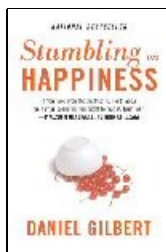


\*\*\* WE ARE CLOSED. THANK YOU FOR YOUR PATRONAGE. \*\*\*



**Book Review**  
**Stumbling on Happiness**  
by [Daniel Gilbert](#)

Reviewer: [Geoff Wisner](#), Staff Reviewer  
Posted: December 10, 2007

What makes us happy? And why do we do such a poor job answering that question? These are the topics addressed with considerable insight, and a lot of jokes, in *Stumbling on Happiness* by Daniel Gilbert, a professor of psychology at Harvard. Rather than try to reproduce Gilbert's argument, I will just touch on some of the observations and

conclusions that I found most interesting.

The wisdom of a decision, the Dutch thinker Daniel Bernoulli once proposed, can be calculated by multiplying the probability that it will give us the result we want and the utility (goodness or pleasure) we will derive from that result.

However, we are not very good at making that calculation. Reasons for this include social influence (like the popular idea that children make you happy), rationalizations about bad things that happen to you (I didn't want to marry that guy anyway), and presentism (assuming the things that make you happy now are the same things that made you happy in the past, and will make you happy in the future).

Many things that make us happy have a diminishing utility. The tenth doughnut doesn't taste as good as the first one, and studies have shown that once we have enough money to raise ourselves from poverty to the middle class, amassing additional money doesn't have much effect on our happiness.

Children don't make people happier. Four studies produced remarkably similar graphs of happiness in couples, showing a dramatic drop after the first child is born, and an upward tendency once the children have moved out.

Some studies have shown that people of different ethnic groups vary in their happiness. For instance, Asian Americans score low on the happiness meter while Latinos score high. However, this seems to have a lot to do with cultural definitions of happiness. If you ask Asians and Latinos to rate their happiness at the moment (instead of in general) you find that one is generally about as happy as another.

People value things more after they own them than before, and especially when they are stuck with them. When people are given a choice between two gifts, they value the one they have chosen more when they cannot exchange it for something else.

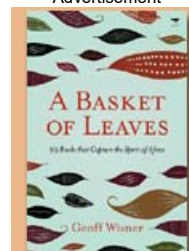
People are often hurt more by small losses than by large ones, apparently because a large loss triggers our psychological defense mechanisms while a smaller one does not. This is one reason why a wife may forgive a husband for infidelity but remain irritated by the fact that he leaves the toilet seat up. (As with many of the claims in this book, one could come up with an alternative explanation: for instance, that a wife might accept infidelity for the sake of the children or her own economic dependence on her husband, but that her anger and resentment would come out in other ways such as the toilet seat.)

People are less upset by decisions they made that turned out badly than by the times when they failed to act and things turned out badly. As with large losses versus small ones, we have better defense mechanisms for action than for inaction. It's easier to say, Well, I lost everything on that investment, but at least I had the courage to take a shot, than it is to say, If I'd only had the nerve to buy that Microsoft IPO, I'd be rich today.

With all these psychological distortions getting in the way, what can we do to identify and act on the things that will make us happy? Gilbert has an answer, but predicts we won't like it.

Instead of using our imaginations to decide what will make us happy, Gilbert suggests that we use other people as surrogates for ourselves. That is, the best general gauge of our future happiness is to determine what makes other people happy in similar circumstances. But to accept this idea flies against our deeply held convictions about how unusual, extraordinary, and even superior we are.

Advertisement





99 Books that Capture the Spirit of Africa  
—A literary tour of the best books from every country in Africa  
A new book by Geoff Wisner

Science has given us a lot of facts about the average person, writes Gilbert, and one of the most reliable of these facts is that the average person doesn't see herself as average. Most of us think we're smarter, healthier, and more attractive than the average person. By recognizing our own averageness, Gilbert argues, and accepting that what makes others happy may make us happy too, we may have the best shot at maximizing our own happiness.

#### About the Reviewer

Geoff Wisner is a freelance writer and staff member of Indigocafe.com. He is the author of [A Basket of Leaves: 99 Books That Capture the Spirit of Africa](#). Visit his website at [www.geoffwisner.com](http://www.geoffwisner.com).

posted by: <a href="#">Geoff</a>   <a href="#">more from this member</a>		<a href="#">Print Article</a> 
1 Comments		[ <a href="#">Add Your Comment</a> ]
<b>Jenn</b>  Struggling to be the change I want to see in the world	Posted: Dec 14, 2007 - 08:28 AM <hr/> This gives me a lot to think about... Though, you're right, it is a bit hard to swallow. Happiness is such an elusive concept.	

"Be the change you want to see in the world."  
—Mahatma Gandhi

[Home](#) | [The Bookstore](#) | [The Café](#) | [Columns & Reviews](#)  
[Advanced Search](#) | [Specials](#) | [Gift Certificates](#) | [Become an Affiliate](#)  
[Your Account](#) | [Your Shopping Bag](#) | [Your Bookshelf](#)

Copyright © 2005 - 2008 [Indigo Café & Books, Inc.](#) All rights reserved.  
[Comments? Questions?](#) | [Policies & Terms of Use](#) | [Help](#) | [Advertise with us](#)

[StatCounter - Free Web Tracker and Counter](#)