3 mindfulness rituals that will make you happy

This is the scientifically-distilled version of mindfulness. Vetted, tested, with air shocks and spinning rims. No chanting, no monk robes necessary. Why is it so hard to be happy all the time? Why can’t our lives be more like the joyous families in insurance commercials and less like the lives of people making insurance claims?

Well, the first reason is because we believe a number of myths about what happiness is. Time to fix that.

Let’s get to it…

**The 4 Happiness Myths**

***Myth 1: “Happiness Is the Natural State for All Human Beings”***

Sorry, that’s just naive. The human brain’s default state is not “bliss.” Anyone who has spoken to me in the morning before I’ve had caffeine knows this.

But advertising, Facebook, and big parts of our culture reinforce this myth on a near-constant basis. You’ve met people who are super happy all the time and, let’s be honest here: they kinda creep you out.

We all have ups and downs. That’s normal and natural. But thinking you’re supposed to be ecstatic 24/7 is a waterslide into myth #2…

***Myth 2: “If You’re Not Happy, You’re Defective”***

We feel like if there’s anything wrong with life than there must be something wrong with us. And so we scramble to “fix” ourselves because this can’t be right…

***Myth 3: “To Create a Better Life, We Must Get Rid of Negative Feelings”***

Everyone else feels great all the time (pro tip: no, they don’t) so we should too. And then we’re running headlong into…

***Myth 4: “You Should Be Able to Control What You Think and Feel”***

We have reached our final destination. Please take your belongings from the overhead bins and exit to your left.

We all spend a lot of time trying to control what we think and feel. Do me a favor: don’t think about bears… How’d that go?

Oh, and next time you’re sad why don’t you just “snap out of it.” How well does that work?

Of course, neither do. We can’t control what we think or feel – at least not so directly and immediately. Sure, we can influence these things — but control? Nope.

And so we’re often struggling to change what we can’t. And this just fuels the fire of these emotions as we struggle with them. We end up with anxiety about our anxiety, anger about our depression and depression about our anger layered on top of one another like some mental health version of “Inception.”

Or we do things to muscle our thoughts and feelings into compliance (procrastination, drinking, etc.) that offer short-term improvement of our feelings, but in the long-term take us away from our goals and values.

This is not the path to a happy life. This is the happiness trap.

You’re not going to feel good all the time. Sorry. And you can’t directly and immediately control your thoughts and feelings as easily as you change the background image on your smartphone.

But that’s okay. Defining happiness as sheer unrelenting non-opiate-fueled-bliss is absurd. We have the happiness definition wrong. Happiness should mean a rich, full and meaningful life — and that includes ups anddowns.

The other far less common meaning of happiness is “living a rich, full, and meaningful life.” When we take action on the things that truly matter deep in our hearts, move in directions that we consider valuable and worthy, clarify what we stand for in life and act accordingly, then our lives become rich and full and meaningful, and we experience a powerful sense of vitality. This is not some fleeting feeling—it is a profound sense of a life well lived. And although such a life will undoubtedly give us many pleasurable feelings, it will also give us uncomfortable ones, such as sadness, fear, and anger. This is only to be expected. If we live a full life, we will feel the full range of human emotions.

(To learn more about how you and your children can lead a successful life, check out my bestselling book [here](http://geni.us/butwt).)

Now that’s all fine and dandy — but how do we get out of this trap for good?

We need to think differently about thinking…

You Are Not Your Thoughts
There are “facts” and there are “thoughts.” Facts we can all agree on (“Alice is frowning.”) Thoughts are the judgments, interpretations and stories that our brains incessantly chatter about all day (“Alice is frowning because she hates me just like everyone hates me because I’m a bad person and that’s why I will die alone.”)

Yes, these thoughts are all too often negative.

Your brain makes thoughts. That’s what it does. Some true, some false, some useful, some not, and some totally absurd. But it’s what your brain does, trying to make sense of the world so that it can fulfill it’s evolutionarily goal of keeping you not-dead by pulling the puppet strings of anxiety, regret, and fear to try to keep you safe from anything that might change your not-dead status.

You can’t control thoughts any more than you can control a headache. Actions, you’re responsible for. Thoughts, not so much. So when it comes to thoughts, you’re not the boss of you.

But the problem is we often fuse with our thoughts. You think those thoughts are you. You think those thoughts are gospel. That voice in your head speaks only truth. It’s like hearing the PA system in Wal-Mart and assuming that’s God talking. (No, it’s not God talking. A kid threw up in aisle 4.)

From [The Happiness Trap:](https://geni.us/happtrap)

*All too often we react to our thoughts as if they are the absolute truth or as if we must give them all our attention. The psychological jargon for this reaction is “fusion.”*

So your brain weaves a fact into thought, you fuse with it and that’s how Alice frowning morphs into “I’m unlovable.” We take these stories our brain creates way too seriously and it’s like a mental computer virus hijacked your brain.

Do you really believe most of your thoughts are all that important? Of course they’re not. If they were mission critical, you wouldn’t even get a vote on whether to listen to them. Your brain does super-important stuff like keeping you breathing and your heart beating. You’re not even allowed to touch that software. Because if you were, at some point you would’ve gotten distracted by your phone, stopped inhaling, turned blue and died.

And, more importantly, when you get so swept up in negative thoughts, you’re missing out on life. You’re engaged with a sad story you’re telling yourself — one that isn’t even real. Chronic depression is often an ongoing fusion with thoughts about the past. And anxiety is fusion with worries about the future. People with both conditions often exhibit anhedonia, a reduced ability to experience pleasure. They can’t experience the joys of the world around them because they’re too wrapped in the stories they’re telling themselves about the world.

Now this doesn’t mean fusion is bad. Being immersed in a good conversation with close friends can be positive fusion. Fusion can be a “flow” state. And negative thoughts aren’t necessarily the enemy either. Sometimes you need a kick in the keister and your brain guilting you is helpful.

The issue is we want the ability to step back and evaluate these thoughts. Because when we’re fused it can be hard to see what is real and we can become a puppet to false, negative stories.

To be fair, sometimes it’s tricky to tell facts and thoughts apart:

**Example #1**: “They won’t like me.” Your crystal ball is lovely but, sorry — that’s a thought, not a fact.

**Example #2:**“I can’t go for a run because I’m too tired.” Thoughty-thought-thought. No fact-o delicti. Now “I can’t go for a run because a spinal injury has paralyzed my legs.” Okay, that’s a fact.

How do you know if you’re fused with a thought or feeling? Ask yourself a simple question:

*“If I wasn’t thinking about this, would it still be a problem?”*

Man standing in front of you with a gun? Okay, not a fusion issue. That’s real.

“Alice is frowning, proving I am an unlovable wretch and I deserve to be boiling in a cauldron in a Hieronymus Bosch painting of Hades.” Fusion alert.

Alice could just be constipated and you may be awesome.

(To learn the 4-step morning ritual that will make you happy all day, click [here](https://www.bakadesuyo.com/2018/05/morning-ritual-2/).)

Some will reply, “But what if it’s true? What if Alice is frowning because she hates me?”

Well, guess what?

It doesn’t matter…

**You Gotta Defuse**

Lots of stuff is “true.” Epic landfills of truth out there. Doesn’t mean you need to be thinking about it. You will never think about most of the true things about the subject of organic chemistry because you don’t even know them. So truth is not a good reason for the wheels in your brain to keep spinning unhappily over anything.

The more important issue when dealing with troublesome thoughts is: Is this helpful? Will further exploration of this thought help me live the life I want?

So when negative thoughts become a problem we need to defuse from them. How do we do that? By accepting them, not wrestling with them.

Now that word “acceptance” gets me in a lot of trouble. People think it means caving, giving in, resigning yourself, waving the white flag… But that’s not a “helpful” way of looking at acceptance.

From [The Happiness Trap:](https://geni.us/happtrap)

Acceptance does not mean putting up with or resigning yourself to anything. Acceptance is about embracing life, not merely tolerating it. Acceptance literally means “taking what is offered.” It doesn’t mean giving up or admitting defeat; it doesn’t mean just gritting your teeth and bearing it. It means fully opening yourself to your present reality—acknowledging how it is, right here and now, and letting go of the struggle with life as it is in this moment.

I see unhelpful thoughts like junk mail. Do you sit down and write a letter back to the sender telling them how awful junk mail is? No. Do you deny its existence? No. You accept it. And then you go do something useful with your time.

And this is the goal with defusion: we don’t try to control our thoughts because that doesn’t work (Bears. Don’t think about them.) And we don’t do a full-on-brain-filibuster arguing with the thoughts because that just makes it worse.

We must recognize the thought for what it is – just a thought. A story, a judgment. Not necessarily true and definitely not you. Acknowledge it. But don’t wrestle with it and give it energy.

From [The Happiness Trap](https://geni.us/happtrap):

In a state of fusion, thoughts seem to be the absolute truth and very important. But in a state of defusion, we recognize that:

1) Thoughts are merely sounds, words, stories, or bits of language.

2) Thoughts may or may not be true; we don’t automatically believe them.

3) Thoughts may or may not be important; we pay attention only if they’re helpful.

4) Thoughts are definitely not orders; we certainly don’t have to obey them.

5) Thoughts may or may not be wise; we don’t automatically follow their advice.

6) Thoughts are never threats; even the most painful or disturbing of thoughts does not represent a threat to us.

How hard is it to evaluate other people’s problems and tell them what you would do? Oh, that’s easy. (Hand me my gavel, please.) But how hard is it to be objective about your own failings, and then make a habit of consistently doing the right thing from this day forward without beating yourself up? (I’d have better luck trying to invade Russia during the winter. By myself.)

Stepping back helps you treat your own issues like you treat other people’s. Which actually makes sense because your thoughts aren’t you, right?

Okay, so you’re feeling stressed, anxious or depressed. That’s your Mindfulness Bat Signal from now on. Time to spring into action with your new skills…

**1. Step Back And Isolate It**

Pause. Ask yourself, “What story is my mind telling me now?”

This immediately provides that distance. For example, a lot of people struggle with self-esteem. But self-esteem is just another thought, another story your brain spins. So as soon as you realize you aren’t saying “I’m a loser”, your brain is saying it, something wonderful happens: you don’t have to agree.

Another simple formula is to take the thought and before it add: “I’m having the thought that…” Again, this provides that distance.

Sounds simple but it’s quite powerful. “I’m having the thought that I’m a loser” is a puzzle to be solved, not a bullet train to getting all emo.

From [The Happiness Trap](https://geni.us/happtrap):

…first bring to mind an upsetting thought that takes the form “I am X.” For example, “I’m not good enough” or “I’m incompetent.” Preferably pick a thought that often recurs and that usually bothers or upsets you… Next, take that thought and in front of it, insert this phrase: “I’m having the thought that . . .” Play that thought again, but this time with the phrase attached.

**2) Accept and defuse**

Your brain occasionally comes up with crazy thoughts, right? But we take its thoughts so seriously at times and let them get us down. It’s important to remember how imperfect your brain’s track record is.

So when its negative thoughts try and fuse, gently mock it. Don’t get angry or worked up, but not taking it so seriously and teasing it a bit can take the steam out of its painful judgments.

**Brain**: “You’re a loser.”

**Me**: “I’m having the thought that I’m a loser. Hmm… Oh, silly brain.”

Some people will say, “I can’t dismiss it that easily; what if I am a loser?” Again, true doesn’t matter; helpful does. Or some might say, “I can’t dismiss the feeling that easily.” That means you’re fused with it. You need to step back and see it as one of many possible stories, not the single, undeniable truth.

We all have recurring negative thoughts. Your brain can be a regular jukebox of criticism that never turns off. But rather than despairing over this, accept its nature and take the sting out of it.

Imagine your personal playlist of “negative-thought-songs.” (If you’re over 40 you’re welcome to call it a mixtape.)

**Brain**: “You’re a loser.”

**Me**: “I’m having the thought that I’m a loser. Hmm… Oh, that song again. Is this from my ‘I’m feeling inferior’ playlist? I think the acoustic version of ‘Nobody likes me’ is next, followed by an a cappella rendition of ‘Life sucks.’”

If you’re laughing at your brain, it’s hard to get too depressed, anxious or angry.

From The Happiness Trap:

After doing this exercise, you probably found that by now you’re just not taking that thought quite so seriously; you’re just not buying into it as much. Notice that you haven’t challenged the thought at all. You haven’t tried to get rid of it, debated whether it’s true or false, or tried to replace it with a positive thought.
Full disclosure: it takes practice to get good at this. You wouldn’t lift weights once and then quit because you weren’t all jacked the next day. So keep at it. Try to get better at noticing when you’re fused with an unhelpful story. Then defuse it. And count on your short attention span to help the unhelpful thought drift off.

Yes, another thought will inevitably come along and try to hijack your brain. Forever and ever. But with practice, you’ll get better at handling how your mind naturally works.

As the saying goes, “You cannot stop the waves, but you can learn to surf.”

(To learn the 4 harsh truths that will make you a better person, click [here](https://www.bakadesuyo.com/2018/06/harsh-truths/).)

Okay, we’ve learned a lot. (Not a thought, that’s a fact… I hope.) Time to round everything up and learn why perpetual bliss is a terrible goal…

**Sum Up**

Here are 3 mindfulness rituals that will make you happy:

* Myths of happiness: Bliss isn’t the default, you aren’t broken, negative feelings are natural and you can’t directly control your feelings. And that is totally okay.
* You are not your thoughts: Would you really think all that negative stuff if it was up to you? No. It’s not “you.” Hearts beat, eyes blink and brains think. And you are allowed to respectfully disagree with its efforts.
* You gotta defuse: What story is your brain telling you right now? Oh, silly brain…

Some people might get sad that there is no perpetual bliss at the end of the happiness rainbow. A little difficulty makes life richer. Without it, there could be no pride in overcoming challenges — because there would be no challenges. There’d be no such thing as a comeback. You’d never feel the joy of improvement.

Plain and simple: you’d be happy but bored. We don’t want that. We want a well-rounded life.

But when the internal challenges get fierce, remember: you’re not your thoughts. You’re not your brain. So don’t take your brain or its thoughts so seriously…

They didn’t like this blog post, Eric.

Oh, we’re playing that song again, are we?