

HOW TO MAKE YOURSELF MISERABLE: DISCOVERING THE SECRETS TO UNHAPPINESS

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In the words of the 19th century philosopher John Stuart Mill, “Ask yourself whether you are happy, and you cease to be so.” Mill’s observation highlights one of the hidden realities of life: It is in the pursuit of happiness that, paradoxically, we can find unhappiness. From the sacred texts of antiquity to the journals of modern science, there are several themes that have been identified as ways to create more unhappiness and greater dissatisfaction with life. For those seeking to be miserable, these empirical and spiritual texts hold the secrets to unhappiness.

Practice negative thinking. Historically, the importance of attitude has been recognized since ancient times. The Greek philosopher Epictetus observed, “Men are not disturbed by things, but by the views they take of them.” In the play *Hamlet*, Shakespeare (c. 1602) made a similar observation when he wrote, “There’s nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.” In modern times, contemporary cognitive theorists have focused on cognitive appraisals of situational events as determinants of emotional experience. Dr. Aaron Beck (1976), the founder of cognitive therapy, emphasized cognitive appraisals as primary determinants of emotional disorders such as anxiety and depression. In other words, change your thinking and you change your feelings. From a cognitive perspective, you can create unhappiness by increasing your negative thoughts and decreasing your positive thoughts. For example, rather than focusing on your possibilities, focus on your limitations. Even better, become a pessimist. Empirical research has shown that pessimists are more depressed, less healthy, die earlier, and generally get less out of life than do optimists (Seligman, 1990).

Prescription for misery: To make yourself miserable, increase your negative thoughts by

focusing on daily hassles, cultivating an attitude of resentment, and developing a sense of pessimism.

Try to change things that cannot be changed.

Is there a best way to create happiness? According to psychologist Mihály Csikszentmihályi (1990), one of the pioneers in the field of positive psychology, “My studies of the past quarter century have convinced me that there is a way. It is a circuitous path that begins with achieving control over the contents of our consciousness” (p. 2). Conversely, psychological research reveals that people who have an external locus of control over their lives report more unhappiness, depression, and stress than people who have an internal locus of control (Benassi, Sweeney, & Dufour, 1988). There is also a correlation between learned helplessness and external locus of control (Hiroto, 1974). We are more likely to be unhappy when we shift the focus of our attention away from what we can control (e.g., our own behavior in response to a difficult situation) and focus more on the things we cannot control (e.g., things that happened in the past or the behavior of other people).

Prescription for misery: To make yourself miserable, focus on changing the things you cannot change (others) rather than focusing on changing the things you can change (yourself).

Focus on problems rather than progress.

Psychological research has shown that people who are highly successful are, in large part, more resilient in the face of defeats, setbacks, and disappointments of various kinds (Sternberg, 2006). Your attitude can define the difference between problems and progress. In many ways, increased focus on your problems

can magnify them, while decreased focus on solutions can help you feel more miserable. This two-fold approach is one of the secrets to unhappiness: Rather than looking back on life and recognizing the challenges that you have overcome, spend more time focusing on the problems that you have not overcome. Whereas an optimist is someone who makes opportunities out of difficulties, a pessimist is someone who makes difficulties out of opportunities. To be more miserable, think pessimistically. Even better, engage in *catastrophizing*, which means labeling challenging situations as terrible or horrible. Spend more time complaining about the way things are, rather than considering the solutions that will make things better. Rather than developing *resilience*, which refers to a positive capacity to cope with crisis and to develop new strengths through adversity, cultivate resentments for the bad things that have happened in your life. Rather than focusing on today's gifts and blessings, pay more attention to yesterday's losses and misfortunes. Although there are no guarantees in life, focusing on problems will ensure that you never run out of them.

Prescription for misery: To make yourself miserable, magnify problems and minimize progress.

Surround yourself with people who drain you. Psychological research has shown that the people who are most fulfilled in life surround themselves with mutually supportive friendships (Myers, 2000; Myers & Diener, 2006). In some ways, our relationships are like investments that involve deposits and withdrawals. Healthy relationships seem to make deposits into our lives, while unhealthy relationships seem to make withdrawals. In other words, some people build us up, while others tear us down. Some people bring out the best in us, and others bring out the worst. To create unhappiness in your life, surround

yourself with gloomy people. Get more involved with people who drain you, and avoid people who fulfill you. Even better, get involved in an abusive relationship. If you are already involved in an abusive relationship, stay in it—and be sure to complain about it.

Prescription for misery: To make yourself miserable, surround yourself with people who bring out the worst in you, and avoid people who inspire the best.

Don't share your expectations with others. Psychological research suggests that people who state what they expect from others, in a clear and direct manner that takes into consideration the rights and feelings of others, usually have more effective communication with others (Alberti & Emmons, 2001). Assertiveness involves a direct, honest, and appropriate expression of feelings, opinions, or requests. In other words, assertive people say what they mean, mean what they say, but they don't say it meanly. When we talk assertively, we take control of our actions and accept responsibility for ourselves. In contrast, *mind-reading* is a cognitive error that occurs when a person believes that he or she knows the thoughts or feelings of another person without asking the other person. This cognitive error can contribute to conflicts in relationships, especially when we don't articulate our expectations but instead we expect that others should read our mind. Unspoken expectations are essentially premeditated resentments, to the extent that others have no idea how to respond to us if they have no idea of what we expect in a specific situation. To create more conflicts in relationships, keep your expectations of others to yourself---so that they have no idea what you want. In this way, others are almost guaranteed not to live up to your expectations of them.

Prescription for misery: To make yourself miserable, create expectations about other

people but don't let them know your expectations.

Cultivate a sense of entitlement. In Greek mythology, Narcissus was a hunter who fell in love with his reflection in a pool of water without realizing that it was his own image. Unable to detach and leave the beauty of his own image, he drowned. Narcissism can become a pattern when someone is repeatedly told how smart, special, or talented he or she is, without these affirmations being connected to the personal effort and hard work needed to actualize them. In an effort to promote self-esteem—often at the expense of self-efficacy and self-regulation—parents sometimes pamper their children with praise unrelated to (or out of proportion to) any effort or achievement. The result can be children, students, and adults who come to feel entitled to receiving what they want when they want it just because they want it. A sense of entitlement is one of the cornerstones of narcissism. For parents, teachers, and others who love them, failure to set limits with narcissists teaches them that their unreasonable demands can be met and that they do not need to change their behavior in order to meet the demands of reality. Narcissism is one of the components that has been popularized in the so-called failure to launch syndrome (Fischer, 2015).

Prescription for misery: To make yourself miserable, cultivate a sense of entitlement in yourself. If you have a narcissist in your life, strive to meet their unending needs so that they never learn how to reciprocate in a relationship.

Develop a sense of envy toward others. Comparing yourself to others leads to envy, and envy is one of the cornerstones of unhappiness. In contrast, gratitude is an antidote to envy. Psychological research has shown that those who keep gratitude journals feel better about

their lives, so be sure to ignore any feelings of gratitude if you want to feel worse about your life. Compared to a control group of participants who recorded hassles or neutral life events, those who kept gratitude journals on a weekly basis exercised more regularly, reported fewer physical symptoms, felt better about their lives as a whole, and were more optimistic about the upcoming week (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Compared to participants who were instructed to focus on daily hassles or social comparisons, those who used the daily gratitude intervention were more likely to report having helped someone with a personal problem or having offered emotional support to another person (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Therefore, to make yourself more miserable, delete the phrase “thank you” from your vocabulary. Cultivate a sense of entitlement and assume that others in your life will be there to satisfy your needs. When they don't meet your needs, focus on your resentment. Compare yourself unfavorably to others who have what you do not have. Even better, develop a sense of envy, and begin coveting what others have.

Prescription for misery: To make yourself miserable, ignore gratitude. Expect more from others, and focus on resentment when your expectations are not met.

Never be satisfied with what you already have. *Choice overload*, a term introduced by writer Alvin Toffler, refers to a process in which a person experiences difficulty making a decision when faced with many options. In discussing the increasing prevalence of this phenomenon, psychologists Barry Schwartz and Andrew Ward (2004) make a distinction between two decision-making styles: *Satisficers* are people who make a decision or take an action as soon as some acceptable criterion is met, whereas *maximizers* search for an option that meets very high criteria and thus the search can sometimes be seemingly endless. In other

words, satisficers are more like to choose the first option that meets some absolute threshold of acceptability rather than attempt to optimize and find the best possible choice out of all the options. *Satisficers*, who are willing to settle for less, seem to be happier than *maximizers*, who continually search for the elusive perfect choice because they cannot “settle” for anything but the best.

This paradox may have been expressed in a similar form when in his 1770 *Dictionnaire philisophique*, Voltaire said “Perfect is the enemy of the good” (Ratcliffe, 2011, p. 389). This statement means that the best is often the enemy of good enough. An effective antidote to this problem is offered in some of the classic spiritual disciplines. For example, Quaker theologian Richard Foster (1981, p. 3) emphasizes the discipline of simplicity as a pathway to freedom from contemporary culture’s modern mania of the “passion to possess.” This type of spiritual discipline, which dates back centuries in the writings of our ancestors, helps guard against the enemy of the best.

Prescription for misery: To make yourself miserable, never settle for good enough but always exhaust yourself searching for the elusive perfect choice that can never be found.

Seek quick solutions and expect instant gratification. Psychological research has shown that the greatest satisfaction and rewards come to those who develop the discipline to delay gratification while focusing on long-term goals (Sternberg, 1996; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). On the other hand, some of life’s greatest frustrations and disappointments come to those who focus on immediate results and short-term goals. If you want to experience greater unhappiness in life, live in a world of instant gratification: instant coffee, instant meals, instant love, and instant success. If a focus on quick results and short-term gains can

ruin Wall Street investment banks, then this strategy can certainly make your life miserable. Look for quick solutions and expect instant results without putting in any effort. Seek immediate gratification of your desires. Develop an impulsive, pleasure-seeking orientation. Even better, seek pleasure at all costs, especially when the long range costs are high.

Prescription for misery: To make yourself miserable, look for the quick fix and expect instant results.

Develop a sense of impatience, hurry, and haste. St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), the Carmelite nun, mystic, and social reformer of the sixteenth century, observed, “Patience attains all that it strives for.” The enlightened teacher Siddhartha Gautama Buddha (c.563-c.483 B.C.E.) observed over two thousand years ago, “The greatest prayer is patience.” Forget patience. In order to make yourself miserable, develop a sense of impatience and urgency. Even better, develop *hurry sickness*, which is a disorder in which a person feels chronically short of time, and thus tends to perform every task faster and to get flustered when encountering any kind of delay. Engage in multitasking as much as possible, so that you are never fully engaged in the experience of the moment. In learning to cultivate less satisfaction with life’s experiences, it is equally important to avoid developing *mindfulness*, which refers to being purposefully aware of the present moment. Rather than being mindful of the simple, healthy pleasures in life, hurry up and want things that are bigger and better. Rather than spending your time developing the character virtue of patience, rush through your day trying to get others to give you what you want in life. Rather than focusing on the here and now, focus on regrets of the past and worries about the future. Even better, hurry up so that you will not be late getting to the future.

Prescription for misery: *To make yourself miserable, develop a sense of urgency and impatience.*

Spend more time thinking about yourself. Rather than engaging in rewarding activities that involve others, consider avoiding others, isolating yourself, and spending more time thinking about yourself. Cultivate your inner self by becoming more self-conscious and self-absorbed. Become more selfish. Even better, develop a narcissistic personality. Cultivate the character defect of *egocentrism*, which means thinking that it's all about you. Egocentrism can be developed by taking into consideration your own interests while ignoring the interests of others. In other words, construct an identity in which the world revolves around you. For example, the next time you have to wait in line, consider breaking to the front of the line with a special request. Be on guard for any traces of empathy toward others, lest you begin slipping down the slope of doing something for someone other than yourself. If you do happen to slip and commit some random act of kindness, just be sure that you get all the credit.

Prescription for misery: *To make yourself miserable, do something special for yourself rather than for someone else, and don't do for others what you want done for yourself.*

Strive for omniscience as a character defect. Psychological research has shown that smart people who do stupid things are often characterized by errors in their thinking (Sternberg, 2002). A former president of the American Psychological Association, Dr. Robert Sternberg, has observed that some people (particularly corporate executives) may be susceptible to certain fallacies in thinking because, at least in some parts of our society, they have been so rewarded for their intelligence or other abilities that they lose sight of their humanity. The *fallacy of omniscience* involves the belief that one knows about everything, when in fact one may only know a

lot about a little (Sternberg, 2002). To create unhappiness in your life, strive to be a know-it-all. Show that you are an expert on everything. Whatever anyone else says, show that you know more than they do. Even better, make sure others know that you are right. It does not matter how little you know; what matters most is to act like you know everything about everything.

Prescription for misery: *To make yourself miserable, always act like you know more than others do.*

Never say you're sorry. "Love means never having to say you're sorry," was a catchphrase from Erich Segal's novel that was popularized by its 1970 film adaptation, *Love Story*. However, Segal was wrong. Psychological research and theological writings have shown that relationships are enriched by the processes of forgiveness and reconciliation (Worthington, 2001, 2006). The 10th Step of Alcoholics Anonymous reads, "Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it." This step has been described as "relationship glue" for those who are living a life of intentionality. In contrast, one of the best ways to ruin a relationship is to never admit when we are wrong. We can hurt others through *acts of commission* (things we have done that we should not have done) as well as *acts of omission* (things we have not done that otherwise could have helped someone). Rather than focusing on the things you have done that have hurt someone, or the things you have not done that otherwise could have helped someone, consider making a list of all the things that someone has done to hurt you. Think about what you would like for the other person to do to make amends to you—and then just keep waiting. Sooner or later, you are bound to feel miserable. In order to create unhappiness in your life, be sure to never apologize when you have hurt or offended someone. Even better, blame the person whom you have offended.

***Prescription for misery:** To make yourself miserable, don't ever say you're sorry or admit that you were wrong.*

Blame others for the problems in your life.

Psychological research has shown that people who avoid accepting responsibility for their behavior are more likely to achieve less than those who readily accept responsibility (Sternberg, 1996). Rather than looking at your own contribution to situations that turn out badly, focus more on shifting responsibility to the other person. When things go wrong, notice what the other person said or did to cause them to go wrong. Develop a sense of *externalization*, which means placing the blame on something outside yourself. Even better, place the blame on someone else, while avoiding responsibility for your own actions. Develop the psychology of *victimology*, which means taking on the role of victim in the blame game. If others do not play the game, then blame them also. Whatever your strategy, just be sure to criticize others while justifying yourself.

***Prescription for misery:** To make yourself miserable, blame others for your problems.*

Take what you want from others.

Psychological research has shown that people who are unhappy are also more selfish, and people who are selfish are also unhappier than others. People often feel worse when they spend more time thinking about their own problems, rather than focusing on helping others with their problems. There is a strong correlation between health, happiness, well-being, and compassion (Posta, 2005). Therefore, in order to make yourself miserable, spend less time caring about other people. For example, the next time you dine at a fine restaurant, leave a small tip. Even better, get someone else to pay. In addition to holding on to what is yours, cultivate both sides of the

attitude of greed, including *envy* (the resentful desire to have what others have) and *jealousy* (the resentful desire to exclusively possess something or the fear of losing what you have). In this sense, envy involves two people whereas jealousy involves three, so take the easiest path to misery and be envious of others. For example, rather than giving your time by volunteering at a homeless shelter, take a tour of luxury homes and notice your feelings of envy. When you see something you like, think of ways to acquire it so that you will have more than others. Rather than giving to others, expect others to be giving to you. When you don't get what you want, take it.

***Prescription for misery:** To make yourself miserable, take what you want from others, while giving nothing in return.*

Hold grudges and never forgive others. The benefits of practicing forgiveness have been studied from a psychological perspective for many years (Smedes, 1984; Enright et al., 1991; Freedman & Enright, 1996). *Forgiveness* can be defined as the process by which we let go of negative emotions such as anger and resentment. Forgiveness is not the same as forgetting, denying, suppressing, condoning, excusing, pardoning, or reconciling. It is possible to forgive without reconciling, but it is impossible to reconcile without forgiving. On the other hand, *resentment* can be defined as the process by which we hold on to negative emotions such as anger. Resentment is like setting yourself on fire in the hope that the smoke will bother the other person. The key to harboring resentments is to hold on to the anger and other negative emotions that are associated with being hurt or wronged by someone. There is usually an emotional payoff in holding on to resentment; we get something out of it. Resentment ties us to the problem--and binds us to the person--through anger. This form of emotional blackmail gives us a sense of self-justification and leverage against the other

person. For example, rather than taking the initiative to reconcile a small rift with a friend, spend more time obsessing about what the other person should do. Don't reserve grudges and resentments for the big things in life, but learn to harbor resentments for the little things as well. For example, rather than calling a friend, become angry while waiting for your friend to call you.

***Prescription for misery:** To make yourself miserable, hold on to resentments and never forgive.*

Hold on to anger and resentment.

Psychological research has shown that people who are angry are more likely to be miserable and they are also more likely to die early. Sustained hostility with angry outbursts contributes more strongly to death from heart disease than other well-known risk factors, including smoking, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol (Finney, Stoney, & Engebretson, 2002; Suarez, Lewis, & Kuhn, 2002; Williams, Haney, Lee, King, & Blumenthal, 1980). Scientific investigators have found that the ability of the heart to pump blood efficiently though the body dropped significantly during anger but not during stress or exercise (Ironson, et al., 1992). Anger also affects people without heart disease. Medical students who were often angry were seven times more likely to die by the age of 50 than students in the same class who had lower levels of hostility (Williams, et al., 1980). To make yourself miserable, maintain a seething sense of resentments in your life. Get into more arguments by making accusatory indictments toward others. For example, begin your statements with "you" and use an angry tone. Take no responsibility for your own emotions, but blame your emotions on others. For example, use statements like, "You make me mad." Engage in *absolutistic thinking*, which means equating your thoughts with reality (e.g., "If I think so, then it's so"), because this type of

thinking leads to rigidity, inflexibility, and lack of emotional and behavioral freedom. Remember, it is better to be right than to be happy. Engage in *emotional reasoning*, which means equating a feeling with reality, because this type of thinking will produce negative emotions. Engage in *emotional stockpiling*, which means keeping a mental list of ways that others have offended you. When arguing with others, don't stick to the issues, but bring up the past by using your list of resentments.

***Prescription for misery:** To make yourself miserable, hold on to negative emotions such as anger and resentment.*

Develop a sense of hopelessness.

Psychological research has shown that hope is one of the most important variables in creating positive changes in one's life (Hanna, 2002; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). *Hope* can be defined as a belief in a positive outcome related to the events or circumstances in one's life. Hope is not the same as wishing, longing, desiring, or yearning. It is the unseen evidence of a brighter day, no matter how dark one's present day may be. It is the realistic expectation of a positive outcome, regardless of how dire one's present circumstances may seem. On the other hand, hopelessness is one of the most significant psychological risk factors associated with suicide (Beck, Brown, Berchick, Stewart, & Steer, 1990; Bongar, 2002). An attitude of hopelessness is usually associated with greater misery in life. Although there is nothing certain in life except taxes and death, focus on taxes and death if you want to make yourself miserable. Develop the self-fulfilling prophecy that nothing good will ever happen in your life.

***Prescription for misery:** To make yourself miserable, develop a sense of hopelessness about the future.*

Live a more meaningless life. In *Man's Search for Meaning*, expanded from its original title, *From Death-Camp To Existentialism*, Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist Viktor Frankl wrote, "Suffering ceases to be suffering in some way in the moment that it finds a meaning" (1969, p. 179). Half a century after Frankl had written his monumental book, researchers have observed that people who are happy tend to have a sense of purpose and meaning in their lives (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Therefore, to be as miserable as possible, it is important to live a life without purpose or meaning. Live without higher values or, if you have values at all, be sure to violate them as much as possible. In other words, live in the basement of life, rather than on its highest plane. Rather than living on the basis of principles, live on the basis of nothing at all. Even better, live only for yourself. Rather than actively *participating* in the world, spend more time passively *watching* the world go by. For example, spend more time watching television or listening to the evening news.

Prescription for misery: *To make yourself miserable, strive to live without purpose or meaning.*

Avoid religion and spirituality. A review of the scientific literature reveals that religiousness is one of the best predictors of life satisfaction (Myers, 2000; Myers & Diener, 1996; Myers & Diener, 2006). According to one Gallup poll, people with high religious involvement are *twice* as likely as those without such involvement to say that they are "very happy" (Myers & Diener, 1997). Therefore, in order to develop a pervasive sense of unhappiness, avoid the religious or spiritual side of life. Become more arrogant, because arrogance is the enemy of spirituality. Be sure to avoid any spiritual discipline, such as serving, praying, meditating, or worshipping. If you are a spiritual person, consider redirecting your focus from the spiritual to the material. Even better, focus on

money. If you are already a religious person, consider becoming more secular. If you are already a secular person, consider becoming an atheist. Whatever you do, stay away from any church, temple, synagogue, or house of worship.

Prescription for misery: *To make yourself miserable, develop a disdain for organized religion.*

In reading about how to make yourself miserable, perhaps you realized that you have already discovered some of the secrets to unhappiness. Perhaps you have even been practicing some of these principles of unhappiness in your life. If you want to make yourself miserable, there may be nothing more you need to do. On the other hand, if you are tired of being miserable, then perhaps it is time to consider a change. If you want to change what you are doing, you may have already taken the first step of self-awareness: Once you become aware of your actions, your life can take on a dimension of greater intentionality as you make choices in a more conscious manner. If you would like to change how things are turning out in your life, then perhaps it is time to start putting something different into your life. Remember, how you are living each day is how you are living your life.

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