

Stumbling on Happiness by Daniel Gilbert – a summary by Katie Boyer Clark

Daniel Gilbert seeks to answer the question of why we continue to make choices for ourselves, both short term and long term, that do not make us happy.

We enjoy thinking about our futures because it gives us a sense of control. “Our desire for control is so powerful, and the feeling of being in control is so rewarding, that people often act as though they can control the uncontrollable.” Many of our decisions are based on this perceived control. The feeling of control is the wellspring of mental health. In fact, the clinically depressed have a more accurate estimation of their control over events.

We enjoy planning happy futures so much, that we overestimate the likelihood that good things will happen, and underestimate the bad. We imagine our own futures as brighter than those around us, just as we see ourselves as special – more attractive, luckier, more intelligent. We plan our futures based on what we think will make us happy, but we are usually wrong.

We can only see life from our own perspective. Thus, happiness is relative; memory even more so. Once we have an experience, we see the world as if we have always had this knowledge. “Our experiences become the lens through which we see the past, present, and future.” We add or remove details of our memories, without even realizing that we are doing so. When we imagine the future, we leave out the things that we prefer not to see, leading us to agree to activities that we may not enjoy as much as we expected. We gauge our future feelings on our current feelings; but we also remember feelings based on what we thought they would be, rather than what they actually are. As we enjoy variety in the moment, we tend to plan as if we want variety in our futures. In reality, the future is widely spaced, and variety's attractiveness needs the comparison of immediacy. What we want NOW, is the thing that is our favorite.

Our ability to see the best in situations or read them as we chose, leaving out the bits that do not make us feel good, makes us better at dealing with pain and loss than we expect to be. We think of pain in the moment, how it would feel NOW. We forget that time allows us to live in each moment as we experience it, and current emotions dull past ones. We don't learn from our experiences, because we don't remember them accurately.

Though we fight for freedom of choice, the ability to change our minds will often lead us to second guess our own decisions, and lead to unhappiness or insecurity. “We are more likely to generate a positive view of action than inaction, a painful experience than an annoying one, an inescapable situation than an escapable one; and YET we rarely chose action over inaction, pain over annoyance, or commitment over freedom.”

Many of our myths and self delusions, thought they may reduce individual happiness, are the very things that hold society together. That being said, in order for us to make decisions that will make us the happiest, it may be helpful to ask others who have made the same decisions, just how they feel about where they ended up.

*All quotes from *Stumbling on Happiness*