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USEFUL IDEAS ON RECRUITING, RETENTION & OTHER HUMAN CAPITAL CHALLENGES

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October 2023

So many executives spend decades reaching the pinnacles of their careers only to find themselves unfulfilled at the top. Successful, but still feeling empty.

In the new book *Build the Life You Want*, Arthur Brooks, Harvard Business School professor and (yes) Oprah Winfrey offer high achievers a guide to becoming better leaders—of their lives: practical, research-based practices to *build* the four pillars of happiness: family, friendship, work, and faith.

I guess we could all be more happy.



SUCCESSFUL, BUT STILL FEEL EMPTY?

*A Happiness Scholar and Oprah
Have Advice for You.*

Well worth the 5 minute Read

Understanding your emotions, and how to take control of them to become

happier and achieve your goals, is the backbone of Brooks' new book with Oprah Winfrey, [*Build the Life You Want: The Art and Science of Getting Happier*](#). They weave together the best happiness how-tos from social psychology, behavioral economics, and neuroscience research to create what Brooks calls "a textbook for the masses."

Written for a broad audience, the book rings especially true with a cohort [**Brooks knows all too well**](#): Successful titans like himself who wonder why they feel unfulfilled. Brooks dove into happiness research after commanding a prestigious nonprofit left him feeling empty. "I wasn't enjoying what I was doing, and I wasn't getting the most out of my own life, so my wife suggested I turn my tools on myself," he recalls, starting a journey that led him to Harvard and to his collaboration with Winfrey.

"Everybody thinks that [successful people] have perfect lives," Brooks adds. "But if you look inside their own heads, you're going to see the same problems that everybody else has. And furthermore, the stakes are higher, because they're leading a whole bunch of other people. So emotional management is even more important."

Brooks says the country, and maybe the world, is in a happiness slump. This epidemic predates the COVID-19 pandemic (though lockdowns and isolation certainly increased feelings of sadness and despair for many). In the last decade, the percentage of Americans who say they are "not too happy" rose to 24 percent from 10 percent; "very happy" respondents dropped to 18 percent from 36 percent, the book reports, citing the University of Chicago's General Social Surveys.

Meanwhile, Winfrey spent the pandemic lockdowns in her California home, thinking about this happiness problem, Brooks says. One of her windows into the subject became Brooks' columns in *The Atlantic*, focused weekly on the science of happiness, as well as his 2022 book [**From Strength to Strength: Finding Success, Happiness, and Deep Purpose in the Second Half of Life**](#). The media mogul invited him to be on her podcast; that led to an intense weekend brainstorming session at Winfrey's home where they hashed out the main idea for the new book: To bring Brooks' MBA class on happiness to everyone.

"There's so much incredible work in academia that's not reaching the public," says Brooks, who is Professor of Management Practice at HBS and of the Practice of Public Leadership at Harvard Kennedy School. "My job isn't to create more new studies, but to curate and translate the existing science for the public. I'm like a sommelier of this information for people. The whole world is my classroom and I have to treat it as such."

Thinking about thinking

Build the Life You Want draws on some 1,000 academic references and begins by detailing the science of emotions and why happiness is so sought after, but so elusive.

“‘I want to be happy,’ is almost always followed by ‘but,’” Brooks and Winfrey write. That “but” is often the idea that circumstances—a bad boss, a failing relationship, problems with money—are preventing happiness.

Enter metacognition or thinking about thinking. Sure, there is a lot of injustice in the world, with the lives of some people much worse than those of others. It’s up to us to decide how to react, though.

Consider Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl, one of many historical figures the authors weave into the story. In Frankl’s words, “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

Big idea 1: Don’t be a caveman

Brain science indicates that many of our knee-jerk emotions evolved to protect us from predators but might not be as adaptive now that the threat has changed.

For instance, the anxiety necessary for our caveman ancestors to protect themselves from being cast out from their community (and get eaten by a tiger) is no longer as useful when activated by a slight on social media. Emotions are just that, the authors say—and it’s up to us (not a Neanderthal) to choose our response.

Big idea 2: Happy is an illusion

The authors recommend charting a course toward “happier” rather than the mirage of constant bliss. The idea is that happiness comes with some unhappiness, from which we can learn and needn’t fear.

“I want leaders to understand that unhappiness is not evidence that they’re defective and broken,” says Brooks. “I want them to think less about what people are thinking about them and more about observing the outside world to get stronger and better and more effective as years go by.”

The book offers three practical tactics for working through day-to-day challenges:

1. Write in a journal about your emotions.
2. Substitute better emotions: gratefulness, compassion, hope, laughter.
3. To reduce envy, avoid mirrors, turn off social media notifications, and

Metacognition at (your) work

Unhappiness is pervasive at work, the authors write. In 2022, they say, 16 percent of workers were “very satisfied” with their jobs, while almost half felt somewhat or very dissatisfied, according to “Job Satisfaction Survey: What Workers Want in 2022” from the blog *Virtual Vocations*. That’s in part because extrinsic rewards—money, titles, corner offices—don’t always bring happiness, Brooks and Winfrey find.

“I talk to people all the time who say, basically: ‘I can manage money. I can manage a whole company. I can’t manage my feelings,’” Brooks says. “They don’t treat their self-management with the same seriousness that they treat their corporate management.”

Big Idea 1: The right path for you

A straight sprint up the corporate ladder is what society pushes many to value; it might yield the most tangible rewards but may not be for everyone.

Consider whether you have lots of interests. You might be happier with a “transitory” career that sees you “waiting tables in Denver, and now you are working for a moving company in Tucson. In a few years, you might be driving a long-haul truck out of Seattle,” the book notes. This may bring happiness to people who prioritize lifestyle, location, or social life.

Talented but have significant family obligations? You might prefer the “steady-state” path that allows you to learn and grow but not take on too many hours or increased responsibility. Meanwhile, a “spiral career” allows you to change paths every now and then while applying the skills you have to a next step.

Big idea 2: Beware work addiction

Many successful people lean into extra time at the office to mask emotional pain, the authors write, a problem that our culture often rewards but one that can worsen with time. Many of these same people tend to rely on work for their identity, leaving them without a clear sense of self.

The book offers three tips to stay balanced in a world that pushes overwork:

1. Keep a log of your activities so you know how much you are working and what else brings you joy. Schedule your downtime and leisure just as you would work.
2. Set goals that focus on service to others and earned success.
3. Take your vacations.

Invest more in family, friendships, and faith

Many work-addicted strivers toil for external rewards at the cost of healthy

families, friendships, and spiritual connections. They're oblivious to the power these pillars could bring to their mindset, the authors say.

Big idea 1: Put your own oxygen mask on first for better relationships

The authors zoom in on the emotional contagion negativity can take on in a family, infecting everyone like a virus. The best advice: manage your own emotions first so that you can help your family with theirs. The goal is not to eliminate problems, but to control how we react to them when they inevitably arise.

The authors remind even the busiest people to pause and take time for friendships. They're key to happiness, according to one statistic stating that friendship accounts for about 60 percent of the difference in happiness between people. COVID-19 made socializing harder, layered on top of existing anxiety and disconnection about how to relate in person.

Big idea 2: Faith takes lots of forms

The authors come to spirituality through a Christian lens; Brooks recounts converting to Catholicism as a teenager after a mystical experience at the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico.

But they report that many transcendental paths can help boost happiness. That's in part because most faith traditions inspire meditation, which invites practitioners to be present in the moment, knowing themselves and their emotions better.

A digital world needs a low-tech approach. Brooks and Winfrey say that people need to put down their phones and:

1. Go outside. Research shows nature walkers had improved mood and working memory, and less anxiety.
2. Keep friendships in person and offline. "Social media is dangerous if it's a substitute for in-person relationships," Brooks says.
3. Don't be transactional. Value family and friends for who they are, not by what they can do for you, and avoid allowing yourself to be objectified as an extension of your work, too.

Source: Harvard Business School-Working Knowledge



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