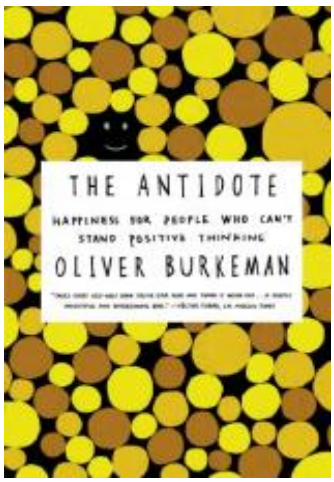
The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking

by Oliver Burkeman



About the Book

Self-help books don?t seem to work. Few of the many advantages of modern life seem capable of lifting our collective mood. Wealth?even if you can get it?doesn?t necessarily lead to happiness. Romance, family life, and work often bring as much stress as joy. We can?t even agree on what ?happiness? means. So are we engaged in a futile pursuit? Or are we just going about it the wrong way?

Looking both east and west, in bulletins from the past and from far afield, Oliver Burkeman introduces us to an unusual group of people who share a single, surprising way of thinking about life. Whether experimental psychologists, terrorism experts, Buddhists, hardheaded business consultants, Greek philosophers, or modern-day gurus, they argue that in our personal lives, and in society at large, it?s our constant effort to be happy that is making us miserable. And that there is an alternative path to happiness and success that involves embracing failure, pessimism, insecurity, and uncertainty?the very things we spend our lives trying to avoid. Thought-provoking, counterintuitive, and ultimately uplifting, **The Antidote** is the intelligent person?s guide to understanding the much-misunderstood idea of happiness.

Discussion Guide

1. When you first read about the ?negative path? and Alan Watts?s ?backwards law? in chapter 1, did you find yourself agreeing or disagreeing with Oliver Burkeman that these might be more sensible strategies for happiness than positive thinking? Have you ever experienced a failure that turned into a success when you stopped pushing yourself to achieve a goal?

2. In chapter 2, Burkeman writes, ?For the Stoics, the ideal state of mind was tranquility . . . to be achieved not by strenuously chasing after enjoyable experiences but by cultivating a kind of calm indifference towards one?s

circumstances.? In chapter 6, Burkeman visits Kibera, a slum in Nairobi, Kenya, where a woman tells him, ?The things you need for happiness aren?t the things you think you need.? If a Stoic philosopher or a resident of Kibera were to speak at a Get Motivated! seminar, what might they have to say about insecurity and uncertainty that Dr. Robert Schuller wouldn?t want his audience to hear?

3. When Burkeman visits the modern-day Stoic Keith Seddon and his wife Jocelyn at their home, Jocelyn describes her debilitating illness as a ?dark gift.? What is your dark gift? What insights and experiences has it given you that you might not have had without it?

4. In chapter 3, Burkeman cites the Zen Buddhist Barry Magid?s view of the tragedy of Oedipus as the backwards law in mythological form: struggling to escape our demons is what gives them their power. What are other examples of this from fiction, history, recent events, or your own life?

5. Burkeman makes a case for Buddhist ?non-attachment? as a key component of the negative path to happiness. Do you agree that it is usually pointless to attempt to change ?mental weather?? Or are you inclined to think that we can control or even force our moods and behaviors?

6. Burkeman posits that if self-help books actually worked, there would be no need for new self-help books. In chapter 3, he uses procrastination as an example of a behavior that motivational techniques fail to change. Why, according to Burkeman, is Buddhist non-attachment a more helpful tool for overcoming procrastination than tactics like creating lists of goals or systems of rewards?

7. Chapter 4 explores why setting goals can be a counterproductive or even destructive practice. The story of the 1996 disaster on Mount Everest, where eight climbers died reaching the summit, makes a compelling argument. What are some of the reasons that the stronger one?s emotional investment in a goal, the greater the potential for something to go wrong? Have you ever experienced ?summit fever?? What were the results?

8. In chapter 4, Burkeman touches on several ways goals can go wrong: We set goals that are too simple, don?t take all the variables of a situation into account, or don?t allow for the introduction of new information. We set goals that disregard the consequences of what we do in order to achieve them. We set goals that are simply bad goals. What are some alternatives to goal-setting that Burkeman presents? How are Stoic and/or Buddhist principals implicit in these?

9. According to the epigraph from Wei Wu Wei at the beginning of chapter 5, people are unhappy because almost everything they think about and do is for the self, which does not exist. Do you agree with Eckhart Tolle and Alan Watts that self, in the form of thought or ego or the boundary between the body and the rest of the world, does not exist? How are these concepts helpful in the search for happiness?

10. In chapter 6, Burkeman explores the hidden benefits of insecurity and the many irrational ways we have of fooling ourselves into thinking we are safe when we may not be. He writes, ?Seeing a television report of a terrorist attack on foreign soil, you might abandon plans for an overseas holiday, in order to hang on to your feeling of safety?when, in truth, spending too much time sitting on the sofa watching television might pose a far greater threat to your survival.? But fear is a natural and unavoidable presence in our lives. Have you ever acted irrationally out of fear? What tools or strategies does Burkeman recommend to help us embrace and thereby deal realistically with fear?

11. It would be difficult to be less secure than the inhabitants of the Kibera neighborhood that Burkeman describes in chapter 6. He asks, ?Why is it that places such as Kibera aren?t unequivocally at the *bottom* of every assessment of happiness levels every time?? He does not find a wholly satisfying answer to this question. He does, however, offer insight into how feeling insecure or vulnerable can lead to a more meaningful life. What can we learn about relationships, ambition, material wealth, hope, etc., from the people who live in Kibera?

12. In chapter 7, Burkeman writes of his visit to GfK Custom Research in Michigan, which houses ?the museum of failed products.? What do the products in this museum demonstrate about failure? Why is it good to fail, whether in business, in the life of an individual, or in the evolution of a species? Think of yourself as the Director of Product Development for your life. What failed products have you created, and what did you learn?

13. Writing of human beings? innate fear of death in chapter 8, Burkeman cites Ernest Becker, author of the bestseller **The Denial of Death**. According to Becker, what is an ?immortality project?? Do you agree with his sweeping definition? If Becker is correct that the denial of death ?is far too deep-rooted for us ever to hope to unseat it,? what are some ways we might at least become more comfortable with mortality? In doing so, what would we stand to gain?

14. Before reading **The Antidote**, what were your beliefs about setting goals and accumulating ?the things you need? as a means of achieving happiness? Did the book change your thinking?

15. In **The Antidote**, Burkeman explores many definitions of the concept of happiness: having everything you need; setting goals that you work toward and reach; living without regret; enjoying every moment of your life; always feeling positive about your life; living without fear of death; feeling safe and secure; believing in yourself and your ability to succeed; living with mystery and uncertainty. He dismisses some of these and embraces others. What is your definition of happiness? Which of Burkeman?s ?antidotes? to positive thinking will you use?

Author Bio

Oliver Burkeman is a feature writer for *The Guardian*. He is a winner of the Foreign Press Association?s Young Journalist of the Year Award and has been short-listed for the Orwell Prize. He writes a popular weekly column on psychology, ?This Column Will Change Your Life,? and has reported from New York, London, and Washington, D.C. He lives in New York City.

Critical Praise

?Burkeman?s tour of the ?negative path? to happiness makes for a deeply insightful and entertaining book. This insecure, anxious and sometimes unhappy reader found it quite helpful.?
?Héctor Tobar, *Los Angeles Times*

?Some of the most truthful and useful words on [happiness] to be published in recent years . . . A marvellous synthesis of good sense, which would make a bracing detox for the self-help junkie.?
?Julian Baggini, *The Guardian*

?**The Antidote** is a gem. Countering a self-help tradition in which ?positive thinking? too often takes the place of actual thinking, Oliver Burkeman returns our attention to several of philosophy?s deeper traditions and does so with a light hand and a wry sense of humor. You?ll come away from this book enriched?and, yes, even a little happier.?
?Daniel H. Pink, author of **Drive** and **A Whole New Mind**

?Quietly subversive, beautifully written, persuasive, and profound, Oliver Burkeman?s book will make you think?and smile.?
?Alex Bellos, author of **Here?s Looking at Euclid**

?Addictive, wise, and very funny.?
?Tim Harford, author of **The Undercover Economist**

?Splendid . . . Readable and engaging.?
?British Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Times* (London)

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