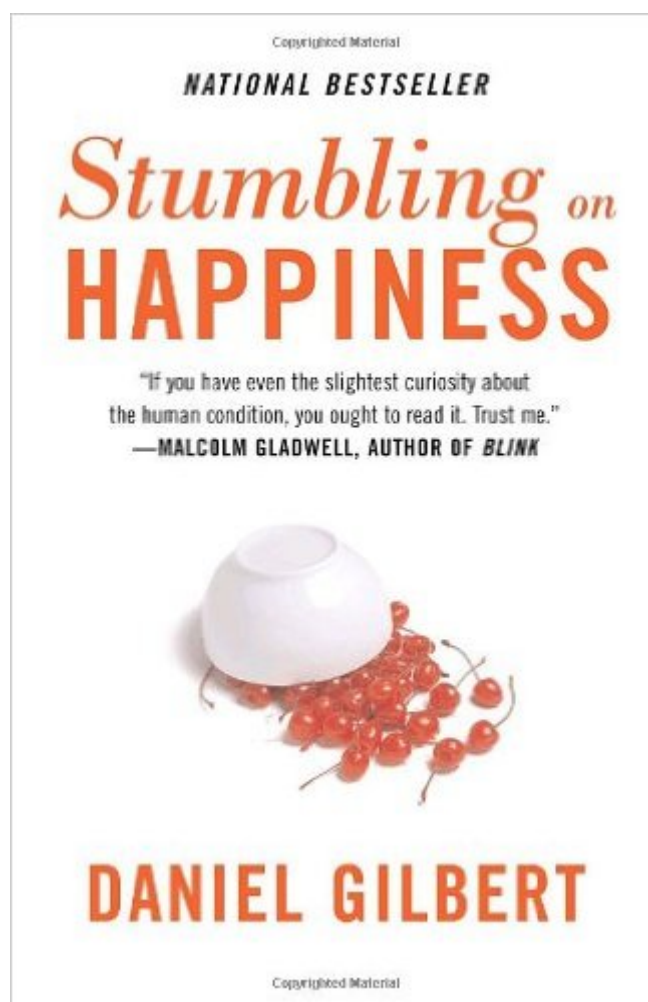


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Stumbling On Happiness



Synopsis

• Why are lovers quicker to forgive their partners for infidelity than for leaving dirty dishes in the sink?
• Why will sighted people pay more to avoid going blind than blind people will pay to regain their sight?
• Why do dining companions insist on ordering different meals instead of getting what they really want?
• Why do pigeons seem to have such excellent aim; why can't we remember one song while listening to another; and why does the line at the grocery store always slow down the moment we join it?

In this brilliant, witty, and accessible book, renowned Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert describes the foibles of imagination and illusions of foresight that cause each of us to misconceive our tomorrows and misestimate our satisfactions. Vividly bringing to life the latest scientific research in psychology, cognitive neuroscience, philosophy, and behavioral economics, Gilbert reveals what scientists have discovered about the uniquely human ability to imagine the future, and about our capacity to predict how much we will like it when we get there. With penetrating insight and sparkling prose, Gilbert explains why we seem to know so little about the hearts and minds of the people we are about to become.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I love a quote by Dr. Richard Feynman, the late Nobel Prize winning physicist: "The first principle is that you must not fool yourself - and you are the easiest person to fool". If you want to be happy, happy with your choices and the outcomes of your efforts you should buy and read this book to at least understand why you are pretty much hard-wired to break Dr. Feynman's first principle while you are trying to do so. Until recently, when someone asked me "what do you want from life?" I

would survey the myriad wishes and desires floating around in my mind and pull out some random musing to do with creating a family or making more money than I knew what to do with. I have certainly worked towards these things and had varying levels of success with love and career and material wealth. But I have always been baffled by why virtually nothing could make me happy in a lasting and predictable way. I am not baffled anymore, even though I am still unhappy in a lot of ways. "Stumbling on Happiness" has educated me to the ways that people exhibit self-delusion when looking forward to predict how happy some future experience will make them happy. Gilbert is wickedly funny at times as he describes the mechanisms that lead us to distort our thinking; our projections about what will bring about our future selves happiness. This is the kind of information (why we're so deluded) I expected to get from the book. But he goes further and explains how we often don't even know how we feel in a particular moment and how we can have an *experience* of something, without it ever bubbling up into our conscious *awareness*. The onslaught of the information demonstrating the failures of human imagination in achieving contentment is a lot to take in...

Like many, many books, this one is better at describing the problem than it is in proposing solutions. Gilbert contends that our powers of predicting what will make us happy in the future are seriously flawed, and then proposes a simple solution which he correctly predicts that no one will use. His description of the reasons that our predictive powers are flawed is both fascinating and convincing. However, even in this part (which is the bulk of the book), he makes an unspoken (and apparently unrecognized) assumption: That is, he assumes that "real" happiness or unhappiness is defined by the emotional state that a person feels immediately after, or concurrently with, the event in question. To use an example: a couple of other reviewers have already mentioned Gilbert's story of a victory in an important college football game. Students predict in advance that they will be ecstatic if their team wins, and a different study suggests that a few months after the fact they will contend that they WERE ecstatic. However, close monitoring of their feelings at the actual time of the victory, or shortly thereafter, suggests that they weren't as happy as they expected to be, or as they later recalled being. On a less trivial topic, he makes the same claim regarding the experience of having and raising children: It isn't as much fun as the parents expect it to be. And while the child-rearing was going on, it wasn't as happy an experience as they later remembered it to be. But Gilbert is ignoring a vital point here: The anticipation of happiness, and the recollection of happiness, ARE happiness! Gilbert writes the entire book with the unexamined assumption that happy anticipations and happy memories can be discarded as mere illusions - the fabrications of irrational minds.

This book is entertaining, highly readable, and ultimately extremely frustrating. Gilbert summarizes scores of psychological and sociological studies on "happiness," and concludes that we humans are spectacularly bad at predicting what will make us happy. But the evidence he relies on seems, for the most part, one-dimensional and even trite, and his unquestioning reliance on this research makes his own theory of happiness seem shallow. The biggest problem is his failure to address what he or the research subjects mean by "happiness." The same word is used throughout the book to refer to, say, the momentary pleasure one gets from a bite of ice cream, as well as to a more profound and lasting sense of contentment and meaning over time. Although he acknowledges the definitional problem in the first chapter, he fails to conduct any systematic inquiry into what research subjects might mean when they say they are "happy" in response to a particular research question. It seems obvious subjects might apply a different definition of happiness when asked to predict their future happiness level than when asked to rate their mood at a particular moment in time. Gilbert's failure to consider this possibility -- or to explain how the research controls for it -- undermines the overall persuasiveness of his argument, and leads one to suspect many of his conclusions would be contradicted by more precisely tailored research (or a more rigorous analysis of the results). For example, Gilbert says that while most prospective mothers predict that having children will enhance their happiness, the research shows that those predictions are wrong. He reaches this conclusion by relying on studies in which mothers were asked how they were feeling at particular moments throughout the day.

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