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# BUILDING BLOCKS OF HAPPINESS

## Section 1: If you can name your feelings, you can tame your feelings

### Emotion exploration

Google for something called an “emotion wheel”. Learning how to properly identify how we feel is the first step to making sense of our experience of life.

To “know yourself” you must go beyond labeling your feelings in simple terms like “happy”, “sad” or “angry”. Instead of angry, use specific words like “frustrated”, “irritated”, “resentful”.

**Exercise 1: Choose a recent experience you’ve had (e.g., a friend’s wedding), but don’t name your feelings just yet. Describe what happened.**

Use the RAIN technique to quickly label what’s happening wherever you are.

**Recognise:** “I’m jealous.”

**Acknowledge:** It’s okay. I’m not my feelings. I’m the observer of my feelings.

**Investigate:** Where do I feel it? (e.g. stomach) What triggered it? (e.g. friend’s wedding)

Nurture: What do I need? (e.g. a plan to find a partner of your own to marry, self-compassion)

## **Exercise 2: Name your feelings using RAIN**

Feelings need to be expressed. If you're angry then your anger must be expressed. Boxing is a good way to release anger. Crying would be an excellent way to release the pain of loss.

## **Exercise 3: How would you prefer to give a voice to your feelings? (e.g. journaling, screaming into the void)**

Remember that when you are clinically depressed your ability to properly tune into your feelings becomes disrupted. Seek medical care.

## **Exercise 4: A deeper look**

Open ChatGPT ([chatgpt.com](https://chatgpt.com)). Share your experience with ChatGPT (see question 1) and include your feelings (see question 2).

Share the experience with ChatGPT first, then ask it the following question:

*“Based on this experience, can you help me understand what core beliefs might be underlying my reactions?”*

Write down anything it says that might be worth investigating.

## End of section 1

### Section 2: The Glass Metaphor

#### Exercise 1: Body-scan check-in – how alert are you?

If your fight/flight system is on “red alert” then you are likely to have tension somewhere in the body. It’s usually the shoulders or neck for me. Notice any areas of tension (e.g. jaw, neck, chest). Assign a colour to yourself. Green if you’re feeling relaxed. Yellow if you’re feeling stressed. Red if you’re numb and dissociated.

#### Exercise 2: Name 3 things you see, 2 you feel, and 1 you hear

There's a part of your nervous system that we call the 'parasympathetic' nervous system. We can activate it by controlling our breathing or rather, our attention. It can help you find calm in moments of stress. By naming what we're experiencing we can reclaim our attention.



### **Exercise 3: Breathing exercise**

Breathe in, but don't force it. Then hold for 7 seconds. Let go slowly and don't count. Hold your empty lungs for 5 seconds. Then breathe in again. Don't count. Hold for 7 seconds. Repeat instructions a few times until you get the hang of it.

### **Exercise 4: Meditation**

Do the previous exercise again, but this time whenever your mind starts to wander off you bring your attention back to your breathing. That's what meditation is, it's reclaiming your attention. It's not about emptying your mind.

It takes daily practice to reap the benefits of meditation. It took me almost a 150 days to see a genuine benefit! Doing it once won't help much, if at all, like how going to the gym once won't make a difference. Today we are solely focused on learning the basics.

TIP: I use *Insight Timer* every morning when I wake up.

### **Exercise 5: Reprogramming core beliefs**

Your experiences shape the way you think. That's not your fault. If your mom was particularly cruel to you about your weight, you'll have a little voice inside your head telling you that being fat is a bad thing. That voice is not you. It's just a copy of your mom's voice. You are the observer. To update the beliefs associated with those experiences you need to introduce new ones. In section 3 you will learn why you need to do this repeatedly for it to have any effect.

I start my day with the beliefs I want to program myself with.

- I'm not my thoughts and feelings. I'm the observer of my thoughts and feelings.
- I suffer more in imagination than in reality.

- There's no future. There's no past. There's only today.
- I love you. I'm listening.

The soul becomes dyed with the colour of your thoughts. What thoughts do you want living inside your subconscious mind?



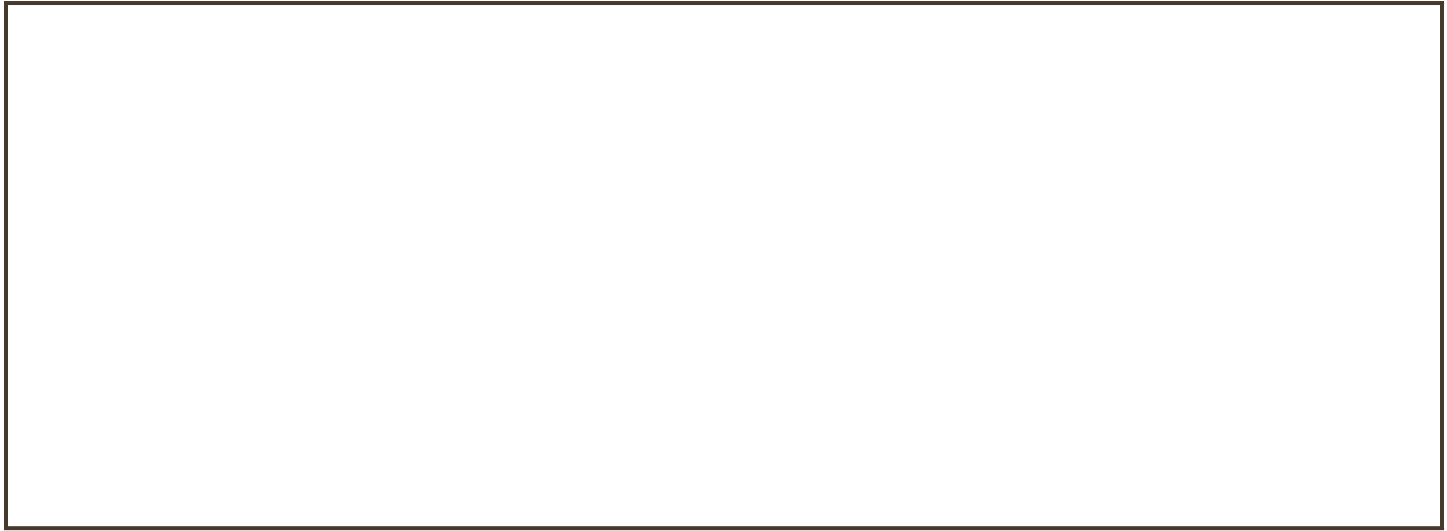
## **Exercise 5: Reflecting on reality**

I often tell myself that I'm suffering more in imagination than in reality. I get angry a lot about a past I can't change. Meditation allows me to stop ruminating about things I can't control. I'm usually surrounded by soft things, like a bed or a cat. The present is rarely uncomfortable.

Choose something you're upset with. Those feelings will continue to rule you if you don't name them and express them (see section 1). You need to keep naming them and eventually you'll be able to just briefly tell yourself "I'm feeling X" and move on.

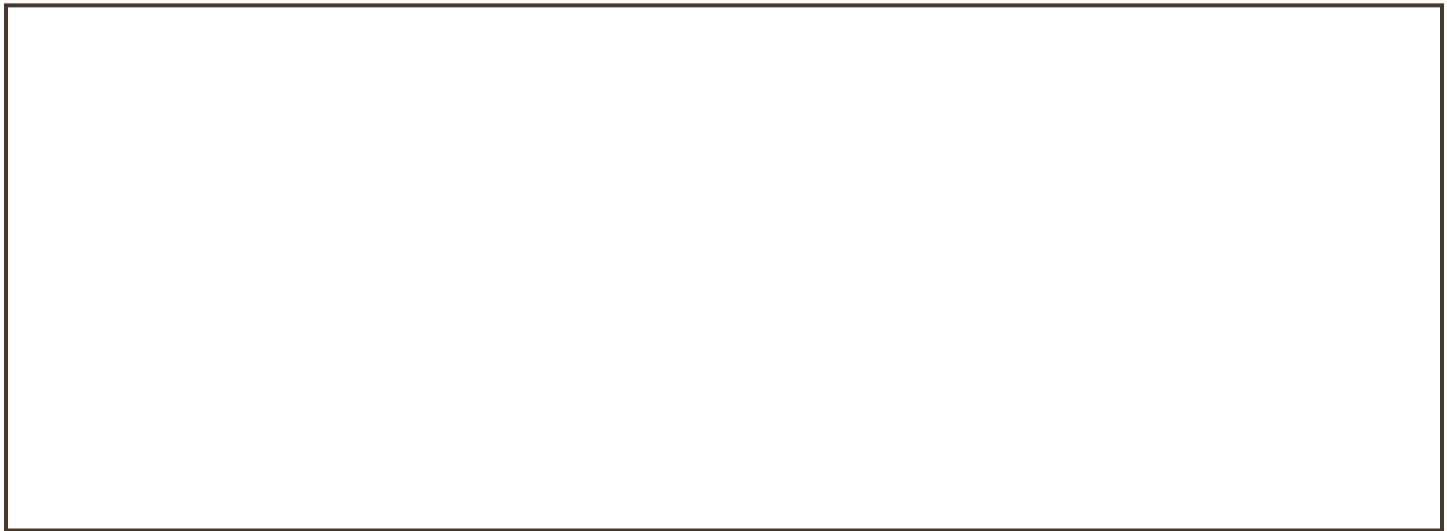
For example, I will always love a woman named Julia. I miss her every day. When that wave of grief hits me I tell myself, "I miss you" and move on with my day. When my grief is particularly bad I tell myself she's not actually "here". I notice where I am, what I'm actually surrounded by, and end by telling myself I'm suffering more in my imagination than in reality.

Try to do the same in the box below. Identify some experience, and then walk through the same steps.



**Exercise 6: Visualising nervous system health**

Draw a glass inside the rectangle. How full is your glass today? Draw cracks or missing pieces if you're feeling mildly depressed. Draw a broken glass if you're severely depressed. Remember that a broken glass can't be healed in the short-term. It takes years, if not decades.



We can heal the nervous system through exercise, meditation, and proper rest (e.g. sleep, moderating stress). Those things become impossible if the right ingredients aren't available to you (e.g. access to healthy food, gym, or a comfy bed), or the oven is too hot (e.g. poverty, toxic work environment, abusive partner). People who can't heal due to their circumstances deserve your compassion.

**End of section 2**

**Section 3: Behaviour modification**

**Human learning (environmental)**

Human learning happens through observation, abstract reasoning, problem solving and conditioning. Think of conditioning as a “type of programming” because we’re “copy machines”. It’s important to understand how you have been conditioned by your environment to think the way that you do. Putin has gained control of America through the process of conditioning. Every day social media is programming you to think a certain way. Understanding how this works lessens its power over you.

You need 6 “ingredients” for conditioning to occur: stimulus, response, repetition, time, intensity, and consistency.

**Stimulus:** Anything that makes you react. If you smell cookies baking in the oven, then you might start to feel hungry or excited. The smell is the stimulus.

**Response:** Reaction to the stimulus (e.g. fear, pain, avoidance). The excitement over getting to eat cookies is the response.

There are two ways for a Stimulus to become a Conditioned Stimulus: **Intensity** (a traumatic event would be High Intensity) or **Repetition** (doing it often enough).

**Conditioned Stimulus:** *Anything* associated with the **response** will trigger a reaction from you.

### Question 1:

Imagine a scenario where a person develops a fear of dogs after being bitten as a child. Identify the stimulus (1), conditioned stimulus (2), and response (3).

## Operant Conditioning

You offer your kid a cookie (stimulus). You wait for a polite reply (response). If you **consistently** provide the right “ingredients” then eventually the child will learn that being polite leads to positive outcomes. **Over time**, they will learn to reply politely in most other circumstances where that’s expected from them (e.g. after receiving cash back from the cashier). This learning process, where behaviour is shaped by rewards or consequences, is called operant conditioning.

## Question 2:

Consider a situation where a teacher rewards students with praise whenever they answer questions correctly. How does operant conditioning explain the students' likelihood to participate in class? What might happen if the teacher stops giving praise?

## Question 3: What experiences have shaped your thinking?

What do you believe about other people who don't share your experience of life (experiences that have conditioned you to think a certain way) – like gay people, people of other religions, or people who live differently than you— that might be false? Remember, you're not your thoughts. What would happen if you challenged that belief, even just for a moment?

## Habits (a result of conditioning)

All habits can be broken up into 3 “ingredients”.

## Question 4: What are those 3 “ingredients”?

- A. Trigger, Routine, Feedback
- B. Cue, Routine, Reward



- C. Stimulus, Response, Outcome
- D. Cue, Action, Emotion

**Question 5: Which of the following best describes a “cue” in a habit loop?**

- A. The behavior you perform automatically
- B. The feeling of satisfaction after completing the habit
- C. The trigger that initiates the behaviour
- D. The plan for breaking the habit

**Question 6: Why is it important to understand the reward?**

- A. Because rewards have no impact on behavior
- B. Because rewards drive the repetition of a habit
- C. Because rewards are only important for good habits
- D. Because rewards determine the initial cue

**Exercise 7:**

Imagine you want to replace the habit of snacking on junk food every time you watch TV. Identify a potential cue, the routine, and a healthier reward that could replace your current habit loop.

**Bonus exercise (difficult): How would you modify your behaviour such that you become *addicted* to running?**

Think first before reading the answer.

**Answer:** You could start wearing a nicotine patch every time you go running. Eventually you'll become addicted to the nicotine and you'll associate that Cue with the desire to go running. You're very likely to go running every time you feel the Cue.

There are many possible answers here. I just wanted to highlight an absurd one that would absolutely work.

Correct answers to multiple choice: 4B, 5C, 6B.

## End of section 3

### Section 4: How to direct your life

#### How to find your "crew"

The people you hang out directly determine how far you'll go and how content you are with your life. There are some exceptions. Some people really don't derive any happiness from relationships, but in general, the strength of your relationships determine how happy and healthy you'll be in life. You could say you're the sum of your five closest relationships.

You can find your people by reflecting on your values and aligning your actions with those values. That requires emotional awareness. That's what section number 1 was all about. Google for a list of values to help you do this. Or use ChatGPT. Then list your top 5 or top 10 values down below along with the things you're doing that reflect those values. For example, if you value your health, do you actually eat healthy and exercise?

#### Question 1: List your values + actions that align with those values

## How to build a “hull”

The hull is what shapes your boat. It’s reflection of your habits and behaviours. The strength of your relationships is what determines how resilient you are in life. Don’t go at it alone. You can’t face the cruelty and unpredictability of the sea alone. You’ll die young. The studies are very clear about longevity. Those with the healthiest relationships live the longest and happiest lives. Your crew plays a significant role in how strong your boat (hull) becomes. Remember, your habits are a result of your conditioning, which is anyone you hang out with.

## Question 2: Reflect on what behaviours you think are pushing people away

## Question 3: Reflect on what behaviours need to be replaced to build a stronger boat

Section 3 covers how to replace habits.

## How to find your purpose – create it

The most beautiful thing about being a human being is our ability to create. We can use Self-Determination Theory to reflect on the type of work we should focus on. You need autonomy, competence, and relatedness to live a fulfilling work life.

Relatedness – you identify with your work, you care about it, and you’re surrounded by people who share your values, who appreciate the work you’re doing.

Autonomy – you feel like your work makes a difference, you feel empowered, like you have agency in life, you’re free.

Competence – you need to be good at what you do for you to enjoy what it is you do. Following your passion is only good advice if you have life experience, otherwise it’s way better to find out what you’re good at first.

Be so good they can’t ignore you.

### Identify what you are good at.

## **Who do you know who could introduce you to someone who would value your skills?**

If you can't identify anyone you'll need to network. Networking means hanging out with people who value the same things you do.

## **Identify a cause**

When you associate yourself with a cause (e.g. sustainability, LGBTQ+ visibility, any societal goal) then you won't care what company you work for. You'll feel fulfilled because you're working on something you care about, something that aligns with your talents and vision of the future.

Pick a societal goal that you'd like to make progress on.

## **Facing the unknown of the "Sea" - Solution: Trust + Curiosity**

I don't see life as having "challenges", just opportunities to learn about life. You need to let go of your expectations for life and embrace the great unknown.

1. Become the observer of your experience of life.
2. Stop giving a fuck about the outcome of any decision you make and simply observe what happens. This is what scientists do as a profession.

## **Question: How will you choose to "roll the dice" next week?**

Have you been afraid to ask someone out? Roll the dice. See what happens.

Have you been afraid to ask for a raise? Roll the dice. See what happens.

Have you been afraid to speak in public? Roll the dice. See what happens.

The only way to learn is through failure and observing what happens. Then trying to do it better next time. Choose what you'll "roll the dice" on next week.

### **Facing a boring "Sea" - Solution: Finding inspiration**

The way I solve boredom is to go search for inspiration. I find it in *beauty*. That could be a person's beauty, which inspires my poetry, or it could be that of my cat, which inspires lots of picture taking. Doing this every day lets me appreciate the life I'm living. It's not the only solution to facing a boring "sea", but I really like this one.

### **Question: Who or what inspires you?**