

INTRODUCTION

(PLEASE DON'T SKIP)

The mind makes for a good and useful servant,
but a very poor master.

— UNKNOWN

In 2004, I accepted a new job designing integrated circuit chips (the tiny bits of silicon that run almost everything today). I wanted my first chip to be perfect, not only because it was my first project at this company, but also because I had long staked my self-worth on scholastic and professional achievement. After many months of arduous design work, and a few more anxious months waiting for the prototype to be manufactured, it came time for the most critical test. This particular test was the electrical engineering equivalent of taking a baseball bat to a carton of eggs. My hands shook a little as I attached the electrodes that would deliver the intended punch.

Pow! Sparks flew into the air, and a wisp of smoke ascended as the chip gave up the ghost.

To say that my heart sank would be the understatement of the century. As irrational as I may have been in that moment, I truly believed my future was riding on this chip. *This can't be happening,*

I thought. I double-checked my setup, replaced the damaged device, and tried again.

Bang! Sparks once again confirmed the horrifying conclusion: My design contained a fatal flaw—a bug.

Then I experienced my first-ever panic attack. My hands shook uncontrollably, my throat tightened, my breath quickened. I experienced hot flashes as my mind spun. The world seemed surreal. Time stood still like I was in a horror movie.

Reality sank in as paranoia hijacked my mind, filling it with racing, discursive, afflicted thoughts without a moment's respite. It wasn't long before I had trouble sleeping, collapsing out of exhaustion around 11:00 PM and waking up somewhere around 2:00 AM, full of anxious energy. Within days, I noticed I was hardly hungry anymore, given that constant worry and sadness can do a real number on the appetite. I regularly had dry heaves before work. I was descending into darkness without a brake lever.

Before you follow me too far down the rabbit hole of suffering, I want you to know that this horror story shifts into a beautiful one of healing and personal transformation. I'm not merely advertising a good Hollywood ending; I wholeheartedly believe that everyone is capable of such transformation when empowered with knowledge and the appropriate tools. So there's no need for despair or disheartenment. I'm sure you've had plenty of both already.

But before I get to the happy ending, I need to talk about what happened to us—how we ended up in this mess in the first place.

Mental illness and emotional instability are increasingly running over us in more ways than we can count. A USA Today/Suffolk University poll found that 9 out of 10 registered voters believe

there's a "mental health crisis" in the nation.¹ Think about that—9 out of 10 Americans can't agree that the Earth is round,² yet nearly all of us agree that we've got a severe problem on our hands when it comes to our mental and emotional wellbeing.

Clinical levels of mental illness and addiction aren't the only things plaguing our society on the mental health front. There is a large portion of the population that I refer to as "not yet clinical, but not currently well." Sadly, many minds considered healthy by today's (insurance-based) standards are locked up in incessant, self-absorbed, judgmental, discursive chatter...and that's when they aren't being distracted by work, gossip, television, podcasts, gambling, social media, exercise, news, porn, drugs, alcohol, and myriad other avoidance mechanisms. Maybe this isn't clinical unwellness, but it surely isn't a picture of health either. So many people's lives have become devoid of meaning and purpose.

You may strive to be healthier but find that, more often than not, your desire for wellbeing is no match for your self-defeating, destructive habit patterns.

Unhealthy individuals form unhealthy communities. Self-absorption and conflict are exploding as social technologies pour jet fuel onto our fears, bringing the worst parts of ourselves into contact with the worst parts of others. Discourse is breaking down as we sort ourselves into tribal bubbles of like-minded people. A society is fundamentally a collection of individuals, and unfortunately, the overwhelming majority of individuals are doing little to nothing to address their own neuroses and mental illnesses.

Polish poet and aphorist Stanislaw Jerzy Lec described the situation perfectly: "No snowflake in an avalanche ever feels responsible." The point is to stop judging others as being the problem. If there

is a problem, the thing you refer to as “me” is it, and it’s a problem *you* have to work on, because no one else can. But that doesn’t mean you must work on it alone, which is why I wrote this book.

EXPLORING MENTAL HEALTHCARE’S SHORTCOMINGS

Back to the horror-movie-turned-redemption story. I hadn’t slept more than a couple hours or eaten a complete meal in a few weeks. This was about enough for my sister Sandy, who flew from Chicago to Phoenix and promptly dragged me to a psychiatrist. The doctor prescribed Zyprexa, an antipsychotic medication that would force me to sleep and eat. Over the next month, as sleep and nutrition returned, my mind “recovered” to a kind of pathetic homeostasis that included near-constant anxiety and depression.

It was around this time that I embarked on a numbed-out, heavily sedated, decade-long foray into pharmaceuticals. A second psychiatrist assured me that none of this was my fault because my brain—analogous to the pancreas of a person with diabetes—was exhibiting imbalances of essential neurotransmitters like serotonin and norepinephrine. I would be on these pills, he asserted, for the rest of my life.

Thankfully, I wasn’t buying it. If I had a neurotransmitter deficiency, what was causing it? Did the chemical imbalances cause the mental states, or did the mental states cause the imbalances? It all seemed rather unscientific.

Don’t get me wrong. I respect psychiatrists; they have helped me and millions of others. It’s not an exaggeration to say they may have saved my life, and psychotropic medications certainly have

their place in mental health treatment. However, in many cases, it often does people a disservice to convince them that little else can be done. Never once did either psychiatrist say, “Your problem is you, so you need to get to work” or anything close to it.

And they were simply wrong, because I haven’t been on medication for years, so where’s my “brain diabetes” now?

MERGING EAST AND WEST TO FIND WELLBEING

Because I find interest, beauty, and awe in the world, I’ve always been a voracious consumer of information. As a kid, I even read the entire encyclopedia—mostly while sitting on the toilet, as my mother loves to point out. So I began reading what I could find about the problem of human happiness and suffering. I headed to Barnes & Noble (a step up from the bathroom), which had a table of recent bestsellers at the front of the store. Prominently displayed in the middle of the table was the book *Happiness* by Matthieu Ricard.³ It was a game-changer.

As gentle as the book is, one thing became apparent within hours: *My entire life had been a fraudulent enterprise that gave me little chance of achieving lasting peace, happiness, and fulfillment.* As a Midwestern, red-blooded American male, I was trained to believe that once I forced all the puzzle pieces into place—career, finances, spouse, children, house, car, entertainment—I would plant the flag on the hill of peace and happiness forever.

Silly me. Nothing could be further from the truth, because peace, happiness, and fulfillment are not based on an external set of cir-

cumstances forced into existence through great effort and sacrifice and held there. *They are internal conditions requiring cultivation.*

It wasn't a coincidence that Matthieu Ricard was a PhD biologist turned Buddhist monk. Buddhism is the world-class gem that offers an understanding of the mind, the self, reality, and factors and methods that lead to the arising of widely desired positive mental states and their associated virtues and outcomes. I'm not alone in this assertion, as this claim is now being espoused by many Western, non-Buddhist scientists and philosophers.^{4, 5, 6, 7} Referring to the instructions provided to him by one of his Buddhist teachers, ardent atheist and learned philosopher and neuroscientist Sam Harris stated, "This instruction was, without question, the most important thing I have ever been explicitly taught by another human being. It has given me a way to escape the usual tides of psychological suffering—fear, anger, shame—in an instant."⁸

Thus in 2008, I enrolled in classes in Buddhist psychology and metaphysics—a body of knowledge so vast and deep that finding the bottom of it is impossible. I've studied it continuously ever since and enjoyed the good fortune to be trained in meditation by some of the world's top minds. These efforts complement my more traditional education in engineering, business, and clinical social work (therapy).

If I have a message for the world, it is this: We're failing a test we've been given the answers to, people! It's high time to put a stop to this madness. That's the purpose of this book.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

My MBA taught me that if you've failed to achieve a particular outcome, it's because you didn't understand your true goals, your strategies were flawed, or you stumbled in the execution of your strategies. Accordingly, this book is broken into three sections.

Part 1 covers how and why these failings occur.

- Chapter 0 provides exercises you can use to feel better right away, since I suspect that's why you're here.
- Chapter 1 reviews definitions of peace, happiness, and overall wellbeing to help you clarify what your true aims are. Then you'll explore a few of the dominant (but failed) strategies you may have used for achieving them.

The chapters in Part 2 provide background on how your brain works and how habits form so you can learn to alter both.

- Chapter 2 introduces models of the brain. Here you'll learn about changing from a small self to a Great Self perspective and how that leads to a more stable version of yourself.
- Chapter 3 discusses the wonderful traits or characteristics of the Great Self that will be the basis for your (new) life.
- Chapter 4 teaches you how humans effect change in their lives to ensure you proceed with confidence. I'll share two paths forward, which you will use as you work through the practices in the remaining chapters.

Part 3 contains practices you can use to achieve the emotional stability you desire.

- Chapters 5 through 10 teach you practices to implement throughout your day to feel better, build confidence in your path toward growth and wellbeing, and keep everyday calamities from derailing you.

Of course, you don't have to stop there. In addition to the content in this book, you can access a variety of additional resources to deepen inner peace and wellbeing on my website at www.UnbreakableInc.com. While you're there, you can also sign up for one of my workshops or retreats if you'd prefer to learn and practice together, get your questions answered, and maybe even meet like-minded people.

There's a global peace, happiness, and wellbeing movement occurring, and I don't want you to miss it. This journey isn't about tweaking a few habits or adding another self-help hack to your routine. It's about transformation—a shift in how you think about, conduct yourself within, and mentally and emotionally interact with the chaos of modern life.

This book challenges you to question fundamental assumptions about who you are, what peace and happiness truly mean, and how to achieve mental and emotional wellbeing. The topics are deep, and several will likely be entirely new and even a bit radical to you, so please don't be surprised if this isn't a quick weekend read. Most importantly, please have no fear: *Nothing I say in this book will require you to change your chosen faith path, and I would prefer that you not do so.*

Some of what this book covers will be provocative; that's one of the reasons I'm writing it. Out of love and from a place of deep

compassion, I'm going to wake you from your slumber and get the gorilla that is your mind off the couch. I tried to make this a little entertaining, but modern human society is very effective at separating us from our true nature, so to move forward, you will have to cut through the significant confusion that this causes.

Society conditions us to believe that working, achieving, consuming, and distracting our way to an empty, self-absorbed happiness that is too devoid of meaning, purpose, and connection will work out. No wonder we're so frustrated and exhausted. No wonder our societal structures are being ripped apart, as various factions attempt to exert control over each other under the belief that their version of reality is "right." Enough already!

CHAPTER 0

LEARNING TO CALM DOWN

Chapter 0? Yes, electrical engineers like myself typically start counting at zero, but that's not the reason for the title. It's more because I want to help you set up a base of operations so you can start calming down and feeling better immediately, and I know you're capable of it. I also want your mind to be calm and pliable—ready to learn and grow while (hopefully!) enjoying the process I've outlined for you.

Two assumptions form the basis of all practices in this book.

- Emotions are combinations of mental and physical events.
- There's a place in your mind that's already peaceful and happy but is currently too often obscured.

The next section looks into each of these assumptions before you get to the exercises to help you feel better.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR EMOTIONS

Emotions are combinations of mental and physical phenomena, so to feel better, you need to address both domains. For example, worry often presents as incessant, futuristic thinking (mental phenomena) and tension in various muscles, including the digestive tract (physical phenomena). Either domain can kick off the emoting process.

To experience firsthand how thoughts activate bodily sensations, think about all the reasons you last became angry, and notice what happens in your body. In turn, physical sensations activate thoughts, as your left brain tries to figure out why the body has been activated and make sense of it. Thus thoughts can generate physical sensations, and physical sensations can generate thoughts. You get stuck in mini emotional loops all day, every day, which is why you love your distractions—they're currently your only means of escape. Consequently, working with emotions means working skillfully with your body *and* mind.

FINDING YOUR MIND'S PEACEFUL PLACE

There is a place in your mind that is peaceful no matter what's going on at any moment. It's actually the base, or *natural*, state of your mind. All thinking, interpreting, mental storytelling, and emotional reactivity are *perturbations* or disturbances of this state. The problem is that your mind has been incessantly disturbing itself for so long that you've (incorrectly) come to believe that neurotic rumination is the base state of your mind. The mind improves at whatever it does, which is why you practice everything from golf to mathematics. This automatic learning process is a blessing and a curse.

To understand why it is difficult to experience peace of mind, imagine how peaceful you would be with someone poking, questioning, or criticizing you constantly! This is what your mind has been doing to itself for a very long time—possibly your whole life. That’s the curse. The blessing arises when you learn to take control of the habituation process and intentionally cultivate peace and stability. The Tibetan word for meditation is *gom* (rhymes with comb), which literally means “to become familiar with.” Thus your mission is to become increasingly and intimately familiar with this stable place and all it has to offer.

USING THE 4–7–8 BREATHING TECHNIQUE TO STOP STRESS

I tell my clients that mental patterns take time to develop, as do the practices required to alter those patterns. Furthermore, no practice is equally effective for every kind of mind. So if a technique works for you, great! If, after a reasonable effort, a practice isn’t doing much for you, just let it go. This particular practice is the first one I give to every client. Almost all of them find it valuable to give themselves permission to snap out of mindless rumination, assess how they are really feeling, and relax the body and mind. In this exercise, you begin by taking the time to assess your current state and then calm your body and mind with a couple of simple techniques.

1. **Check in.** Take a moment to assess the state of your body and mind right now. Simply close your eyes and scan your body, noting any sensations that are present. Then check on your state of mind. Use one word to describe what you find.

2. **Calm your body through muscle relaxation.** If your body scan found muscle tension, tense each of those muscles fully for a few seconds and then allow it to relax. Alternatively, massage a tense area while breathing into it. Be sure to check your shoulders, face, and belly since these are some of tension's favorite hangout spots. Lastly, tense up all your muscles at once—even the muscles in your face—for a few seconds, then relax completely. (And be sure to crack a smile at how silly you just looked.)
3. **Calm your body with the 4–7–8 breath.** Inhale *through your nose* for four seconds, hold your breath for seven seconds, exhale *through pursed lips* (like you're blowing out a candle) for eight seconds, and *note how you feel at the end* (key point). That's it.

If you have difficulty slowing the out breath down that much, try extending it for 10 seconds or even longer a few times, until you become familiar with what it's like to slow down.

Try a couple rounds of this technique now, mentally noting how your mind and body feel after each one. Maybe you detect a calming effect, and maybe you don't. Whatever you experience is okay!

Breathing techniques are scientifically proven to be effective⁹ at calming the body and mind, though we didn't need EEG or fMRI scans to tell us that. This particular sequence is effective because it engages the parasympathetic nervous system, which calms you down when you're activated.

SNAPPING INTO RADICAL ACCEPTANCE

One theory of suffering suggests that it arises due to resistance to the immediate experience. It's helpful to distinguish between *what's happening* and *your relationship to what's happening*. Suffering results from your relationship—one based in fear, aversion, or even hatred—to painful, unpleasant experiences.

For this exercise, I want you to truly *know* that your mind completely controls its relationship to the present moment. I further want you to accept as fact that your mind can pivot to a more positive relationship in an instant. Now follow the sequence.

1. Define your current state of mind as identified in Step 1 of the previous exercise.
2. Reflect on the fact that your state of mind is inherently unstable and doesn't last. While this fact can be unsettling, it also provides the requisite space for a new state to arise. In other words, the impermanence of mental and emotional states provides space for new possibilities.
3. Fully feel whatever your state of mind is and say to yourself "This is my truth—for now—a starting point on my journey to happiness."
4. If your current state of mind is negative, ask yourself *why* you find it so unacceptable. Tag "So what? Who said...?" onto the end of every answer your mind produces. Develop whatever "who said" phrases you think will work for you.

Here's an example sequence:

"My current state of mind, depression, is unacceptable because it's horribly unpleasant."

So what? Who said life wasn't going to be unpleasant sometimes?

"But I don't like it."

So what? Who said you were going to like everything?

"But I'm afraid I will be like this forever."

So what? Who said you would never be afraid in life?

Besides, you have no idea what's coming for you, so just cut it with all the prognosticating. Ask yourself if you're willing to stop fighting against reality and just be whatever, wherever, and whenever you are—right now.

5. Now snap your fingers, and in so doing, snap your mind into mindful awareness of the present moment, and drop all resistance whatsoever to your direct experience. Becoming hyper-mindful implies concentrating exclusively on what you see, hear, and feel. Completely surrender to this moment, and most importantly, feel what it's like to do so. Whatever you are, for now, you are—so BE IT. I don't need to tell you how to drop all resistance any more than I would need to tell you how to stop talking or walking. You just stop.
6. Now when you're ready—SNAP! Notice any shift in your experience.

These exercises are designed to teach you that you are not a helpless victim. If you commit some time to work with your mind and body throughout the day, you *will* feel better. These techniques require only a few seconds each, and no one in your scintillating employee communications meeting or at your in-laws' Thanksgiving dinner needs to know you're using them.

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

In this chapter, you learned some techniques for quieting your mind. If one or more of these generated some shifts for you, great—if not, keep trying. Most of my clients need some practice with these exercises before they feel the full benefits. If they didn't work for you (yet), at least you've had a couple of moments of being present in your life, which is immensely beneficial in and of itself.

Key Insights

- You are not at the mercy of your mind or emotions.
- You can use intentional muscle relaxation and the 4–7–8 breath to calm your body and mind down.
- Snapping into radical acceptance—a total surrender to the now—can help you instantly slow your mind down when it is spinning.

It may sound obvious, but being a more peaceful and happy person entails spending more time every day in a peaceful and happy state. In that spirit, I'll refer back to these techniques throughout the book, reminding you to be kind and compassionate to

yourself by slowing down, becoming present, taking a breath, and reminding yourself that you're sane. With practice, you'll become an expert in this sanity and be able to maintain it, even when life becomes a four-alarm dumpster fire and no one else in the space could possibly make such a radical claim.

Your time has come. Welcome to basic sanity. I'm so glad you're here.

Now that you've learned techniques to calm yourself, please move on to Chapter 1, which provides you with information to help you understand why peace and happiness have remained elusive and home in on what you really want in life. After all, you can only achieve your goals once you have soundly defined them.

PART 1

UNDERSTANDING WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU

CHAPTER 1

ASSESSING FLAWED GOALS AND INEFFECTIVE STRATEGIES

In the pursuit of happiness, many people fail to find joy.

— VIKTOR E. FRANKL

This much is obvious: Despite all of society's myriad advances in science, technology, and medicine—peace, happiness, and overall wellbeing remain elusive. Wasn't that the point of all those advances—to be happy and well? This chapter quickly and systematically assesses the situation to help you figure out what went wrong, dismantle it, and then fix it. Though the process should be fairly straightforward, it may also be a bit unpleasant. So take a deep breath (maybe one of those 4–7–8 breaths you just learned) and prepare to rip the Band-Aid off.

As I mentioned in the Introduction (which I know you didn't dare skip), my MBA taught me that failure to achieve a particular result occurs due to at least one of three reasons:

- You were confused about what you really wanted—the goals.
- You were confused about how to go about achieving your goals—the strategies.
- You failed to execute your strategies properly—the tactics.

Modern Western life presents you with countless strategies and tactics to achieve your goals. Most people assume these will be effective because they are the status quo, so there's no need to question them. But when no combination of the tried-and-true methods appears to work, no matter how well executed, the issues run deeper than mere tactics. This is a primary reason you've likely ended up frustrated and exhausted: You changed tactics or worked even harder by doubling down on the tactics you already employed, yet the desired outcomes remained elusive.

FORMING A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF HAPPINESS AND PEACE OF MIND

When I ask clients what they want in life, they typically say they want happiness, peace of mind, or both. But when I ask them to define those terms, they either say they don't know or say something like happiness is a *state* of mind resulting from the *presence* of the *desirable*, and peace of mind is a *state* of mind resulting from the *absence* of the *undesirable*. In other words, they believe they are happy when they get what they want and are peaceful when nothing bothers them.

Clients also report an important caveat: While they may experience *moments* of happiness and peace of mind, what they've strug-

gled to achieve is the *stability* of these states. To arrive at more specific goal definitions, you must first look at the most basic states of mind, namely pleasure and pain, *states* that result from the positive or negative subjective (specific to you, the subject) appraisal of a particular moment, respectively. It is important to note that pleasure and pain relate directly to what's happening in that moment—the circumstances.

For a more detailed explanation of these definitions and how I arrived at them, refer to the Glossary in the back of the book. For now, let's keep this straightforward. The key element is that pleasure and pain are subjective appraisals of what's happening at any given moment.

Now most people maintain that pleasure = happiness and pain = suffering (the opposite of peace of mind). Thus most people describe themselves as “happy” if they can string together significantly more pleasurable experiences than painful ones, and they suffer when they can't. It doesn't substantially matter if you're an unemployed, involuntarily celibate gamer living in your parents' basement or a highly esteemed professor who is happily married with three kids. Everyone is trying to maximize mental and physical states to match their desires in the context of their perceived capabilities and circumstances.

Using substitution (sorry, there's the nerd in me), the modified understanding of happiness and peace of mind can be defined as follows: Happiness is a state

GET THIS!

Most people believe happiness and peace of mind result from particular circumstances that must be forced into creation and held in place.

of mind resulting from the *presence* of circumstances *you* find pleasurable, and peace of mind is state of mind resulting from the *absence* of circumstances *you* find painful.

These modified definitions of happiness and peace of mind are the goals of modern life. Now that they are clearly defined, I'll briefly outline the top three (flawed) strategies people use to achieve happiness and peace of mind, and the fundamental problems that result from each strategy.

FLAWED STRATEGY #1: INCESSANT CIRCUMSTANCE MANAGEMENT

If happiness and peace of mind depend on circumstances, and you want them to remain stable, then the primary strategy for achieving them is obvious: You must *constantly manage the circumstances of your life*. Through tremendous and incessant effort, you are to force pleasurable circumstances into existence, hold them there indefinitely, and do whatever is required to avoid painful circumstances, both now and in the future. Circumstance management is what all the busy bees in the jar are doing. Investing aggressively in this strategy may consume your entire life, leaving only this activity and whatever distractions you use to avoid acknowledging that it isn't working well enough. Let's explore some of the reasons such a strategy is doomed to fail.

- **Happiness and peace of mind are internal conditions that already exist.** Happiness and peace of mind are internal, not external. Managing internal circumstances through external means is inherently problematic because it ignores this root point of confusion.

For example, you've likely heard the phrase "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder," but there's much more to this statement than initially meets the eye. Say someone already has a perfectly working coffee mug, so they don't *need* another. But then they see mine and like it better than theirs. Their next question will inevitably be "Where'd you get that?"

Now not everyone agrees that this is a desirable mug, which implies that the "goodness" of the object originates within the *subject*, but they don't know that. They mistakenly believe the goodness resides in the *object*, so they pull it into their territory to keep experiencing its goodness—the goodness they projected onto the external object from within themselves.

In other words, they crave the object because they aren't able to experience that internal goodness directly, so they attempt to experience it *by proxy* of the external. This mistake is why you're always so deeply engaged in the "pursuit of happiness," a fundamental right enshrined in the Declaration of Independence. I hate to be the bearer of bad news (not really; I am a therapist, after all), but this is the inherent problem with the circumstance management strategy: As long as you're in pursuit of something, *you don't have it*. The monumental irony is that you *do* have it; you just *don't know* you have it. Oops.

- **Impermanence is a fact of life.** External circumstances are inherently impermanent and, therefore, constantly changing. Every engineer will tell you that as soon as you put something together, entropy is working tirelessly to

take it apart. Everything you own is future junk. Money comes and goes. (Trust me on that one.) Every favorable situation will eventually end, because everything created disintegrates. This inevitability implies that the circumstance management strategy runs counter to a fundamental fact of reality—impermanence—and that’s a problem. Practically speaking, this means that the stress and exertion required to force the circumstances to your liking will be replaced with the stress and exertion required to try and hold them there while they do nothing but change. This is a fool’s errand that only ends in disappointment!

GET THIS!

Everything is constantly changing, so attempting to incessantly control reality is an inherently exhausting, frustrating, and stressful approach to life.

Internal circumstances, including your desires, are also in a constant state of change. If you don’t believe me, listen to your favorite song a few thousand times. (Wait, don’t do that—you’ll end up hating your favorite song.) That this happens to us suggests that humans are insatiable; the pleasure you achieve and pains you avoid can never fully satisfy you. The

satisfaction of a craving only leads to more craving, like an itch that only gets worse from scratching, leading to a life of perpetual dissatisfaction.

This feedback loop is how addiction gets rolling. What every addict craves most is a moment without craving. Dissatisfaction directly results from the brain’s inherent

inability to achieve satiety. Nagarjuna, an important Buddhist philosopher from the second century, famously said, “Better to not have the itch than the pleasure of scratching.”

- **You lack adequate control of circumstances.** External circumstances are far more out of control than you need for circumstance management to be effective. Sure, you can and should work hard and make lots of money, but that still won’t give you what you need and want with any guarantee of stability. If such a strategy were effective, wealthy and powerful people would always be happy and peaceful, which is neither what we observe nor what they report. Why? Because they’ve achieved positive but unstable *states* but not positive and stable *traits*.

No matter who you are or what you achieve, you can’t control employees, friends or family members, competitors, politics, economies, pandemics, technological developments, the weather, natural disasters, or unnatural disasters. The list could go on forever. Regardless of how much money you have, you can’t make people love you, nor can you stop yourself or those you love from aging, getting ill, and dying.

This lack of adequate control points directly at another inherent flaw in the strategy: Relying on out-of-control external circumstances for wellbeing leads to one of the most crippling conditions crushing society today—hyper-vigilance, also known as *anxiety*.

Internal circumstances are also out of control, as anyone who has meditated for more than a few seconds will report. A professor in therapy school said we should never use the word *crazy*. I raised my hand. “Uhhhh, have you ever watched your brain operate for an hour straight in meditation? That thing is full-on nuts!”

GET THIS!

Relying on control of ever-changing situations full of unpredictable people automatically results in anxiety.

The thing is, we’re all a little unhinged, but this is only a problem if you fail to maintain a healthy perspective about it, which entails lightening up quite a bit. I’m going to show you how to view and work with your particular brand of nuttiness so it doesn’t affect you.

- **Circumstance management is expensive.** Pleasure-seeking and pain avoidance involve consumption, and lots of it. Consumption is costly, not only to ourselves but also to the planet and other animals who live here. Pleasure-seeking and pain avoidance are also costly in terms of the traditional way we think about cost—monetarily. And if you’re going to *spend* lots of money, you need to *make* lots of money. So you’ll need a high-paying job that takes a lot of time, which is yet another massive expense. This cycle creates the conditions for stress.

I hope you can see at this point that basing your wellbeing on the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain is a dead end. It can’t possibly work out long-term. The “pleasure = happiness, pain = suffering” paradigm leads you to outsource your wellbeing to an

increasingly unreliable world full of unreliable people you can't control nearly enough and turns you into a dopamine addict. This outsourcing also causes you to wake up every day and ask the world "What kind of day do I get to have?"

Tell me what you rely on, and I'll tell you why your peace and happiness are so unstable.

As a funny example, I had a client struggling with their teenage children. I said I wanted them to try saying the following phrase without even cracking a smile: "I'm relying on American teenagers for my happiness and peace of mind." I'm sure you'll be shocked to learn they couldn't do it but instead laughed hysterically at the statement's ridiculousness.

FLAWED STRATEGY #2: ENGAGING IN AGGRESSIVE INDIVIDUALISM AND SELF-ABSORPTION

Doubling down on individualism and self-absorption is the most common reaction to the failure of circumstance management to achieve stable peace, happiness, and overall wellbeing. Since happiness and peace of mind (as defined) depend on *you* getting *your* way, maybe you just need to care more about yourself and what *you* want.

I discuss self-absorption more deeply in Chapter 2, but for now it's important to determine whether this thought pattern is present in your mind. If it would help to make that real for you, check in again on your ruminating mind and see who is playing the role of protagonist or antagonist (or possibly both) in the little soap opera.