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## Choosing Unhappiness

If you could be happy in 45 days with just a few minutes of effort per day, why wouldn't you? Here are common rationales for sticking with unhappy thought <sup>x2</sup>habits instead of substituting happier ones. Each has its own vicious cycle. 

### **Reason #1: "I can't lower my standards"**

I have high aspirations, you may think. Why should I be happy with small things?

It's natural to assume big things will make you happy, since we've all felt big spurts from big achievements. But big achievers are not necessarily happy people. This is hard to believe, but tabloid news does a public service by reminding us.

In modern times, people with "high standards" often focus on "saving the world." They say it's unethical to be happy as long as one person in the world is suffering, or even one animal. But the world has always been full of suffering. Is it unethical for anyone in human history to have ever been happy? No. Your cortex might embrace "ethics" as an explanation for the unhappiness your mammal brain is producing. A cortex constructs verbal logic for neurochemicals that can't speak.

Perhaps you think happiness is just handed to some people, while others are wrongly deprived of it. Perhaps you think suffering is the

way to earn happiness. Such thoughts create a vicious cycle. You feel good for a moment when you ally yourself with suffering and deprivation. You feel important and bonded, so serotonin and oxytocin flow. But the good feelings soon stop, and you try to get more by suffering more, because that's the link you've built.

There is an alternative. You can accept that everyone has to manage their own brain. Every brain is always releasing happy and unhappy chemicals using the circuits it has. You decide how to manage your brain. No one else is responsible for your brain, and you are not responsible for other people's brains. → *live and let live*

If you take an idealized view of happiness, it will always be out of reach. You might blame others for this. You might think permanent happiness would reign if it weren't for the bad guys who lack your "high standards." You might focus on saving the world from those bad guys to somehow "get" the happiness they've deprived you of.

While you are waiting for the world to meet your high standards, you might engage in bad habits to relieve your frustration. You justify these happy habits by pointing to the flaws of the world. This vicious circle is a common by-product of "high standards." You'd be better off learning to be happy with small things than waiting for the world to be perfect.

Well-intentioned people choose unhappiness without realizing it. Teachers often choose unhappiness for their students by insisting on impossible standards. Imagine a teacher encouraging all his students to aspire to be president. He's condemning them to disillusion and frustration when they fall short. And even presidents experience unhappiness and must learn to manage it. When teachers require literacy and math skills, students learn the self-management habits that lead to happiness in the real world.

"High standards" sounds nice, but it can be an excuse for living with bitterness and resentment while you're waiting for some abstract ideal. Your high standards can lead to low standards if you exclude a realistic middle ground. Meeting your own survival needs is the standard your brain evolved for, so that is what makes you feel good.

**Reason #2: "I shouldn't have to do this"**

You may be thinking, “Other people get to be happy without repeating things for 45 days. Why should I have to?”

Maybe you think other people owe you something, so why should you “let the jerks off the hook” by making yourself happy instead of making “the jerks” give you what you think you deserve.

You may think you’ve already done more than enough, and it’s time for the rest of the world to do its part.

Many people think settling a score with those who have short-changed them is the path to happiness. Once you look at life this way, you will easily find evidence that you have been wronged and lots of company to share your view.

I’ve often heard students say it’s unfair they have to work hard at coursework while someone they know seems to “get it” effortlessly. I often hear dieters say it’s unfair that others stay thin effortlessly.

If you think happiness comes effortlessly to others, you might decide that it’s unfair for you to have to work at it.

When you feel wronged by life, you give yourself permission to have another cookie, or another drink, or another pill, or another sulk. After all you’ve been through, why deprive yourself anymore? This is a vicious cycle. You keep feeling wronged in order to enjoy more of your consolation prize.

It’s easy to believe others are luckier than you in the happy-circuit department. We mammals naturally compare ourselves to others. But we never really know the inside story about other people’s lives. Even if you could know, it wouldn’t make you happy. Focusing on other people’s emotional accounting diverts you from doing what it takes to trigger your own happy chemicals.

If you are always searching for wrongs, you don’t notice what’s right, even if you stumble on it. And yet, this mindset is curiously popular. You wire it in when you are young, pleasing teachers with essays on the awful state of the world, and mirroring parents who feel deprived themselves.

Some people have no experience making themselves happy because they grew up in a world in which other people took responsibility for their happiness. Some parents live to please their children and never please themselves. Their children learn to expect others to please them, and

they don't learn to please themselves. When they're unhappy, they are sure someone else messed up.

Blaming others for your unhappiness is a habit that's hard to give up because it triggers some happy chemicals. You feel important when you battle perceived injustice (serotonin), and you bond with others who feel similarly deprived (oxytocin). You get excited when you seek and find evidence that you have been denied your fair share of happiness (dopamine). You may even trigger endorphin by welcoming physical pain into your life as evidence of your deprivation. You keep building a circuit for seeking happiness by feeling wronged.

A stopped clock is right twice a day, so if you look for evidence that happiness is wrongfully distributed to the undeserving, you will certainly find it. But it will only make you happy for a moment. Then you will need to go find more evidence that "they" have failed to distribute happiness in equal shares. You will not learn to produce happiness yourself while distracted by the belief that happiness is doled out by "them."

You can be happy by building new circuits. Six weeks from now, you might be the happiest person you know. But you won't do what it takes if you believe you shouldn't have to. If you focus on the happiness you think others are "getting," you end up shortchanging yourself.

### **Reason #3: "It's selfish to focus on your own happiness"**

Many people take a zero-sum view of happiness. They unconsciously believe that one person's happiness takes away from others. When my mother was scrubbing the floor in an angry rage, she felt sure that she would be happy if only I were scrubbing the floor instead of her. So I got down and scrubbed, preferring that to being labelled "selfish." But it failed to make my mother happy. I felt like the captain who had to go down with the sinking ship. But I learned that I was not captain of her ship. I could only be captain of my own.

Looking back, I understand that my mother wanted company. She didn't know how to stop scrubbing, so she wanted me to join her in her prison. "Our society" was not forcing her to scrub. It's a habit she built long ago, when it seemed to promote survival. She navigated her survival choices, and I navigated mine.

Learning to stimulate my own happy chemicals does not deprive others of them. Each adult is free to make their own calls in the pursuit of happiness as long as they take responsibility for their own side effects. Adults must not make themselves happy at the expense of children. But when you are with other adults, you are not obligated to subordinate your happiness to theirs. Cooperating in pursuit of mutual goals is a great way to promote survival. And trust enables us to do that without one-for-one reciprocity. But if someone insists you must subordinate your survival needs to theirs, you don't have to agree.

If you give yourself permission to feel good while others are feeling bad, you are helping them more than you realize. Other people's mirror neurons will notice and spark happiness, too. But you cannot make yourself happy for the purpose of helping others. That's a contradiction in terms. Your brain rewards you for promoting your survival, not for denying your needs. If you decide to be happy, you may feel conspicuous and out of step with those who decide differently. You may be tempted to feign suffering to avoid being called "selfish." You get to choose, and live with the consequences.

Perhaps you enjoy the feeling of unselfishly devoting your life to others. The thought of "changing the world" triggers your happy chemicals. You may think you only care about the planet and the underprivileged, but your brain is focused on you. Your world-changing efforts trigger serotonin because they get respect and build a legacy. Oxytocin flows as you join forces with fellow world-changers. Dopamine surges when you set goals and accomplish them. You are focusing on your own happiness. Being a rescuer is so rewarding that many rescuers persist when they do more harm than good. They ignore the harmful consequences of their intercession because they don't know how else to get those selfish rewards.

Adulthood means creating a sense of well-being that's separate from others. *Enmeshment* is what psychologists call it when a person can't distinguish their own neurochemistry from others.' Enmeshment lures people with the immediate reward you get from taking charge of other people's happiness, or from the expectation that others will take charge of yours. The result is often shared suffering.

The problem is that you have to keep suffering to keep getting the reward. If you are afraid to be caught looking happy while others are

suffering, you will always find suffering to join in with. Many people focus on the suffering of the planet, or animals, or far-away children. It's a way to avoid looking "selfish" while still putting a little distance between yourself and the suffering.

It's reasonable to feel bad about the suffering of others, and it's reasonable to help where you can. But being a good person does not mean enmeshment. When you stay focused on your own brain, you are not judging or abandoning others. You are unselfishly respecting their responsibility for their own brain. You are securing your own oxygen mask. If you put your happiness in other people's hands instead, you're likely to end up in a vicious cycle.

People may sneer at you if you don't join in the suffering. In the past, people were tortured and executed if they refused to join the shared belief system. So when people sneer at me for not joining in an unhappy thought habit, I'm just grateful that sneering is such a small penalty.

#### **Reason #4: "I want to be ready when it hits the fan"**

Will you lose your edge if you let yourself be happy? Will it lower your guard, leaving you worse off when things go wrong?

If you believe this, you make it true. Your brain can always find potential threats, and if you focus on them, that is the world your brain will know. You will not see the good in the world unless you are looking for it because the cortex finds the information it looks for. Your brain is always choosing which details to focus on because it's impossible to process everything. It has to choose quickly in order to function, so it scans for patterns that match its expectations.

→ *Confirmation bias*  
If you look for the good in life, you may feel like you're frittering your attention and taking your eye off the ball. But ironically, focusing on potential crises does not necessarily prepare you for them. Bad things are curiously unpredictable. A siege mentality just wears you out. Happiness builds a cushion that prepares you for bumpy roads better than unhappiness.

Happiness is less distracting than you may think. It's the side effects that cause people to presume happiness conflicts with survival. You can build happy circuits that have fewer side effects.

While you're building new circuits, you may have a bad feeling that stuff is hitting the fan. That's your old superhighways lighting up. If you keep focusing on good things for 45 days instead of giving all your attention to those crisis-mentality circuits, you will have a new superhighway. You will see more in the world than potential calamity.

If you choose instead to focus on disaster preparedness, you're in a vicious cycle. Every time your happy chemicals dip, you expect a cataclysm and start preparing. That keeps you focused on danger signals, which triggers more unhappy chemicals, which motivates more preparedness.

You can end this vicious cycle in one instant, just by refusing to give your attention to a threat when it pops into our mind. It may feel bad. You may feel like you will die if you don't do something about the looming crisis. But you will survive that instant, and you will courageously refuse to contemplate disaster for the next instant, too. Eventually, you will create a gap big enough to fill with positive expectations. A happy circuit will grow big enough to compete for your attention.

And when things go wrong, you can ask yourself whether being unhappy would have prevented it.

### **Reason #5: "I won't be able to do this"**

What if you try to build new circuits and fail? The thought sounds so bad that your old circuits seem comparatively happy.

If you expect to fail, 45 days is a very long time. You'd rather not try than spend 45 days worried about blowing it.

Failure is easy to imagine because that's where your existing pathways lead. If your existing circuits could imagine a new habit, you'd already be doing it. So the challenge is to start without a clear conception of the finish.

If you expect to do things right the first time, disappointment is likely. If you refuse to do things until you're sure of doing them right, you limit yourself significantly. Willingness to fail gives you power. It frees you from doing the same old thing over and over. Tolerance for failure doesn't mean expecting to fail. It means expecting to succeed after a period of trial

↳ "reject"

and error. The error is not a sign of incompetence; it's a sign that you are facing up to an unknown that must be explored before it can be mastered.

But each time we fail, it triggers memory of past failures. No one likes being reminded of past failures. If Day One of your circuit building unleashes the spirit of everything you've ever done wrong, it's hard to continue on Day Two.

But if you give up on Day Two, your failure circuit is strengthened. It's a vicious cycle that only you can stop by doing something that feels temporarily bad. Tell yourself "I did it!," even if the only thing you did was thinking "I did it!" while feeling like you can't do it.

It will probably feel fake at first. But if you persist, the success feeling will become a circuit that's big enough to feel as true as the failure circuit.

Of course, you don't want to be a deluded person who pats himself on the back for no reason. But you may already be kicking yourself for no reason. Accidents of experience will define you until you shape new experiences into new circuits.

Building a success circuit doesn't mean lying to yourself and others. It means you can be honest about failure because you "know" that trial and error leads to success.

→ stoicism

#### **Reason #6: "Who can be happy in such a flawed society?"**

My college professors taught me to blame "the system" for all human misery. They praised anything that linked human problems to the flaws of "our society." And they disdained anyone who questioned this view, saying "they don't get it." I didn't want to be dismissed as stupid or evil, so I "got it".

I eventually understood the flaws in their reasoning. I learned that tearing down the system leads to more unhappiness. I learned that people who have things given to them are as unhappy as people who are considered "deprived." I learned that human nature is more complicated than the lyrics to a 1960s folk song would suggest. Happy chemicals only come in brief spurts. We cannot be on an emotional high every moment. If we blame the system for that, it feels good for a moment, but it's a vicious

cycle. Blaming boosts your self-respect, but you have to feel hopeless about the world to get that boost.

Blaming abstract institutions protects you from blaming people you know in person. That keeps the peace with friends and family in the short run, but you don't work things out with flesh-and-blood people when all your attention is focused on an abstract "them."

Each time your happy chemicals dip, you might soothe yourself with visions of the world being "fixed" in a way that will make you happy all the time. Instead of building healthy new ways to stimulate your happy chemicals, you can imagine you live in a hell because the system is flawed and the bad guys block change.

This thought habit surrounded me for decades. Wherever I went, I heard the expression "our society is bad." I had a large circuit to welcome this input. But the more I studied history, the more I understood the miseries of the past. I realized that our lives are good, and I was stunned at how few people notice. In fact, people seemed indignant if I mentioned any positives. It seems like the rallying cries of starving serfs in France and Russia are copied and pasted into today's discussions without anyone noticing the unprecedented improvement in their quality of life. A new generation has grown up being told that they are living in misery under an oppressive system. They get "A"s if they reproduce this view, and they're ostracized if they challenge it. They don't want to be condemned as stupid or evil, so they "get it."

Many people believe they cannot change unless everyone else changes. They can't stop eating junk food until "our society stops eating junk food." They can't stop feeling shame until "our society stops shaming you." They can't stop worrying about their future until "our society takes care of the future." If you put our society in charge of your brain, you are in a terrible bind. When you put yourself in charge of your own happiness, you will do what it takes.

"The personal is political" was a popular slogan when I was young. Early feminists promoted the idea that problems in your personal life are caused by political failures and must be solved by political action. This prescription triggers good feelings in the short run. But those who expect the government to solve their personal problems end up disappointed. Human relations are difficult, and if political anger is your

primary tool for working through these difficulties, you are likely to get bad results.

I have learned to see the reverse: “the political is personal.” Our personal frustrations get projected onto the political system. When unhappy chemicals get your attention, blaming the political system is one way to feel good again. But to feel good you have to keep believing your society is bad and your life is bad. Politics diverts you from making peace with the uncomfortable facts of life. You are just one person among seven billion. Some day you will die, and the world will spin on without you. It’s not the government’s fault, and blaming the government for the awful truth can distract you from making the most of the time you have.

Your brain is designed to see you as the center of the world. But when you go out and interact with people, you are constantly reminded that you are not the center of the world. This is so unpleasant that your brain cries out “Something must be done about it!” You can join with others who feel the same way, and “demand that your voice be heard.” But when you expect public institutions to satisfy that deep human longing to be heard you get disappointed. So you try again. It’s a vicious cycle that distracts you from the real people in your life that don’t hear you either. Each brain gets frustrated about being heard because we built circuits in youth, when being ignored truly was a full survival emergency.

Everyone has to manage this core unhappiness. If those around you manage it by hating people in suits, it’s easy to do that, too. But you end up full of hate. Instead of blaming society for the frustrations of being a mammal, you can learn to accept the mammalian facts of life. You will feel less frustrated if you do.

Questioning the system-failure theory of human happiness can damage careers and relationships that you’ve nurtured for years. If you succeed at changing yourself, you may get a bad reaction from people who still believe they cannot be happy until the world changes. They may label you “privileged,” and start blaming their unhappiness on you. But you didn’t create the mammal brain.

We have no choice but to live in a world where everyone else has a mammal brain focused on its own survival. Those who refuse to see their own mammalian nature may get angry about the mammalian nature of others. But we are fortunate to live in an age where our nature is increasingly well understood.

Accepting responsibility for your own happiness can be anxiety-provoking at first. The urge to “do something” never seems to stop. You might prefer the relative calm of just waiting for a “revolution” to bring a “good society.” When you stop believing the system can make you happy, you are stuck with the awful prospect of doing it yourself. It’s much easier to tussle with philosophical abstractions than to deal with actual people who get on your nerves. It’s easier to think about fixing the system than to think about fixing yourself.

Believing in a system that makes everyone happy is comforting. It may be the only path to happiness for those who decide it’s wrong to make yourself happy. Imagining this “better world” feels so good that it can become your primary happy circuit. But while you wait for the better world in the long run, you overlook your own power to make your life better in the short run.

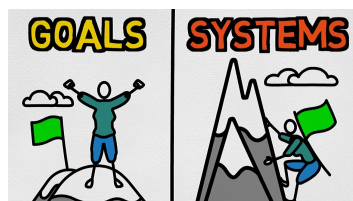
Changing yourself is hard, while “changing the world” seems like fun. When you get frustrated trying to change yourself, it seems easier to get frustrated with “the system.” Raging at the system creates social bonds, a feeling of social dominance, and the expectation of future rewards. It stimulates happy chemicals fast. Changing yourself does not feel good unless you keep at it for a while. It’s not surprising that so many people focus on changing others instead of themselves.

### **Reason #7: “I’ll be happy when...”**

People often imagine they will be happy when they reach some particular benchmark in their public or private life. We imagine happiness will come as a result of “making it” in some area or another. I’ll be happy when I can finish a triathlon, or get my grandchildren into a good pre-school, or stop AIDS.

But goals are double-edged swords. They stimulate happy chemicals because you link them to survival. But they also stimulate unhappy chemicals because your brain sees every obstacle to your goal as a survival threat. Of course, you know you can survive without winning the Olympics in Stand-up Comedy, but your cortisol tells you otherwise.

Goals do stimulate happy chemicals. Dopamine surges when you approach rewards, and serotonin flows when you take pride in your



accomplishment. Oxytocin is boosted when you bond with others in pursuit of your goal, and even endorphin is triggered if you push yourself to the point of pain. But goals cause a vicious cycle if you use them to mask unhappy chemicals. You constantly focus on a goal because you can't stand it when your happy chemicals dip, and you end up feeling exhausted and resentful. You think you can't stop until you "get a break" and reach that milestone you imagine. Once you "get it right," you quickly focus on a new goal and start feeling overwhelmed again.

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| <b>Reasons I choose unhappiness</b> |  |
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You can't stop this loop if it's the only one you have. Single-minded pursuit of a goal can lead you to see other people as obstacles. You might see your body as an obstacle. You might even see rules and laws as obstacles. If you imagine yourself on an escalator to perfection, unhappy chemicals stun you when you step off the escalator.

People often say "our society" forces this on them. They don't see how they've created this loop, though they can easily see that in others. The urge to "make something of yourself" is much older than our society. Status feels good, and the urge for status has motivated people to do useful things. But the mammalian brain keeps seeking more status to keep feeling good. You may dream of a world in which your status anxiety is gone. But you will always live in the world of your mammal brain. All you can do is create new pathways to your happy chemicals.

You can free yourself from an escalator if you are willing to do something different for 45 days. Do not simply replace one goal with another. Instead, build the habit of having multiple sources of satisfaction. Your new circuits will not trigger happy chemicals every minute. But they help you survive that blast of unhappy chemical you feel when you ease off your goal.

Watching the news tends to reinforce the escalator view of happiness because it focuses on people with high social dominance. Your mirror neurons feel their confidence, and your mammal brain feels like you've been included in elite circles. Then your cortex realizes that you're not included. You have to make peace with your mammalian status urge. If you hate that urge, you hate yourself and everyone else. Instead, you can just accept it and decide where to invest your life energy.

We all invest effort with no guarantees of the outcome. You can never be sure when your efforts will be rewarded. But reaching goals doesn't ensure constant happiness, so you might as well start being happy before those goals are reached.

## **Choosing Happiness**

Some thought patterns stimulate happy chemicals in the short run, but they lock you into unhappiness in the long run. You get to decide which thought habits are good for you. You are the master of the cockamamie mental equipment built by your life experience. The moment you refuse to send your electricity down an unhappy highway, you create space for a new thought pattern to grow. You can grow the happy habit you choose.

7

## The Burden of Choice

### **The Trail of Trade-offs**

There is no set path to happy chemicals. There is only a constant string of trade-offs. The choices are so hard to make that you might be tempted to shift the burden of choice onto others. When you let others choose for you, you may not like the results, but at least you can get angry with them instead of being angry with yourself.

Choice leads to cortisol when you fail to get what you seek. You might also end up with bad feelings if you get what you seek and start thinking about what it cost you. Trade-offs are inevitable because life is finite.

People are always deciding when to risk something to gain something else. We hear a lot about “good decisions” and “bad decisions.” But every decision is bad when you look for the bad in it. When you’re rewarded, you can focus on how you might have done slightly better. When you have two good choices in front of you, you could endlessly lament the option you didn’t choose.

Frustration grows if you think of life as an optimization function with one correct solution. Instead, you can think of life as a series of trade-offs. Tough calls are inevitable, but you are the best judge of the fine-tuned trade-offs of your own life.

Your brain will never stop trying to promote your survival. It will take what you have for granted and look for ways to get more— more

rewards (dopamine), more physical security (endorphin), more social support (oxytocin), more respect (serotonin). Seeking more is risky. Your brain is constantly deciding whether it's worth giving up some of this to get more of that. Once you decide, you may not get the outcome you expected. The resulting frustration may tempt you to leave the hard calls to someone else.

You will end up with more happy chemicals if you carry your own burden of choice. You can manage the frustration by accepting that trade-offs are inevitable in the real world. Here are some examples.

### **Short run vs. Long run**

We constantly weigh immediate rewards against rewards we expect in the future. If you decide to smoke, you put a particular value on your present as opposed to your future. If you decide to party, you trade off a future reward for a present reward. You get to live with the consequences, which motivates you to make the best possible predictions about your well-being. Perfect predictions are impossible, but better information leads to better choices.

You are always choosing which information you focus on. You can choose good information and make good choices. You will not do that if you believe you are a victim of outside forces. When you know that your life depends on your choices, you get the information you need to manage your trade-offs.

### **Known vs. Unknown**

We are always trading off the security of the known against the promise of the unknown. You can choose to stick with the known until you find an alternative that feels like a sure thing. Or you can risk an alternative before it's fully baked. Once you choose, you never know how the other option would have turned out.

However things go, you can make yourself feel worse by looking for flaws in your decision-making. Or you can make yourself feel better by honoring your ability to make choices amidst the inevitable uncertainty of life. I am not saying you should defend your decisions to the point of refusing to learn from experience. But if you only attack your

decisions, you will never make a choice unless there's absolute certainty. Most of the time, uncertainty prevails. The better you can live with it, the more options you have.

### **Individual vs. Group**

Going along with the group triggers one good feeling, and striking out on your own you triggers another. It would be nice to have both, but it's not realistic to expect that. When you're with the group, you might notice what you're missing and long for the good feeling of independent action. But when you follow your individual impulses, the loss of group protection feels bad to your mammal brain. There is no permanent solution, only constant trade-offs. When you go with the group, you will feel the squeeze on your personal interests. When you focus on yourself, you will feel the pressure on your social ties.

At some point you have to accept the conundrum.<sup>x2</sup> Though careful decisions are nice, you will have nothing but unhappy chemicals if you focus on the down side of each option. Instead, you could focus on the benefits of the option you are currently enjoying. Enjoy the group when it's group time and enjoy your individuality when you're alone. Your mind naturally seeks what it doesn't have, but you can remind it of what it has.

It's natural to want it all. You'd like to have more group support without losing your individuality. You'd like to focus more on your own needs without losing the support of the group. Why shouldn't I have it all, people think. Perhaps small adjustments are possible, but it's important to see that this trade off is part of being human. Instead of expecting it to go away, you can pride yourself on your ability to manage it.

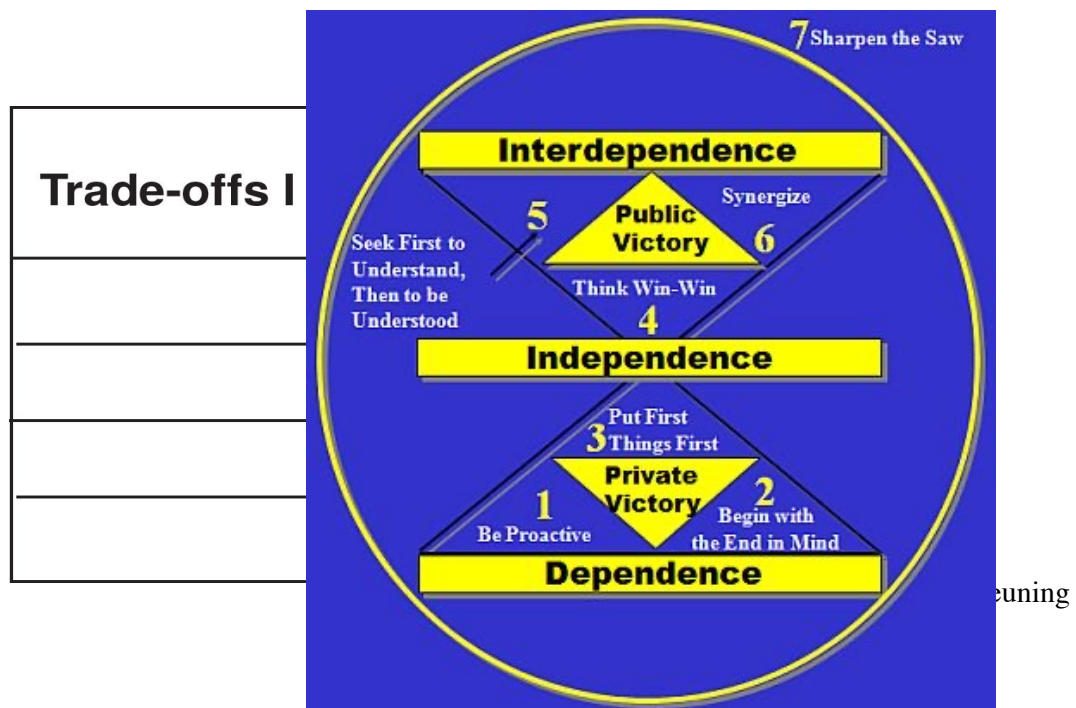
### **Free will vs. Dependency**

If you were a zoo animal, you might envy wild animals and try to break free. But if you were a wild animal, burdened by the need to root for food, compete for mates, and protect your offspring from predators, you might look for a way to break into the zoo for food and shelter.

Having your needs met by others looks nice, but people often end up disappointed with what they're getting and angry at the loss of freedom.

When you're free to meet your own needs, you might groan from the burden instead of celebrating it. Both paths have ups and downs, and the mind easily sees the down side because it wants to make things better. You can see the up side if you make a habit of looking for it.

Choice can be so frustrating that people sometimes opt to live in the zoo and then hate the zookeeper. People may want to be led and protected, but at the same time resent those with power over them. They often resolve this with perpetual hostility toward their leaders and providers. They create a sense of personal power by putting down those they perceive as above them. But it never really makes up for the sense of personal power they lose when they give away their burden of choice instead of managing it themselves.



### How You Keep Score

A lizard has simple decision rules. When he sees something bigger than himself, he runs from it. When he sees something smaller, he tries to eat it. And if it's about his size, he tries to mate with it. Then he moves on to the next thing.

A lizard doesn't analyze his successes and failures. He has neurochemical ups and downs, but he doesn't expect himself to produce ups all the time. You are able to judge yourself because you have enough to compare yourself to abstract expectations. This helps you find ways to

improve things in the future. The ability to judge yourself is a blessing unless you make it a curse.

A mouse fails to get the cheese some of the time. He tries again, but he doesn't kick himself for being an idiot. He has a much worse problem: hunger. You manage to avoid hunger because you anticipate your needs, and judge yourself when you fall short of meeting those needs. You expect to get the cheese every time, and if you choose the wrong path you feel bad, even when you have enough cheese.

Humans are always keeping score on themselves. Our cortex evolved to learn from experience. We often succeed at avoiding harm by learning from our failures. We can get so good at this that we overlook things that go right. We don't want to clutter our minds with information unless we can see how it helps us score.

Each person tries to improve their own "score" by learning from their own experience. When you score in your own mind, it feels great, briefly, and the happy chemicals wire you to score in that way in the future. When you fail to score, it hurts, and unhappy chemicals build a pathway that tells you how to avoid that kind of hurt in the future. You develop neural networks good at fixing problems so you can feel good. Your circuits can overlook good things around you because they don't seem relevant to your score.

You can train yourself to see what goes right instead of just seeing what goes wrong. It may feel dangerous because you are less focused on threats while you're scanning for triumphs. But if you tolerate that anxiety for a short time, your mammal brain gets the message that you will not die if you stop scanning for predators. At first, it will be hard to see triumphs because you haven't built neural superhighways for them to light up. But the pathways build if you keep at it.

I started thinking about what goes right when I came home from a year in Africa. Every time I flushed a toilet, I marveled that such a luxury exists. I realized that people lived without proper sewage systems for most of human history, and yet when we have them, we take them for granted. Rat-infested outhouses and open drainage ditches would make us very unhappy. Yet when sewage is whisked away from us effortlessly, it doesn't make us the slightest bit happy.

When I lived in Central African Republic, I got stuck in an elevator during one of the many blackouts. After that, I made a concerted

effort to celebrate elevators instead of being scared of them. Every time an elevator works, I appreciate it instead of taking it for granted.

My appreciation of infrastructure began in Haiti, when I was invited to a picnic at a dam. Why would you want to picnic at a dam, I asked. I had lived in the world where dams were sneered at as blots on the landscape. My co-worker explained that electricity and drinking water were scarce, and the dam was widely seen as something to celebrate. Since then, every time I use water, I think about all it took to get it to me. When I wash a teacup, I imagine the quantity of water I've used in relation to the containers Haitian women carry on their heads. Instead of focusing on what goes wrong, I focus on what goes right.

During my stays in China, I went for lots of massages. Each one felt unique, and I marveled at the massage therapists' skill. More important, I marveled at the fact that I could walk into a public place and take my clothes off in perfect safety. That level of trust is a colossal achievement. In most of human history, it was not safe to leave your village. Strangers could easily kill you with impunity, and people rarely left their familiar hamlets in a lifetime. Now, strangers literally rub shoulders worldwide in safety. Things go wrong occasionally, but when you focus on problems you miss the immensity of what goes right.

When I lived abroad, I often saw food contaminated by insects, vermin, and grains of sand, not to mention invisible contaminants. People lived with contaminated food for most of human history, and they were just grateful they weren't starving. Now, our food supply is virtually free of immediate threats, and most long-run threats too. No one I know seems to appreciate this. People seem to be in a frenzy about food risks with no idea of what has gone right.

When I get health care, I appreciate what goes right. I had a severe pneumonia in my thirties, and would probably not be alive today if it weren't for the antibiotics. They were introduced less than a decade before I was born. Most of us alive today would already have been done in by something if we hadn't had modern health care. Yet people rage at health care all the time with scarcely a thought of what goes right.

On the contrary, people often pride themselves on their expertise in what goes wrong. They end up in a vicious cycle, needing to focus on signs of disaster in order to keep feeling good about themselves.

## **Life is Like a Box of Chocolates**

A box of chocolate confronts you with choice. Sometimes, your pick disappoints. Even worse, you may see someone else get the chocolate you'd hoped for. When a chocolate falls short of your expectations, it's possible to feel bad even while you're enjoying intense chocolatey goodness that's overwhelmingly similar to the other chocolates.

We all build expectations about what will make us happy. We feel good or bad by comparing our reality to what was expected. Our expectations build in adolescence because that's when the brain is highly plastic. These expectations are inevitably unrealistic. A young person imagines they'll feel on top of the world as soon as they can come and go without anyone telling them when to go to bed or take a test. But once you start meeting your own needs instead of having others meet your needs for you, you don't feel like you're the master of the universe. You wonder what went wrong. Something is wrong with the world, you may think, or with your partner, your boss, your culture, yourself. You never blame the brain circuits that compare reality to your youthful enthusiasm, because those circuits function without your awareness.

I have a friend who always complains about the food he gets in a restaurant. He chose it himself, of course, but once it comes, it seems flawed to him. He looks longingly at other people's orders. When I eat with him, I feel like I can't enjoy my meal. So I no longer eat with this person.

You are always choosing the information you feed to your brain. Choice is a responsibility we can celebrate or dread. I often hear students complain that it's so hard to choose courses. But I also hear them complain when a course is required. When they don't have choice they lament it, but when they have it they don't seem to value it.

If you had lived in times past, you would have not been free to choose your career, your beliefs, or even your sex partner. Group expectations would have constrained you. You would have imagined eternal bliss if only you could choose your mate, your work, and the expletives you hurl at the powers that be. Yet these choices do not bring constant happiness when you have them. Your brain keeps looking for more and focusing on the obstacles.

When life is frustrating, people often blame "bad choices." This implies that there were clear "good choices" just hanging around that a person overlooked. Reality is more complicated. Each choice has its

advantages and disadvantages. Once you embrace one choice, you see its disadvantages up close. If you had to do it over, you might make another “bad choice,” because the down side of each option is hard to know until you’ve chosen. You can spend your whole life lamenting your choices, or accept the fleeting nature of happiness. Instead of focusing on what you would’ve-could’ve-should’ve had, you can see the good in what you’ve chosen. Even a “good choice” will only make you happy for a short time.

Your mammal brain evolved to work without conscious awareness. But modern science lets us choose to understand the neurochemical ups and downs our mammal brain produces in its wordless way. If you decide to be happy, your brain will find things to be happy about. You will still have frustrations and disappointments, but you will always have the ability to find ways to make yourself happy. If your happy pathways don’t spark themselves, you will find healthy ways to crank them up.

You can do this right now. No one is stopping you. And you cannot do it for someone else.

Your happy chemicals cannot surge constantly. But you do not need to be having a “peak” experience all the time. When happy chemicals dip, unhappy chemicals may get your attention. But you don’t interpret that as a crisis. You don’t try to mask it with unhealthy happy habits. You just accept it as a reminder that you’re mortal.

It’s not easy to manage this brain we’ve inherited from our ancestors. It’s the challenge that comes with the gift of life.