person is asleep that their brain processes what they learned that day, converting material in their short-term memory into long-term memories so they can recall those memories in the future. This becomes clear when we consider the three things that need to happen for the formation of long-term memories.

- The first ingredient that goes into long-term memory is **acquisition**. Acquisition is the simply process of learning something you didn't know before.
- The second ingredient that goes into long-term memory is **consolidation**. This is the process whereby a memory becomes stable in the brain.
- The third ingredient that goes into long-term memory is **recall**. This refers to the brain's ability to access the memory later on in time.

The first and third of the above processes (acquisition and recall) takes place when you are awake. Interestingly, however, the third (consolidation) happens while you're sleeping. This was proved in 2009 when American and French researchers found that brain events called *sharp wave ripples* were responsible for consolidating memory. The ripples transferred information from the hippocampus to the neocortex, the seat of long-term memory. The interesting thing is that they found that sharp wave ripples occur mostly during the deepest levels of sleep.

So how can you improve your sleep? Here are eight ways.

1. Address Your Lifestyle While Awake

Researchers have established that sleep quality (how well you sleep) is more important than sleep quantity (how much you sleep). But researchers have also found that stress may be getting in the way of quality sleep. This isn't surprising, as stress has been found to inhibit the production of melatonin, a neurochemical involved in regulating our sleep patterns.

Thus, anyone wishing to address the quality of their sleep has to begin by addressing their lifestyle while awake. A lifestyle filled with stress, anxiety, bitterness, unresolved grief and negative rumination is likely to have an adverse impact on one's sleep patterns. These

negative emotions create unconscious stress that is held in the body, making it difficult to fully relax at night.

It usually isn't possible to completely eliminate all stress from our lives, especially work related stress. However, it is possible to lessen the impact of various types of self-imposed stress. For example, when we take measures to eliminate unnecessary stressors like rumination, unforgiveness, anxiety and thinking errors (see section on thinking errors at the end of this booklet), then we can more easily handle the remaining stress that we cannot control. We can also take measures to lessen the intensity of unavoidable stress through coping strategies like mindfulness, self-care and meditation.

Addressing stress in these ways comes with many health benefits, including a better night's sleep.

2. Get Plenty of Exercise

Because of our sedentary lifestyle, most people do not get sufficient exercise. Not surprisingly, this can have an effect on sleep. Research published in the journal 'Mental Health and Physical Activity' suggests that when people get 150 minutes of exercise a week, this helps people to sleep better and to be more alert during the day.

If you have trouble sleeping and have decided to address this with exercise, keep in mind that exercise is like dieting: it is better to do less but to do it consistently. Sporadic intense exercise can actually keep you awake and make you feel tired the next day. This is especially true for people who suffer with chronic insomnia. Indeed, the research suggests that for insomniacs it sometimes takes a bit longer before exercise begins making a difference, with a person's sleep only improving after four months of regular exercise. Chronic insomnia often occurs because of hyper-arousal of the stress system, and sporadic one-off exercise can actually exacerbate that. A longer and more consistent exercise routine is required.

3. Have a Buffer Time

Before electric lights, people would generally have stopped work at sundown, even if this was hours before their normal bedtime. The period between the end of work and the beginning of sleep would have provided a valuable buffer period for the brain and body to slow down. The absence of artificial light would have inclined our ancestors to use this period to pursue activities that are naturally calming, such as conversation, studying the stars, telling stories or reading by candlelight. (Interestingly, our ancestors would also pursue these types of activities in the middle of the night, since their sleep was generally divided into two sections. More of that in a minute.)

By contrast, in modern life we often deprive ourselves of this buffer zone between being active and sleeping. We go straight to bed after non-calming activities like watching television or being on our smartphones. Even if we have no problem getting straight to sleep, the quality of our sleep is compromised. What we need is a buffer period for the brain to calm down. Activities to do during the period before sleep could include:

- Bedtime reading;
- Listening to calming music;
- Enjoying a period in which all white light, including the computer and TV, is turned off and a warm orange or red light is turned on (you can achieve this through either candles, special bulbs, or orange glasses that screen out the blue light). This type of light has a calming effect on the body and helps with the regulation of melatonin.
- Mindfulness meditation;
- Have a bath with Epsom Salts and Lavender.

The last two activities I mentioned require further explanation, beginning with mindfulness.

4. Practice Mindfulness Meditation

Often the quality and quantity of our sleep is compromised because we cannot shut off the constant activity of our brains. Our brains often function like non-stop radio that refuses to be quieted. Those who have spent the day in busy or stressful activities may find it particularly hard to switch off, experiencing a type of “mental hyperactivity.” This can have an impact on our sleep in the following ways:

- Our hyperactive brains may affect the quality of our sleep, so that even when we are fast asleep, it is a light or troubled sleep;
- Our hyperactive brains may make it difficult to initially fall asleep;
- Our hyperactive brains may cause us to wake up in the middle of the night, or keep us from falling back to sleep after a natural period of wakefulness caused by other factors;

Fortunately, you can address these problems with mindfulness techniques. Before you go to bed, have a period of “mindfulness meditation”, which is essentially watching the pattern of your breath as you deeply inhale and exhale. The benefit of this technique is that instead of going to war against unwanted thoughts and thereby exacerbating the problem, mindful

breathing enables your attention to shift to something else. Once you are in bed if you find your brain beginning to race, simply shift your focus to deep breathing. In an article on meditation and sleep, the Eco Institute shared that,

“Rutgers University researchers discovered that melatonin levels for meditation practitioners were boosted by an average of 98%, with many participants having increases by more than an incredible 300%! Meditation effectively re-balances all of the biological markers for night after night of super deep, natural sleep, every night of the week — ensuring you wake up feeling fresh and rejuvenated every morning.”

This type of mindfulness can be especially effective if done while diffusing pleasant essential oils. Here is an aroma-based mindfulness exercise that is very effective at helping to calm down the brain.

1. Once you are all ready for bed, put 4 or 5 drops of Young Living essential oil into your diffuser and begin diffusing. You should choose an oil that has calming properties, such as Frankincense, Idaho Blue Spruce, Stress-Away, Lavender or Vetiver.
2. Find somewhere comfortable to sit where the aroma can reach you.
3. Let all of your senses be engaged with the aroma. Breathe in and out deeply, taking deep breaths of the aromatic mist emanating from the diffuser. Give the aroma your full attention: the feel of it, the smell of it, the sound of your nose as you gently inhale the aromatic mist. Don't let your brain analyze what you are doing; just experience it. If various thoughts enter your brain that's ok; just gently let the thoughts go and return your attention to the aromatic mist.
4. After a few minutes, focus the same loving attention that you gave the aromatic mist onto your breath. Let the aroma recede into the background and bring your attention to your breathing. As you do this, your brain will probably be pulled in all directions. These types of mental distractions are normal. Be mindful to view these distractions as being separate from yourself and just gently bring your focus back to the present moment of your breathing.

5. Take an Epsom Salt and Lavender Bath

The mineral magnesium is needed for sleep, since this mineral contributes to that calm and relaxed feeling we should normally have before going to sleep. When our lives are filled with stress, however, magnesium becomes drained out of the body. If you're having trouble sleeping, there is a good chance that you are magnesium-deficient.

Epsom Salt is a mineral compound consisting of magnesium and sulfate. When you take a bath with Epsom Salt, the magnesium soaks into the skin, helping to promote a sense of wellbeing and calm.

I recommend adding Young Living lavender oil into your Epsom Salt bath, since lavender has been used for centuries for its calming properties. By having lavender in the bathwater, you will benefit from the gentle and reassuring aroma, while your skin will benefit from the lavender particles in the water.

You can purchase an entire bag of Epsom Salt at Winco for only a few dollars. To start with, measure out two cups of Epsom Salt into the warm bathwater. The quantity can be increased for greater effect.

6. Don't Take Technology to Bed with You

A surprising number of Americans take their phones to bed with them. Writing for the *Business Insider*, Henry Blodget reports research showing that

- 90% of 18- to 29-year-olds sleep with their smartphones;
- 1 in 3 people would rather give up sex than their phone;
- 95% of people use the phone for something just before going to bed;
- Half of people check their phones immediately if they wake up during the night;

These habits interfere with a good night's sleep since research shows that the type of light emitted from these screens interferes with your sleep cycle and impacts how sleepy you feel the next day.

But it isn't just the physical light from these devices that cause an interference with sleep. The main reason these devices interfere with sleep is because they make it difficult for the brain to calm down. The sense of connectivity, together with the background awareness of actual or potential messages waiting to be received, is antithetical to the type of mental silence needed for quality sleep.

It's often not sufficient to simply turn off your phone when you go to bed: you should also put it in another room so you're not tempted to think (perhaps unconsciously) of messages waiting to be received as soon as the phone is turned on.

If you want a good night's sleep, you should also avoid using your phone, tablet, iPad, or laptop for bedtime reading, since these devices stimulate mental activity at precisely a time when you need to be calming down. Reading a book is different since it stimulates a different part of the brain (printed material also does not emit melatonin-suppressing white and blue light).

7. Protect Your Bedroom Environment

Many people who report insomnia also report doing other things in their bedroom. Perhaps the bedroom is a place where they sometimes eat, watch TV, use a computer, do paperwork, make calls. The problem is that the brain begins to associate these non-sleep activities with the physical space of the bedroom or even the bed. Begin protecting your bedroom environment by limiting it to sleep and other calming activities.

8. Strategically Address Insomnia

Some people experience periods of wakefulness because they need to apply the above steps to achieve better sleep-quality. But ironically, other people experience insomnia precisely because they are such good sleepers. Let me explain.

Some people become a victim of their own good sleep. They start off the night sleeping deeply, but then wake up and struggle to get back into a deep sleep cycle. They think they are bad sleepers, but actually they are really good sleepers: having experienced deep REM sleep at the beginning of the night, their body feels wide awake at 12:00, 3:00, or maybe 4:30 AM.

In one sense, this is not surprising. Our bodies were designed to have eight or nine hours of good sleep every night, but our bodies do not seem to have been designed to sleep all the way through. This second fact seems strange, but there is a wealth of documentary evidence that the notion of sleeping straight through the night is a comparatively modern phenomenon. For millennia of human history, segmented sleep seems to have been the norm throughout many societies.

The common practice was to get up in the night for two or three hours and do stuff: to engage in quiet work, to visit neighbors, to pray, study, write, read or make love with one's spouse. That was possible because prior to electric lighting people's circadian rhythms were more synchronized by light, and prior to industrialization many people were able to sleep later into the mornings. Put these two things together (going to sleep earlier and being able to wake up later) and it was possible to spend two or three hours in the night doing things.

But while sleeping all the way through the night may not be natural (historically speaking), most of us have been able to adjust. But some people still routinely wake up after having 3 to 5 really good hours of sleep. Their bodies do not seem to know that society no longer revolves around segmented sleep patterns.

If you are one of these people, there are a few things you can do to “hack your brain” and get around the problem.

First, before you lie down for the night, decide what your strategy will be if you wake up before the morning. When you are tired, your impulse control is significantly lower. Thus, if you wait until the middle of the night to decide how to handle sleeplessness, you will be more likely to react in ways that only make the problem worse, like checking your text messages, watching online videos, going on social media or mindlessly clicking around the internet. These activities are not calming since they involve white and blue light, and also because they stimulate the brain instead of calming it down. Here are some activities to try if you find yourself regularly waking up in the middle of the night:

- Sit up in bed to practice mindfulness meditation;
- Get out of bed to read a physical book or magazine;
- Remain lying down but turn on an audio book (with your device on airplane mode and with an app that screens out blue light);
- Have a bath (preferably with Epson Salts and Lavender);
- Listen to calming music;
- Do any of the above while diffusing calming essential oils;
- Get up and do an activity you would normally do during the day but which will not stimulate your brain or involve any stress. This could be an activity like chores, craftwork or meal preparation.

As you try any of the seven techniques above, consider keeping a journal to document what techniques are the most effective for you.

Another alternative is that when you have insomnia to simply do nothing. Keep lying in bed, trying to keep still, and eventually you may find yourself falling back to sleep.

9. Use Young Living Products

I've already had occasion to mention ways that essential oils can help with sleep. Young Living actually has an entire collection of various products that have been formulated to help increase the quality and quantity of sleep. Because each of us respond in unique ways, the secret is to find the right product that works for you. Here are some of Young Living's popular sleep aids.

- **Stress-Away.** When I am having trouble sleeping, I put 3-6 drops of Young Living's Stress-Away blend on my pillow. As I lie in the pillow, the pleasant aroma of the Stress-Away envelopes me with feelings of well-being and calm.
- **The Freedom Sleep Collection.** This kit was created by Young Living researchers to help re-establish a positive energy flow throughout the body, helping relax and calm a person prior to bedtime.
- **SleepEssence Capsules.** These capsules combine the essential oils of lavender, vetiver, valerian, and Ruta graveolens. All these oils help the body produce melatonin. This is so simple to use: before bed you simply swallow a few capsules. It's as simple as that! (This product causes me to sleep *so* deeply that if I take it before bed I find myself wide awake by about 1:00 or 2:00. So I only use it if I find myself waking up in the middle of the night and I want help getting back to sleep. Do not take these pills during the day to help you have a nap or you will be groggy for the rest of the day.)



Six Thinking Errors That May Be Keeping You Awake at Night



Research shows that much of what we experience in life is fundamentally ambiguous and open to a variety of interpretations. One of the ways we make sense of life's circumstances is by the meanings we ascribe to those circumstances. The problem arises when we impose negative meanings onto our experiences that are based on a distorted view of reality.

Psychologists who have studied human thought and communication have identified some common distortions or “thinking errors” that cause many people negatively to frame their experiences. There are many lists of these thinking errors on the internet, but below are ones I have identified as being the most common and relevant to everyday life.

Filtering

Filtering occurs when we look at an entire situation and hone in on specific negatives while overlooking positives that might balance things out.

How many times do you think about your day, your job, your friendships or your family relationships in a way that filters out what is good while giving inordinate attention to what is bad? Often negative details become so magnified in our thinking that we filter out more positive aspects that could bring things into a healthier perspective. Filtering often happens

in married relationships, where a wife will become so accustomed to her husband's good qualities that she will begin overlooking those qualities and focusing instead of his imperfections. (And, of course, husbands make this same mistake too.)

Filtering can also occur in the other direction, when a person filters out negative aspects of a situation, ignoring problems that actually need to be addressed.

Polarized Thinking

Polarized thinking (also known as “dichotomous thinking” or “splitting”), happens when we divide the world into extreme black and white. For example, you might think that all conservatives are good people and all liberals are bad, or visa versa. Or you might observe something another person said and conclude that they either have a trustworthy character or an untrustworthy one. Or you might reflect on something you did and conclude that you are a total success or a total failure, smart or stupid, good or bad. But most people and situations are not so black and white. The majority of our sweeping judgments overlook the role context plays in informing a person's behavior. For example, someone who is untrustworthy at one time—perhaps because of a particular situation or context—does not mean the person necessarily has an untrustworthy character. Polarized thinking causes us to draw hastily inferences from particular instances while ignoring the role of context and complexity.

Dwelling on the Lighter Side of Things

The great theologian of early American, Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) was by nature a melancholy person. He was often subject to depression and mood swings and knew from painful experience that dwelling long on the dark side of things only multiplies one's afflictions. In a 1723 diary entry, he reflected on his experiences, noting, “*Tis a most evil and pernicious practice in meditations on afflictions, to sit ruminating on the aggravations of the affliction, and reckoning up the evil, dark circumstances thereof, and dwelling long on the dark side; it doubles and trebles the affliction. If we dwelt on the light side of things in our thoughts, and extenuated them all the possibly we could, when speaking of them, we should think little of them ourselves; and the affliction would really, in a great measure, vanish away.*” Through hard work and patient struggle, Edwards learned to vanish dark thoughts by extenuating the light side of things. By the time he married and had a family, he was a great source of stability to them, as well as to the flock he pastored for many years.

Polarized thinking is closely related to the all-or-nothing fallacy. Sometimes a person will look at a potential project and think that unless they can do it perfectly, there is no use working on it at all. Or we might approach problems with our spouse by thinking that unless problems can be solved perfectly, they are not worth trying to solve even partially. By contrast, a mature person is able to live with ambiguity and accept that sometimes people and situations are too complex to be divided into black and white.

Overgeneralizing

Overgeneralizing happens when we hastily infer a pattern out of a single incident. It is

closely related to what psychologists call “selective abstraction”, whereby we draw conclusions on the basis on just one of many elements of a situation while ignoring other elements. For example, if something bad happens in the morning, a person might think, “Now I’m going to have a bad day.” Or if you make a mistake at something, you might be tempted to think, “I always fail when I try new things.” If something unpleasant happens in a relationship, people sometimes think, “We never get along” or “he’s always doing things like that.”

Although generalizing can sometimes be rational when there is evidence to support it, we have to be careful not to infer negative patterns out of isolated incidents. As with polarized thinking, overgeneralizing also results in overlooking important factors of context that may account for why things happened as they did. In marriage, a husband or wife may overgeneralize by using a single causal explanation to account for all the problems in the relationship.

Overgeneralizing can often lead us to label ourselves or others with attributions like “idiot”, “stupid”, “failure.” It can also overlap with polarization in influencing us to hastily assume that a person’s behavior must be a symptom of their intrinsic character instead of a result of external circumstances.

Sometimes overgeneralizing influences the expectations we bring to relationships, distorting our sense of what is normal and causing us to measure people by unrealistic standards. Overgeneralizing can also result in us internalizing unrealistic expectations about ourselves, magnifying the negative aspects of our experience and creating patterns out of them.

Here are some particularly unhelpful overgeneralizations that often distort our relationships and self-understanding:

- “Children normally rebel when they become teenagers.”
- “Normally people grow stupid as they enter their 70’s and 80’s.”
- “A normal Christian wife submissively allows her husband to boss her around.”
- “If a man expresses his emotions, that means he is a sissy and wimp.”
- “Women aren’t able to control their feelings.”

You and Your Prefrontal Cortex

God has given you a gift called the prefrontal cortex. This is the part of the brain that enables you to observe your own thinking. Animals can’t do that. Animals can think, but they can’t think about thinking; they can’t observe what is happening in their brains. But human beings can think about thinking, thanks to the prefrontal cortex. Your prefrontal cortex is like your brain’s guard house, tasked with controlling what enters. As thoughts arise in your brain, you can use your prefrontal cortex to watch what is happening and exercise second-by-second censorship to weed out thinking errors.

Comparison

“He and I went to school together,” Douglas shared with me, “and we both started out with the same opportunities. But thirty years later, his life has been successful and mine has not. Oh, if only I had made different choices when I was younger—then I might have made something of my life!”

The type of compliant Douglas shared with me is very common and is becoming more frequent within our interconnected world. Instead of being able to accept and enjoy the blessings God has given us, we compare ourselves with others, especially people from our peer group.

It isn't always wrong to compare ourselves with others, especially if it leads us to imitate the behavior of role models like Christian heroes and saints (1 Corinthians 11:1). Moreover, comparing ourselves to others can help us maintain humility about our own talents and accomplishments, as we take inspiration from others who have made further progress than we have. However, much of the time we compare, it serves no positive purpose and actually blocks us from experiencing contentment. Instead of being content with the gifts God has given us (1 Tim. 6:6), we begin envying the possessions, lifestyle, wealth and opportunities God has bestowed on others.

Over the years, psychologists and economists have done a lot of research about comparison, and its impact on the human brain. Their research shows that by comparing ourselves to others, we sabotage our own happiness and make detrimental decisions. Here is a smattering of some of this research.

- **Comparison Influences Spending and Saving Habits.** Economists have found that our attitude towards spending and saving tends to be dictated, not by our actual income, but by our income in relation to others around us and in relation to our own past peak income.
- **Income Comparison Leads to Unhappiness.** Data published in 2010 from a Europe-wide survey found that people who compared their incomes to others were less happy with what they had. The comparisons that were most damaging to happiness occurred when people compared their incomes to friends from school and university.² Other research conducted in other contexts found that social comparisons in an “upward” direction (that is, when we compare ourselves to people

² Emma Wilkinson, “Comparing Salaries Leads to Blues,” *BBC News*, May 29, 2010, sec. Health, <http://www.bbc.com/news/10182993>.

we deem superior to us) is associated with decreased self-esteem and decreased wellbeing.³

- **Social Media Breeds Envy.** A study published in *The Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* showed that the more time someone spends on Facebook the greater likelihood there is that the person will compare herself to others and experience depressive symptoms as a result.⁴ This type of comparison often happens on an unconscious level so that we are not always aware of the source of our depression. Another study, published in April 2015 in the same journal found that individuals with low self-esteem were more likely to experience envy when viewing attractive Facebook profiles.⁵
- **Unhappy people enjoy seeing other people miserable.** Unhappy individuals tend to increase in self-confidence when other people do worse,⁶ and tend to conceive happiness as existing at other people's expense, leading them to denigrate the

If instead of thinking of happiness as a zero-sum game, or as a competition between us and our peers, we could instead develop the mentality of *shep naches* (happiness at another's success), just imagine how much grateful (and therefore happy) we would be. A person who can train himself or herself to be grateful for other people's fortune and well-being, has continual grounds for happiness even when everything is going wrong in his or her life.

³ Jin-Liang Wang et al., "The Mediating Roles of Upward Social Comparison and Self-Esteem and the Moderating Role of Social Comparison Orientation in the Association between Social Networking Site Usage and Subjective Well-Being," *Frontiers in Psychology* 8 (May 11, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00771>.

⁴ Mai-Ly N. Steers, Robert E. Wickham, and Linda K. Acitelli, "Seeing Everyone Else's Highlight Reels: How Facebook Usage Is Linked to Depressive Symptoms," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 33, no. 8 (October 1, 2014): 701–31, <https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.2014.33.8.701>.

⁵ Helmut Appel, Jan Crusius, and Alexander L. Gerlach, "Social Comparison, Envy, and Depression on Facebook: A Study Looking at the Effects of High Comparison Standards on Depressed Individuals," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 34, no. 4 (April 1, 2015): 277–89, <https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.2015.34.4.277>.

⁶ In 1997, Sonja Lyubomirsky, who teaches psychology at the University of California Riverside, teamed up with Lee Ross from Stanford, to explore the different ways happy vs. unhappy people responded to positive and negative feedback following a teaching exercise. They found that positive feedback enhanced the self-confidence of happy participants even if the happy person learned that their peers got a better result. On the other hand, unhappy people increased in self-confidence when they received positive feedback alone, but increased only minimally when they learned their peers did better. However, the really interesting part of the study was when participants were given negative feedback and told that their peers did even worse. During this part of the study unhappy participants showed greater increases in self-confidence after learning that they did poorly than after learning that they did well, because in the former case they were told that their peer did even worse and in the latter case they were told that their peer did better. By contrast, for the happy participants, the condition of doing well while their peer did better led to more self-confidence than learning they did poorly that their peer did worse. S. Lyubomirsky and L. Ross, "Hedonic Consequences of Social Comparison: A Contrast of Happy and Unhappy People," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 73, no. 6 (December 1997): 1141–57.

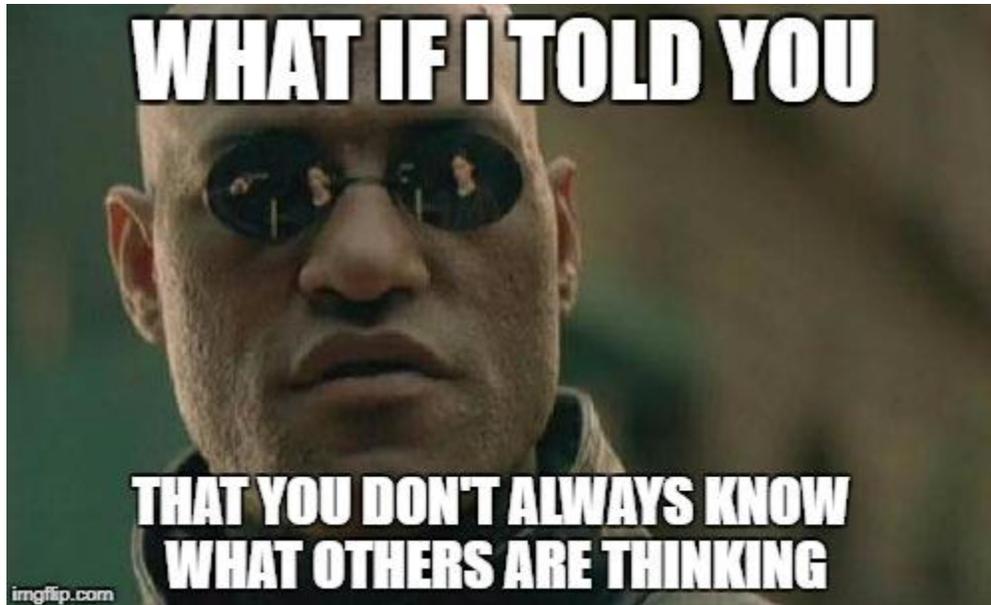
fortunes of others.⁷ Unhappy people tend to view happiness as a zero-sum game, whereby we are endlessly competing with those around us.⁸ This social comparison model of happiness (happiness equals what I get minus what others get) leads many people to actually prefer less optimal outcomes in order to be above other people.⁹ By contrast, happy people tend simply to enjoy what they are given without comparing themselves to others. A truly happy person can enjoy the blessings in her life, but also take delight in the good things other people have.

Mind-Reading

⁷ S. Lyubomirsky and L. Ross, "Changes in Attractiveness of Elected, Rejected, and Precluded Alternatives: A Comparison of Happy and Unhappy Individuals," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 76, no. 6 (June 1999): 988–1007. Elizabeth Weil described the import of this experiment for *The New York Times*: "Dr. Lyubomirsky designed an experiment in which people ranked 10 desserts, knowing they'd get one. Each participant was then given his second or third choice and told to rank all 10 desserts again. ...Dr. Ward remembered, 'The happy people said, 'Well, this dessert is good, and I'm sure the others are good, too!' The unhappy people liked their desserts just fine but indicated they were extremely relieved not to have received the 'awful nonchosen dessert. In other words, unhappy people derogated the dessert they did not receive, whereas happy people felt no need to do so.'" Elizabeth Weil, "Happiness Inc.," *The New York Times*, April 19, 2013, sec. Fashion & Style, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/21/fashion/happiness-inc.html>.

⁸ Dr. Lyubomirsky did work with children and found that unhappy children had unconsciously imbibed the notion that the only way to achieve true happiness is at another person's expense. As *The New York Times* explained, "Dr. Lyubomirsky asked two volunteers at a time to use hand puppets to teach a lesson about friendship to an imaginary audience of children. Afterward the puppeteers were evaluated against each other: you did great but your partner did better, or you did badly but your partner was even worse. The volunteers who were happy before the puppeteering review cared a bit about hearing that they had performed worse than their colleagues but largely shrugged it off. The unhappy volunteers were devastated. Dr. Lyubomirsky writes: 'It appears that unhappy individuals have bought into the sardonic maxim attributed to Gore Vidal: 'For true happiness, it is not enough to be successful oneself. ... One's friends must fail.' This, she says, is probably why a great number of people know the German word *schadenfreude* (describing happiness at another's misfortune) and almost nobody knows the Yiddish *shep naches* (happiness at another's success)." Weil, "Happiness Inc."

⁹ The irrationality of social comparison emerged in a study conducted at Harvard. "...students at the Harvard School of Public Health were asked to choose in which of two worlds they would prefer to live. In World A, your current yearly income is \$50,000 and others earn \$25,000. In World B, your current yearly income is \$1000,000 and others earn \$200,000. Which one would you choose? A majority of the students preferred World A in spite of it providing half the income available in World B, presumably because their relative income position was higher. This same answer pattern was given for several other domains of life, such as intelligence and attractiveness. Again, people prefer lower absolute levels as long as they have an advantageous relative standing." Manel Baucells and Rakesh Sarin, *Engineering Happiness: A New Approach for Building a Joyful Life* (University of California Press, 2012), 51.



- Eric’s father constantly criticized him. Now that Eric is in his young twenties, he finds it hard to believe he is lovable. When his fiancé, Annette, interacts with other men, Eric becomes suspicious and begins imagining all sorts of terrible things.
- Michelle’s teenage son, Stuart, is going through a severe period of rebellion. He has even got in trouble with the police on three different occasions. When Michelle draws any sort of boundaries for Stuart (for example, prohibiting drugs on the property or insisting that he doesn’t play heavy metal music around his younger sister) Stuart becomes abusive. On a handful of occasions, Stuart has even hit Michelle. When he is being violent, Michelle thinks she knows what is *really* going on in Stuart’s mind, having convinced herself that the real reason her son hits her is because he loves her. “After all,” Michelle keeps telling herself, “because he loves me, I’m the only person he feels comfortable really being himself around, which is why he takes out his frustration on me in the form of violence.”
- Every time Emily goes to the beach with her youth group, she wears a one-piece bathing suit while all the other girls dress in bikinis. When they’re not in the water, the other girls typically watch music videos on their smartphones, although Emily enjoys reading novels. One of the girls once asked Emily who her favorite music group was and she said that she only listens to classical music. Emily senses the other girls are treating her differently, but she couldn’t understand why until her friend Amy shared some of the things they were saying behind her back. This included comments like, “She thinks she’s so good” and “Emily obviously isn’t comfortable with her own body,” and “I know Emily’s parents used to homeschool her, so she’s probably one of those little-house-on-the-prairie type of traditionalists that always goes around judging other people.”

- Miranda's husband, Jackson, is always criticizing her. Earlier this week when Miranda made Jackson's favorite meal for dinner for him, he replied, "You're probably only doing that because you feel bad for how you treated me last night." On Sunday when Miranda was hurrying the family to get ready for church so they wouldn't be late again, Jackson said, "The only reason you don't want to be late is because you're worried what other people will think of you." When Miranda was reading C.S. Lewis's *The Discarded Image*, Jackson replied, "you think you're so gaddamn smart when you read books like that." When Miranda challenges Jackson about these assumptions, he typically twists her words against her, using her explanations as a basis for a further accusation, such as "You're just too sensitive", or "gosh, why are you so defensive all the time?"

The common thread running through each of the above scenarios is mind-reading. Mind-reading occurs when we make assumptions about what another person is thinking or what is driving their behavior. You've experienced mind-reading if you've even been with someone who responded to things you say by announcing what you *really* meant, or who interacted with you as if they understood your thinking, motives and intentions better than you do yourself.

When we mind-read, we often fail to sufficiently distinguish the intent of someone's behavior from the impact of their behavior, being overly quick to infer the former from the latter.

Mind-reading is often practiced by people who suffer chronic insecurity, as in the case of Eric in the first example above. Often people who suffer from insecurity end up thinking things like, "she must have really thought I was stupid when I said that," or "I just know everyone at the party was judging me because of my tattoos."

Often mind-reading is practiced by people who are enablers, as in the case of Michelle who convinced herself that the real reason her son was hitting her was because he really loved her. It's easy to read into someone else's behavior or words various interpretations that make us feel better, but at the expense of reality.

When mind-reading becomes chronic, a person may end up habitually twisting another person's words to confirm their preconceived interpretations, making authentic communication impossible.

Since the majority of human communication is non-verbal, it is inevitable that we will pick up implicit meanings and that we will interact with people by intuitively "reading between the lines." This type of "empathic accuracy" is helpful in relationships and should be distinguished from the thinking error of mind-reading, which involves premature rigid assumptions that blocks healthy communication. One way to distinguish between empathic

accuracy and mind-reading is the impact your behavior has on the other person. If you have empathic accuracy towards someone, this helps that person to feel heard and understood, while fostering their sense of connection with you. By contrast, mind-reading blocks healthy connection, making the other person feel like they are being trapped in definitions and categories that stifle who they really are.

The more you get to know someone, the more temptation there is to second-guess what the other person is thinking. Although this is a natural and beautiful part of having a close relationship, it can spill into unhealthy mind-reading. To illustrate this, imagine the following scenario.

Steve returned home after a long and tiring day at work. His wife, Jennifer, had also had a long day. She had intended to have a warm dinner waiting for her husband, but all day she had been harried by unexpected distractions. When Steve came home, all that was waiting for him was a big pile of dishes. A few minutes after his arrival, Steve asked Jennifer, “What did you do today?”

Angrily, Jennifer responded, “You only asked that because you want to know why I didn’t make dinner! You aren’t actually interested in my day at all.”

In this exchange, Jennifer is mind-reading, imposing a narrative onto Steve’s words that may not be accurate. To be sure, Steve might have been asking his question as a subtle way of finding out why there was no dinner, or maybe he was genuinely interested in his wife’s day. It may even have been a little bit of both. Whatever may have been Steve’s real meaning, it would have been better for Jennifer to respond with another question, perhaps asking something like, “Honey, are you asking that because you are genuinely interested in how my day went, or only because you want to know why I didn’t make dinner for you?”

Again, the point is not that we can never read between the lines to pick up non-verbal cues. Often we really do intuit what other people are thinking, especially when interacting with people we know well. For example, in the above exchange, if Steve had asked, “What did you do today?” while looking at the pile of dishes and rolling his eyes, then Jennifer would have good reason to infer a subtext to his question. But even when you are pretty sure you know what another person is thinking, hold it lightly and don’t be afraid to check in with the other person. Just because you think you know what someone else is thinking, does not mean you actually do.

Catastrophizing

Catastrophizing is closely related to overgeneralizing. It involves inferring a dramatic pattern from insignificant events or forecasting the worst possible outcome to a situation. For example, we’re often tempted to put a catastrophic context around our own

shortcomings (“the fact that I did that means I’m a complete failure is a mother”) or to dramatize other people’s mistakes and shortcomings (“the fact that my wife believes that about me just proves we’re incompatible” or “only a manipulative and controlling husband would say that to me”).

One of the most common forms of catastrophizing is when we forecast disastrous consequences about the future. Here are some common examples of catastrophic forecasting:

- “If I go on a diet, I’ll probably just gain weight.”
- “If I compromise with my wife in this one area, then everything I’ve worked to achieve in our marriage could begin to crumble.”
- “The fact that I can’t pay this bill proves we’re on the road to bankruptcy.”
- “Things have gone so smoothly for so long that tragedy is bound to be just around the corner.”

Catastrophizing often hinders us from taking appropriate action since it leads us to underestimate the role we can play in overcoming problems, creating opportunities and finding creative solutions to hostile circumstances.

It can be particularly easy to fall into the error of catastrophizing during times of stress, heartache, physical illness or sleep deprivation. The key is that when you begin thinking catastrophic thoughts to recognize the error and remind yourself that you do not need to go down that path. It is always possible to reframe catastrophic-based thoughts with a more realistic assessment of the situation. For example, instead of saying to yourself, “I think this is finally going to push me beyond coping point”, you could say, “I know from the past that I’ve been able to endure a lot more than I thought I’d be able to.” Instead of reflecting on how bad things are for you right now, you might instead think, “Given everything I’m up against, I think I’m actually doing pretty well right now.”

Another way to buttress ourselves against a catastrophizing mentality is to recognize that whatever difficulties we may be going through, it is a normal part of being human. As Jordan Peterson reminds us, “it is a rare person indeed who isn’t suffering from at least one serious catastrophe at any given time—particularly if you include their family in the equation.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Jordan B Peterson, *12 Rules For Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2018), 316.

Emotional Reasoning



Emotional reasoning occurs when we allow our feelings to drive our thinking, or when we treat our emotional reactions as if they are self-authenticating. Often our emotional reactions are correct, but we cannot know that simply on the basis of how we feel. We need to first check if our feelings are rooted in fact.

Here are some common examples of emotional reasoning:

- “What he did made me feel hurt; therefore, it must have been wrong.”
- “If I’m this scared about moving, then I shouldn’t do it.”
- “I know my spouse is behaving inappropriately, because otherwise why would I feel jealous?”
- “I feel like I can’t cope with this; therefore, I can’t cope with it.”