

My Life Is My Message

Discontent is the first step in progress. No one knows what is in him till he tries, and many would never try if they were not forced to.

— BASIL W. MATURIN

For too long, I was unhappy. I grew up painfully shy. In fact, I was voted “Most Shy” of my high school class. It may be hard to believe considering how much time I’ve spent on television screens and in front of audiences as a speaker, fashion model, actor, and corporate consultant, but it’s true.

My mother, a homemaker, and my father, a computer analyst, raised my brother, my sister, and me in a humble home in western Pennsylvania. Like many married couples, my mother and father experienced their fair share of challenges. But they always weathered them. My father was the

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breadwinner and disciplinarian, and my mother was the caregiver. Raising three children and supporting two adults on one salary was financially stressful for both of them. Somehow, however, my siblings and I grew up to be stand-out students, above-average athletes, and well-meaning adults (most of the time, anyway). We were lovingly guided and cared for in ways some children never know.

In fact, one of the things that I remember most fondly is how my parents never seemed to miss a single game, athletic contest, concert, or school play of ours all the way through high school. Wow. I can barely take care of myself, so I sure don't know how they did all of that. On one occasion, I remember, all three of us children had a baseball or softball game on the same day. And my mother and father somehow found a way to catch several innings of each of our games. And this was before the days of digital communication, so they weren't able to be there virtually.

Despite my loving family, I found myself consistently unhappy in intangible and indescribable ways. Even at a young age, life seemed like a lot of hard work for little or no reward and hardly any lasting satisfaction at all. In the classroom, on the football field, baseball diamond, basketball court, or track, I worked myself to the bone. I studied and rewrote class notes, lifted weights for hours, shoveled snow, practiced jump shots over and over again in the freezing cold, ran wind sprints we called "suicides," and fielded ground balls until my back hurt. And despite all of my hard work and all the money my parents spent, I never felt as if I got good-enough grades, scored enough points, threw

enough touchdown passes, ran fast enough, or hit enough home runs. My social life, too, was dismal. I had maybe two close friends and no girlfriend at all until I was about twenty years old.

There's Nothing Fashionable about Being Miserable

My depression took on a more philosophical nature in college. I thought my melancholy made me look intelligent, believe it or not. I embraced it — at first. I read all of the classic philosophers. I even wore this really dorky pair of glasses. Boy, I cringe now just thinking about them.

Eventually, I tired of philosophy and the facade. I genuinely wanted to feel better. I stopped reading so much philosophy. I wanted proven answers based in science, not more questions. Psychology seemed more promising in this respect. (Sorry, Professor Raff!)

Interestingly enough, after months of study, I convinced myself that I was clinically depressed. I observed all of the associated symptoms: persistently sad mood, hopelessness and pessimism, feelings of worthlessness and helplessness, loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities that were once enjoyable, oversleeping, overeating, fatigue, regular thoughts of death and suicide, irritability, extreme difficulty concentrating and making even the most trivial of decisions, and persistent physical symptoms that would not respond to treatment, including back pain and digestive disorders.

In an attempt to accurately self-diagnose my depression (a fool's game!), I completed all of the self-assessments I

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could find. I never saw a psychiatrist, psychologist, or doctor about it. I thought they could do little to help. Later, when I watched the Woody Allen movie *Anything Else*, I was rather amused by Christina Ricci's reason for not seeing a therapist: "Jerry, I told you that psychiatrists don't work for me. I know how to trick them!" That was how I saw my depression. It was something that was logically sound and experientially proven. Everything either was bad now or would be bad soon, would forever be bad on all occasions and in all places, and there was little, if anything, I could do about any of it. That is precisely what I thought. That is precisely how I lived.

Even years later, while things on the outside changed — I had a beautiful, intelligent girlfriend, a well-paying job as a management consultant, a luxury apartment, a new BMW, a loving and supportive family, great friends, and an otherwise promising future — things on the inside seemed to only be getting worse. I knew that, inevitably, I would lose my job, experience financial ruin, break up with my girlfriend, argue with family members, disappoint friends, and lose much of everything I cared about. And it turned out that I was right. It all happened just as I had predicted, just not in that particular order. It's interesting how thoughts shape circumstance. Perhaps life really can only be understood backward and lived forward.

A Thought Saved My Life

I contemplated suicide often. To be honest, those thoughts of suicide brought me some solace. In fact, it was the realization

of the solace of those thoughts that turned out to be the defining moment in my life.

One day, soon after this realization, I came to the very resolute conclusion that I would either kill myself or “fix” myself. I could not afford to risk a great job by seeking out psychiatric help. I was afraid of the stigma and the repercussions of doing so. Moreover, I figured that once the shrink realized that talking would do little good, he or she would prescribe antidepressant drugs. And I simply did not want to live that way. I had made that decision a long time before then.

Of course, my religious and spiritual beliefs — or rather, the religious and spiritual beliefs I had inherited from others — complicated issues even further. I found myself caught between the Christian belief that I would be sent to hell for taking my own life and a newly developed karmic/Buddhist philosophy that suggested I would be reincarnated right back into the same metaphysical challenge I was currently experiencing, perhaps even in a less able body and mind.

Furthermore — and this was the real catalyst for my decision — I contemplated the solace that the thought of killing myself brought. “Wow,” I thought, “how interesting it is that a simple thought, notion, or idea could change my mood so quickly. If only I could master that power. Maybe it would not be ‘reality’ that I would be living, but who really cares if it actually works?”

And so, left with the only real, actionable alternative I could find, I proceeded to throw myself passionately into self-help books, studies on cognitive therapy, psychocybernetics, and so on. Continuing in the same vein, I matriculated and

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graduated years later from the Master of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) program at the University of Pennsylvania.

Ever since I made that decision many years ago — to make happiness my career, the principal pursuit of my life — my life has not been the same. I've been happier on a more consistent basis. When my happiness does dip, I'm usually able to quickly reestablish my original level of happiness. Previously, I lived most of my life in the lower decks of my happiness range. Now, I spend most of my life in the upper decks.

When I made the conscious decision to make happiness my dominant intent, I suddenly felt the freedom to do things I would never have done before. Here are just a few of the things I did that seemed to make a huge difference:

- I broke off an unhappy relationship with a wonderful woman for whom I was not a good fit.
- I moved to a city that was a better fit for me. (My mantra those days was “I want to live where others only vacation.”) That city was Miami. I loved the sun, the fun, the beach, the playful and laid-back attitude, the diversity of the population, and the pleasant lifestyle.
- I chose a better profession for myself. (Truth be told, I was laid off. It turned out to be one of the best things that ever happened to me. I didn't know it at the time but it set the tone for the rest of my life.)
- I sold both my cars. That was a tough one because I loved my cars (a BMW and a Mercedes), but in truth

I couldn't afford them anymore. I replaced them with a scooter. To this day, I think of my scooter as one of the best purchases I've ever made.

- I rented a simple studio apartment with simple appliances and furniture in a great, convenient location. I'm a minimalist so I really felt better about doing this.
- I gave away a lot of the clothes I no longer wanted or wore.
- I spent more time outside.
- I started exercising much more and I did it outside as much as possible.
- I started eating better. This was easy and fun because I now had the time to plan my meals and I was more body conscious in this city of warm weather and scant clothing.
- I started doing things on my own, without requiring other people or circumstances to bend to my wishes or to be different in order for me to do what I wanted to do. Since I had a genuine interest in the city and since I was feeling better about myself, it was easy to do things on my own. Plus, since I didn't know anybody there, it was up to me and only me to meet new people and find my way around.
- I tried things I had never tried before. I became a huge fan of Cuban food and worked on realizing my dream of being a model and actor.
- I cut up all my credit cards and started living on cash. (Truth be told, my credit cards were maxed out and I had no choice.)

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- I read a lot more, especially books about psychology and spirituality.
- I reduced my work commute significantly. Since I was splitting my time between working from home as a happiness coach and going to local modeling and acting gigs, reducing my commute was easy.
- I started writing this book.

If you'd asked me then, I honestly wouldn't have been able to explain to you why I was doing what I was doing. All I knew was that I had been unhappy for too long. I knew that what I had been doing up to that point was not working and wasn't making me feel good, either. So I changed my strategy. As the saying goes, if you keep doing what you've always done, you'll keep getting what you've always gotten.

A Thought Can Change Your Life, Too

Once I turned my life around, I vowed to help other people do the same. Your situation may not be as bad as mine was. You may not be depressed at all, much less suicidal. But you can always be happier. In the chapters to follow, I will share some of my most basic ideas about happiness. Use what works; lose what doesn't.

As you read, however, have faith and believe. Yes, I'm asking you to believe. Not just in my ability to bring about real change in your life, but in *your* ability to do so.



INSIDE-OUT HAPPINESS HABITS

- ✓ *Make happiness the most important pursuit of your life.* Prioritize feeling good above all else. Make joy your guiding principle.
- ✓ *Make learning more about the art and science of happiness a lifelong goal.* The first step in becoming happier is learning about happiness, and reading the next ten chapters is a great way to do that.