

Why You're Unhappy: Biology vs Politics

Introduction

When I was young, no one expected me to be happy. In fact, happiness was sort of taboo. It marked you as someone who wasn't doing their fair share of the suffering.

Today's mindset is quite different. Happiness is now considered "normal," and unhappiness is seen as a disorder. We're told that animals are happy, children are happy, and hunter-gatherers are happy, so happiness must be the natural default state. Unhappiness is viewed as a medical problem that you can fix if you "ask your doctor." This view claims to be THE Science, so it's hard to question.

But it's not true. Our happy brain chemicals are not designed to be on all the time. They're released in short spurts when you see a way to meet a survival need. They're quickly metabolized, so you always have to do more to get more. Unhappy chemicals are always ready to surge because they helped our ancestors detect threats in time to avoid them. No one is effortlessly happy all the time because our brain evolved to promote survival, not to make you feel good.

If you expect to be happy all the time, you end up disappointed. Today's view of happiness leaves a lot of people feeling defective and deprived. How did we get here?

Almost three hundred years ago, Jean-Jacques Rousseau said that nature is happy and civilization causes unhappiness. Rousseau lived at the time when naked women greeted European sailors entering Tahitian waters. Europeans looked for a way to explain this, and Rousseau portrayed it as an expression of the happiness that prevailed before civilization ruined things. He ignored the fact that these women were pressed into service by fathers and brothers who coopted their earnings. Rousseau was not an ideal specimen of humanity. He had five children with his housekeeper and brought each to an orphanage at birth because he didn't want them to be raised by a housekeeper. But his theory that society causes unhappiness was popular and took root.

A century later, Karl Marx agreed that "our society" creates unhappiness, but asserted that a new society could make everyone happy. Marx disparaged religion, and the quest for a society that makes everyone happy came to replace religion. This belief system underlies today's view of emotions and mental health. It trains you to blame "our society" for your unhappiness and thus expect society to fix it.

A century ago, European universities swept away medieval courses of study and replaced them with "social

sciences” based on Marx’s theories. The new Sociology, Psychology, and Anthropology soon spread at US universities too. They strove to produce “evidence” that happiness is the norm in other societies, but “our society” causes distress. Not surprisingly, an abundance of “studies” suddenly provided the desired “proof.”

When the Nazis took over Germany, a group of scholars known as the “Frankfurt School” fled to Columbia University Teachers College. There, they created a prestigious program that was adopted nationwide. Thus, US teacher training came to embrace the belief that our society makes people unhappy, and changing society is the way to be happy. Your teachers were probably trained in this paradigm.

Human emotions are hard to make sense of because they come from a part of the brain that can’t process language. This *limbic system* (the amygdala, hippocampus, pituitary, thalamus, etc.) is basically the same as an animal brain. Animals can’t talk, so your limbic brain can’t tell you in words why it’s releasing a chemical. This is why humans have always been so eager for theories that explain their emotions.

In ancient times, emotions were seen as the gods speaking to you directly. It was hard to disagree with that theory because everyone around you believed it. You’d seem crazy if you questioned it. Over time, new theories kept replacing old ones, but people kept relying on the popular theory to avoid seeming crazy.

The Sense of Crisis

A mental health crisis is widely reported today. Statistics are provided, so it seems like a fact. You're led to believe that society is broken and perhaps you are broken. But all we really know from "the data" is that more people are interpreting their feelings as a disorder. They do this while surrounded by the message that distress is a disorder and that happiness was the norm before "our society" ruined things. We're told that THE Science proves this, so you seem crazy if you question it.

Mental health discussions invoke the greater good, so we should ask ourselves whether the greater good is really served by a theory that makes so many of us defective. More important, is the greater good served by the belief that you are powerless over your brain and should wait for society to make you happy?

When I was young, I was thrilled to discover Psychology, Sociology, and Anthropology. I was sure I'd be happy if I lived by the book of Social Science. But it didn't work, and that's how I came to research the brain chemistry of animals.

I spent most of my life in academia, so I've seen how statistics are produced. I'm like the person who has been inside a sausage factory and now hates to eat sausage. So instead of looking at happiness through the lens of statistics, I looked at basic biology. I found amazing facts about the brain chemicals that make us feel good.

Dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin, and endorphin have specific jobs and are not meant to flow all the time for no reason. They're only released when you see a way to meet a survival need.

In short, it's hard to get happiness from this brain we've inherited. It's a skill that must be developed over a lifetime. You have no reason to learn the skill if you're told that happiness comes automatically for normal people. And you don't learn it if you're trained to believe that you're broken and society must fix it.

When you have the facts, you can build the skill of sparking more happy chemicals. You'd have done it already if you knew how. Indeed, human civilizations have always prized the skill of managing emotions and worked to cultivate it. They just didn't have the facts, so politics filled in the blanks. We are fortunate to live at a time when more facts are available.

But the facts conflict with Rousseauian beliefs. The fact that happy chemicals reward meeting a need conflicts with the belief that good feelings are the natural default state. The fact that our chemicals give us feedback about our surroundings conflicts with the belief that a good society would make you happy all the time. Beliefs can distract us from essential facts, even when we think we are following THE Science. When new facts emerge, we tend to filter them through old beliefs. For example, genes are now seen as a component of happiness, so society is blamed for failing to cure genetic unhappiness.

You can manage your emotions more effectively when you know your biology. You need to know that your happy chemicals are not designed to be on all the time. You need to know that they're sparked by action to meet survival needs. You need to know that your non-verbal brain defines survival needs with neural pathways built from its own experience. And it's essential to know that other people are not getting effortless happy chemicals all the time.

The facts about our threat chemicals are equally important. Our brain evolved in a world full of threats, and threat chemicals helped our ancestors take the action necessary to survive. The bad feeling of cortisol helps people notice potential threats in time to take effective action. Our brain is designed to anticipate threats and to get our attention by blasting us with cortisol. But it's essential to know that each brain defines threats with neural pathways built by its own past cortisol.

Our ancestors felt good sometimes despite the threats around them because happy chemicals were released when they met their needs. Your brain will always create a sense of threat, but you can feel good by taking action to meet your needs.

It's a challenge to feel good with this brain we've inherited. If you were born in a tropical paradise, you'd still face that challenge. You'd keep scanning for potential threats and feeling bad unless you built the skill of focusing on your next step toward meeting a need.

Why doesn't anyone tell you this?

It's politics.

Not politics in the sense of electing leaders, but politics in the sense of saying what's popular to win support. Doctors, academics, therapists, and media win support by conforming to the Rousseauian template. But you get to draw your own conclusions about your own brain.

Rethinking Mental-Health Alarmism

Few people question the disease model of mental health, for many reasons. First, it's presented as THE Science, and you don't want to seem like an anti-science nut. Second, our brain is wired by early experience, so beliefs we're exposed to in youth seem like facts. Finally, you don't have a better alternative. This book gives you an alternative. It explains your power to feel good regardless of what others believe.

Part One shows why unhappiness is natural. It explains the negative side of each "happy" chemical, so you know why good feelings are not meant to flow all the time. You'll see why threat chemicals are there to help you notice risks and obstacles. When you know the biology, you stop seeing it as pathology.

Part Two shows how politics distort THE Science we get from the medical establishment, academic psychology, the "helping professions," and the media. You'll see how

these institutions filter information to meet their own survival needs. They craft messages that fit the Rousseauian paradigm and leave out the rest of the story.

Part Three shows how anyone can spark happy chemicals by building brain-management skills. I have explained this at length in my other books, especially *Habits of a Happy Brain: Retrain your brain to boost your serotonin, dopamine, oxytocin and endorphin levels*. Here, you will find a simple direct method for blazing new trails to your dopamine, serotonin, and oxytocin.

This basic biology is hard to accept because it conflicts with deeply-held beliefs. It feels good to believe that animals, children, and hunter-gatherers are always happy. But the popular view cuts you off from the reality of your internal impulses. This book shows you the evidence that animals, children, and hunter-gatherers are unhappy, a lot. These facts will help you understand your inner mammal, so you can better manage it.

Politics won't go away because it's a natural human impulse. Every family has politics because siblings campaign for parental approval. Every company has politics as employees campaign for promotions. Every scientific discipline has politics as researchers campaign to advance their careers. Mass media are rooted in politics as journalists campaign for numbers and awards. Even in a dictatorship, people campaign for a slice of the leader's wealth and power.

In a democracy, politicians campaign for your vote by appealing to your unhappiness and promising to fix it. You hear this so often that it shapes your beliefs about happiness. It trains you to blame your unhappiness on external forces and ignore your internal wiring. It trains you to expect society to make you happy or else deliver “treatment” that cures unhappiness. You learn to seek happiness through politics instead of biology.

It’s hard to feel responsible for your chemicals once you’ve learned to see happiness as an entitlement. It’s hard to believe in your skill-building power once you think you have a disorder. But you’re likely to be unhappy if you accept the popular view of emotions. So it’s great to know that with effort, you can build the skill of sparking more happy chemicals.

Re-thinking What Is Natural

In the 1960s, feminists said that “the personal is political.” “Studies” were created to show that the political system is to blame for our personal woes. I accepted this mindset when I was young because I looked up to my teachers. And what young person doesn’t like the idea that fighting the system will make you happy? But as the decades went by, I kept stumbling on evidence that conflicted with the Rousseauian view. Here’s a simple example.

I was asked to donate money to a mountain lion sanctuary while working as a docent at my local zoo. It was explained as a way to rescue wildcats who wander into residential areas. I asked why they didn't just bring the animals back to nature. No answer came, so I repeated the question a few times. Finally, I was told that a mountain lion would be killed instantly by the lion whose territory it landed in.

I knew this was true because I'd read about territoriality in old biology books. I learned that animals kill their own kind for a long list of reasons. Indeed, they attack whenever they think they'd win. Animals rarely fight because they're so good at predicting who would win. Cortisol motivates the likely loser to back down when it perceives its relative weakness. Rousseauians call this "living in peace," but that's not an honest portrayal of the facts.

In my years at the zoo, I learned that zookeepers love animals but hate to acknowledge the reality of animal aggression. So they take precautions to protect their animals, but don't acknowledge the reason for the precautions. They'll build a fence around an animal without saying that its neighbor would kill it without the fence. They invent heart-warming euphemisms to explain the fences. I heard a lot of euphemisms in my five years at the zoo. (More on that in my book *Status Games*.)

The territorial impulse got my attention again on a visit to Medellin, Columbia. A tour-guide told us that the city's violence ended when a gondola was built from the city

center to the hilltop slums. She said the gondola finally gave young people access to downtown. I asked her why people couldn't go downtown before. She avoided the question, so I repeated it a few times. Finally she said there were buses, but the road went through different gang territories, and kids were killed on the bus as it went through another gang's neighborhood. Then, she pointed to a library on the hilltop and said that the violence stopped when the government gave the people a library. This suggests that people were killing each other for lack of a library. Euphemisms are appealing because the truth is not appealing.

I am not saying that violence is inevitable. I am saying that negativity comes easily to this brain we've inherited, so positivity is a skill that each new generation must learn. When we believe that peace and love are the automatic default state, we don't see the need to teach the skill. Realistic information about human nature is needed to make good choices.

Violence is less common today than it was in the past, though it doesn't look that way if you watch the news. Most people learn to restrain the might-makes-right impulse that we've inherited from earlier mammals. But we don't know that because our information on earlier mammals is filtered through a Rousseauian lens.

Toddlers fight over toys with the survival impulses of our primal ancestors. Each toddler must learn to restrain these impulses or they will carry them into adulthood. We

are not born with emotion-regulation skills. We're born with the capacity to learn from experience. A baby has billions of neurons but very few connections between them. Connections build with each experience, especially when an experience triggers your chemicals. Neuroplasticity peaks in youth, so early experience builds the major highways in your brain. We can reroute a highway later on, but it takes so much work that it doesn't happen much. We are shaped by early experience more than we like to think. For people to avoid violence, each newborn brain must learn to manage its own negativity.

Yet our trusted institutions slice information in ways that obscure the non-Rousseauian facts of life.

Medical schools do not teach about the job our brain chemicals do in animals. Your doctor was trained in the disease model of mental health. They learned to disease-ify your chemicals without learning their natural healthy functions.

Academic psychology does not teach the biology explained in this book. It focuses on the belief that "our society is the problem." It blames corporations for hacking your dopamine instead of helping you manage your dopamine. It seeks oxytocin from group hugs and ignores the true dynamics of a mammalian herd or pack or troop. It produces evidence of a mental health epidemic without acknowledging the self-reported core of the statistics.

Therapists have a different kind of politics. They tell you what you want to hear today in hopes of having an impact

tomorrow. And they adhere to academic trends in order to be blessed as “evidence-based.” If their clients and academic supervisors want the “blame-society” model, then that’s what the well-intentioned helping professions give us.

Journalists reinforce the disease model of mental health with frequent alerts about “warning signs.” It’s not surprising that so many people see signs in themselves or others and conclude that something is wrong with them.

I learned the facts about the mammal brain by reading decades-old research that had been overlooked. I read a lot of evolutionary biology and cognitive psychology, and connected the dots. I was able to do that because I had taken early retirement from my academic career.

Life suddenly made sense to me when I understood the mammalian roots of our emotions. I knew this information could help people, so I decided to share it as widely as possible. Academics have not shown much interest in my work, and I understand their constraints because I lived them myself. Some journalists expressed interest in my work, but they mostly wanted “tips” to “hack” the chemicals. My doctor doesn’t know the natural job of our happy brain chemicals, but my doctor is not responsible for my happiness. As for therapists, I am grateful that they’ve helped me look beneath my verbal veneer, even if they tried to implant their own models.

The inner mammal perspective has caught on with individuals rather than institutions. A person can quickly feel the truth of this information when they hear it. People

often tell me they felt like a weight was lifted and their emotional confusion disappeared once they heard this information. They often tell me that it changed their perspective on everything and they see life in a more light-hearted way. And they tell me that they want to spread this view to others.

It would be nice if there were a fast, easy way to enjoy happy chemicals, but this book shows why there is not. Our brain saves the happy chemicals for survival-relevant moments, as defined by neural pathways built from your own past experience. Knowing this frees you from an unrealistic quest for “hacks.” It frees you to invest your effort in steps toward meeting your needs, because that’s what sparks happy chemicals.

You may dislike this new perspective at first. You may prefer to blame society for your unhappiness, and insist that researchers can’t all be weaving data to fit the peace-and-love template. You may call me a conspiracy theorist. But where does that leave you? Waiting for society to make you happy and give you “the right treatment”? Your life passes by as you wait.

You could be happier right now if you understood your biology. Your happy chemicals will always dip after they spurt because they’re not designed to be on all the time. Your unhappy chemicals will always be there because your brain evolved to scan for potential threats. But when you understand your natural operating system, you can manage it more effectively. Instead of waiting for doctors,

academics, therapists, and journalists to give you the facts, you can just turn the page.

