

WHY CAN'T WE ALL BE HAPPY?

5 PRACTICAL STEPS TO
UNLOCK YOUR INNER HAPPINESS
AND HELP CHANGE THE WORLD

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Printed in Egypt by Barakat for Bookstores
Arkan Plaza extension, Sheikh Zayed, Giza, Egypt
www.bibliothek-eg.com

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ISBN 978-977-86641-4-0

Dar El Kutub No. 10923/2025
Dar El Kutub Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Co-edited by Rania Badreldin and Hana Seifelnasr

Special thanks to Hussein Seifelnasr

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PREFACE

Born in the summer of '69 (just like the Bryan Adams song), I was a little girl from Egypt who learned to be afraid to use her voice. That little girl learned not to trust herself, or life itself for that matter. She learned that she had to constantly prove herself through impressive accomplishments and to hide or ignore her negative emotions in order to maintain her positive and 'strong' exterior. She learned to feel ashamed because she made mistakes and wasn't 'perfect'.

That little girl is not so little anymore. Here I am decades later, having done the unlearning that I needed to do through an often rough journey of self-awareness. Here I am, being unapologetically myself, using my voice, believing that I fully deserve happiness, and making it my reality!

This book is to encourage you to do the same and guide you through your journey. In doing so, it aims to set us, as one humanity, collectively on a happier path.

For as long as I can remember, I have wanted to see people happy and getting along. Yet we live in a world where people increasingly struggle with their mental health and, whether on the scale of households or nations, people so often do not get along. Despite an abundance of self-help books, gurus, life coaches, and mental health practitioners, individual and collective unhappiness is rampant.

Most people struggle in one area or another, whether it's their career, family, relationships, personal development, spirituality, or health and fitness. They may feel anxious, depressed, overwhelmed or stuck and have most likely tried different solutions to no avail.

At the same time, the state of the world is often sad and unimaginably horrifying. Things like justice, freedom, dignity,

and peace, which every human being has a right to, are inaccessible to far too many. Wars that should be a thing of the past still occur with a complete disregard for the sanctity of human life.

We are at a critical juncture. We need new solutions, and we need them now. It's time to take action towards a happier world, and that starts inside each one of us.

It's time to question everything we have learned and been conditioned to believe about ourselves, others and the world at large. As children, we are unbiased, innocent and curious about the world, incessantly asking "why" until we are shut down and told to stop questioning and listen to what we are told. Let's go back to the child inside each one of us and give them a chance to ask questions again and perhaps even give us some insight into what it was like before society taught us to judge, hate, be greedy and value power over people.

Join me in contemplating the childlike question: "Why Can't We All Be Happy"?

Growing up, I often contemplated happiness, especially other people's. I didn't think much about my own happiness and wore this almost like a badge of honor, as though something was wrong with that, as though that was somehow selfish.

Human pain and suffering have always affected me deeply, and I felt a strong responsibility to end this pain and suffering and make others happy. However, in doing so, I often found myself feeling hopelessly miserable. It took time, but I came to understand that I cannot be responsible for the happiness of others. I can't just sit around and watch others struggle, though. So what can I do? How can I help people? This question has been at the heart of my life's work.

As a scared mom-to-be at 21, I was able to transform my fear into excitement through the knowledge I gained during my pregnancy. This personal transformation led me to pioneer

women's and children's well-being in Egypt, leveraging my childhood passion for writing. Little did I know at the time that this would lead to a long and successful career in publishing and development that has spanned decades. With my business degree and high level of empathy, social entrepreneurship was a no-brainer. The impact of my social enterprise grew exponentially over the years and continues to grow, with ripple effects on millions of families throughout Egypt as we have pivoted and adapted to changing landscapes and needs.

Yet, despite our extensive positive impact, I was dissatisfied and frustrated. In my mind, at the time, I wasn't doing enough and therefore, I wasn't good enough. There were millions more that I could help and I wasn't helping them all. And so I continued to push myself. And I continued to feel dissatisfied and frustrated. I had many low dips and became ill at times, and I had highs when I felt proud of our accomplishments even if they "weren't enough". I stayed stuck in this cycle until I learned better.

I finally learned that the most helpful thing I could do for others, and naturally myself, was to take charge of my happiness first and, from there, spread it all around. While we cannot be responsible for the happiness of others, just as others cannot be responsible for our happiness, we *can* have a positive influence on it. As human beings, I believe we have a moral obligation to do so to the best of our ability.

Happiness starts with you. From there, as contagious as happiness can be, your happiness can improve all our lives simply by being yourself!

True happiness is not only a personal journey but a powerful catalyst for positive change. As it brings out the best in us, it has a ripple effect, benefiting everyone around us. For instance, a happy individual is more likely to be kind and compassionate, which can positively impact their relationships and their community. When we grasp the true essence of happiness, we not only lead more fulfilling lives but also contribute to a

happier world, empowered by the belief that our happiness has the power to influence the collective happiness of humanity.

It took decades, but I finally learned the importance of prioritizing my happiness and taking charge of it. However, in order to do that, I had to overcome a tiny little obstacle first: I had to believe that I deserved to be happy!

Although I had generally thought of myself as a happy person, I became aware that I carried so much guilt and shame inside of me, as well as a sense of not being good enough, that I didn't think I deserved to be happy. Not to mention having what, in retrospect, was a minimal understanding of what happiness actually is!

And so I did the inner work I needed to do, with accepting myself at the heart of it, and I set out to study the topic of happiness, learning more and more as I went along about what both science and age-old wisdom say happiness is (and isn't). More importantly, I became clear about what happiness means to me specifically.

I began to realize that the more there was inside me, the more there was outside me. So, when I filled myself with love, I began to experience more love outside of me. When I cleared the space for peace, letting go of what was no longer serving me, I experienced peace both internally and externally.

As it turns out, I was going about happiness the wrong way. After years of exhaustion, frustration, overwhelm, and confusion, I finally learned how to master my thoughts and emotions and align my actions to the things that matter the most to me. I learned how to move freely through life, gliding super slowly at times and soaring at others, in all cases consciously moving.

My happiness learning curve has been steep. I have trained in and healed through Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), Hypnotherapy,¹ and Time Line Therapy,² and have attended numerous courses focused on happiness.³ After making a career shift to become a happiness consultant, I worked closely

with many individuals who sought my guidance. Additionally, I have learned from some of the world's most prominent thought leaders in the field. Over the years, I worked zealously to crack the code on what makes happy people happy.

Much like the detectives and private investigators I had spent most of my life reading about or watching on screen, I was intent on solving the mystery for myself and others! And much like them, I was certainly not going to rest easy without sharing my findings.

I'm writing this book to share my most important learnings with you so that you can take charge and set yourself firmly and gracefully on your happy path! This book has been ages in the making. It's the first of many unwritten books to come to light. In the end, it's the one that was meant to be written first. In it, I guide you through five steps towards a happier, more fulfilling life, one that contributes to our collective well-being. I have tried and tested these five steps through the most challenging times of my life, and they have withstood the test. I hope you also find value in them and that you find some insight or inspiration in all seven parts of this book.

Throughout the book, I share personal experiences, research, tips and insights. In addition, you'll also find sections with invaluable practical exercises for you to explore at the end of the first six parts. This is where you will move from theory to practice and do the most essential and potentially transformational work. I invite you to entertain my ideas and suggestions, even if you don't get behind all of them. Most importantly, get behind yourself!

This book is best read in its entirety because it builds upon itself and evolves, with some necessary overlap and repetition, just as we build upon ourselves and evolve as we go along. I elaborate on many things at later points in the book, so if you are unclear on something in one chapter, hang in there; you might find the answer in the next.

As you work on your happiness, I urge you to align it with your humanity. This alignment ensures that as you thrive, others can thrive, too. Happiness that is disconnected from our humanity or that disregards fellow human beings is not true happiness. A holistic approach to happiness that considers the well-being of all is crucial.

And now it's time for your journey through this book to begin! It's over and out from me for now, and I'll see you inside!

READY, SET, GO!

Chapter 1

The Fundamentals

Fundamental #1

Everyone deserves to be happy.

First things first, let's acknowledge that happiness is important and that we all deserve to be happy. That includes you! And it includes all other human beings.

So tell me, do you agree?

If you are not 100% sure, are you at least open to the idea?

If you aren't, I encourage you to open up to it as you go through this book.

As a little girl, there was an exercise that I would often do. I can still see it in my mind: I'm in the back seat of my parent's car with my father driving and my mother sitting next to him. We're on the Maadi *corniche* (Maadi is a suburb in Cairo, Egypt, where I'm from, and the *corniche* is a road along the Nile River). The Nile is to our left, and an overcrowded public bus is to our right as we drive towards downtown Cairo. A man is sticking out the bus door, which is bursting with commuters. A veiled lady with a child on her lap looks out the bus window, and the two children (me and her child) exchange glances. Suddenly, I would wish I wasn't in our car (not that it was super fancy, but it was a car). There was a sense of shame and injustice that would hit me and that I didn't know what to do with.

I would spend much of the car ride entertaining myself (although it would often be uncomfortable) by noticing the other cars. When I found one that had a child in the backseat,

and that was not as fancy as ours, I would imagine myself being that child. I would pretend I was in their car and imagine where they might be going, where they lived, and what their life was like. It was always a less privileged life. Over time, I suppose that is how I developed a strong sense of empathy, and, inadvertently, a sense of shame and guilt along with it. It made me uncomfortable to have more than some people, even when I also had less than others.

Unconsciously, I was deciding to play small and stay small because, somehow, that seemed more fair to others.

I was preoccupied with the less fortunate, the underdog. I was quick to counter-argue and defend those who were less represented, sometimes simply because they were. I wanted to be a voice for the voiceless. But none of these efforts appeased me. I still didn't understand why some things were the way they were or what I could do about it.

As a result, I struggled for most of my life. I struggled to make sense of life and define my role in it. I struggled with an unrealistic sense of responsibility and, along with it, a sense of urgency in the face of injustice, both of which brought on feelings of inadequacy, desperation, and helplessness.

The truth was, I was privileged. And even though my parents carried privilege beautifully and humbly, I was embarrassed. I resisted that privilege, and as a result, I developed money mindset issues, self-worth issues, and the self-inflicted burden of performing at the highest possible standards at all times.

It all boiled down to the same thing. I didn't realize it then, but I wanted everyone to have a fair chance at happiness. Deep in my heart, I knew that everyone deserved it. But was that possible?

I know now how it might be.

For most of my life, I had closed the door on receiving because I didn't know how to do so gracefully, and I didn't want to receive

too much or the wrong things. I wanted things to be fair and just, but in my effort to make sure they were, I overdid it. Erring on the side of caution, I overcompensated by allowing myself to receive the bare minimum as I gave my maximum.

But if I want things to be fair, shouldn't they also be fair to me? What happened to win-win? My self-sabotaging default mode often had me accept win-lose situations. Didn't I deserve to win, too? It took deep-level work to get to the bottom of it, but in the end, as is often the case, it boiled down to a belief that had gotten wired in my mind.

In this case, the belief was that I don't deserve to be happy.

Wait, what?! When I realized that I held this belief (you don't know what you don't know, until you do), my rational mind immediately questioned it. I don't deserve to be happy? Why *not*?

I worked through all the answers that came up. I questioned the thoughts and unraveled the past traumas and the lessons mislearned along the way.

I rose with my new belief:

Everyone deserves to be happy (including *me* and *you*).

Fast forward decades later, the little girl in the back seat of the car has turned everything around. I have let go of the guilt and shame, and at the same time, I am full of compassion, able to take inspired action to help others while being realistic about what I can control and what I can't. I no longer give in to a scarcity mindset, recognizing that abundance is all around, for all of us, and that the more I thrive, the more others thrive.

I deserve to be happy, and you do too. And please don't feel that you have to take my word for it. Let me share a bit about the history of happiness and what others have said about this important topic over the years!

Happiness has been a topic of thought and discussion for over 2500 years, dating back to the teachings of Confucius, Buddhism, Taoism, and the insights of the Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, to name a few. It was primarily believed to be out of our hands, a privilege that only a lucky few might ever attain. It was thought to be synonymous with dignity, humanity towards others, compassion and the sum of a virtuous life. Going to the other extreme, European philosophers later took a hedonistic viewpoint and defined happiness as sensory pleasures and the absence of pain. The 17th and 18th centuries then saw a happiness revolution that bridged this gap. It brought us to today's belief that *everyone has a right to be happy*, that happiness is about more than pleasure alone and that it is in our hands and a skill that can be developed.¹

This realization is liberating because it means we have the power to shape and improve our lives if we choose to. Are you ready to make that choice?

PRIORITIZING HAPPINESS

I find that happiness is so underrated!

It's something we want and wish upon others. You often hear us say "Happy Birthday," "Happy Anniversary," "Happy New Year," "I hope you will live happily ever after" and so on. It's what almost every parent out there wants for their child. It's what practically every client I have done deep-level work with has revealed that they want for themselves. Yet we seldom talk about happiness, think about it or align our actions to it. Why is that? Does that make sense? If we want something, don't we usually do something about it?

We make happiness important by constantly wishing it upon ourselves and others. If it's not important, then we should stop doing that. But since we are doing that, then it's time to talk about it.

Many of us, including myself, have grappled with the concept of happiness. We often find ourselves unclear about what it is and what it means to us specifically. Perhaps we have been conditioned to believe that happiness is a luxury or that it's selfish or unattainable.

I now firmly believe the opposite! Happiness is not a luxury; it's a necessity. It's not selfish; it's unselfish. And most importantly, it's not unattainable; it's achievable.

It all has to do with how we define happiness. If we consider it just a fleeting emotion, then we're setting ourselves up for failure. If we're arguing that satisfaction or contentment are more important, we don't have to argue because they are integral to happiness. There are many different perspectives on happiness. In the next chapter, I gather some from across the globe and share my own.

Thankfully, in recent years, happiness has been taken more seriously by various governments, researchers, entities and individuals. The significant surge in scientific approaches to happiness, including substantial research in the field of positive psychology, has given us insight into what works and what doesn't when it comes to happiness.

Understanding happiness and making it a priority has helped me improve my life and positively impact the lives of others.

And in case you need more convincing or are still wondering *why* to live happy, there are many great reasons. Research shows that happiness leads to increased creativity, innovation, productivity and energy and has been linked to stronger relationships, better heart health, a stronger immune system, lower levels of stress, fewer aches and pains, lower likelihood of disease and disability and greater longevity.²

And if you still need convincing, ask yourself: *Why wouldn't you want to prioritize happiness in your life?*

After all, this is your life, and you deserve to live happily, successfully, peacefully and whatever else you want! It's all possible, and it doesn't have to be complicated, even if it does require work.

THE GREATER GOOD

Another reason I get excited about people prioritizing happiness is that when you do, not only will you live a happier life, but others will benefit as well.

The more you focus on yourself, being true to yourself and doing things for your own purpose, the more you will be able to spread happiness and love. You'll find yourself practicing kindness and compassion towards others, embracing individuality and celebrating diversity. You'll allow others to be unique individuals too, rather than expecting them to conform to your perceptions of what is and isn't right or good.

These positive changes inevitably lead to better relationships and increased love, peace and joy. Wouldn't we want to see that spread globally?

For me, the ultimate goal is global peace and happiness, fueled by individuals who are themselves peaceful and happy, including you!

In the past, I cringed at the phrase "world peace", associating it more with the stereotypical beauty pageant contestant's reply when asked what our society needs most. If you've seen Miss Congeniality,³ you'll know what I mean. However, I have since had a drastic change of heart.

While overuse and misuse have somewhat stripped the words of meaning, I now realize that the concept of world peace is not just a cliché but an aspiration to which we can all contribute. However, in order for peace to be just, it must be preceded by the essential prerequisites of human rights. These rights are "inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex,

nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status.”⁴ They must be protected and prioritized. We must work towards ensuring their existence in the real world and not just on paper, where they exist so comfortably with far less accountability than the current state of the world demands. We can achieve that if we work together.

It all starts with making the world a happier place, one person at a time.

Fundamental #2

Happiness begins and ends in your mind.

All change is created from the inside out, and the same applies to happiness.

If you want to be happy, I'm telling you, you *can* be.

Your mind is that powerful.

It's where you live; it's where everything begins and ends.

Therefore, by understanding it better, you can make it work for you!

Throughout my childhood, I had an incredible fascination with the human mind. I often wondered what made people tick. What made them do the things they do? What made them communicate in a certain way?

It's safe to say that I was a bookworm. But I didn't read just anything. Apart from my prized collection of Archie comics, I focused on one genre and one genre only: mystery.

This genre fueled my fascination with the mysterious human mind and helped me understand more about people. It taught

me to question everything and not assume that anything is true.

One of my favorite mystery series was Encyclopedia Brown. I loved trying to solve the cases myself and looking up the answers at the end of the book. The Famous Five, Nancy Drew, The Hardy Boys and Sherlock Holmes were also part of my childhood.

As I got older, I found myself captivated by Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple. The proud Belgian detective's "little grey cells"⁵ and the fluffy old lady's uncanny ability to solve crimes by identifying "the village parallel"⁶ had me delving further into the human psyche and contemplating what people think, feel and do.

Away from the world of fiction, I often thought to myself: if only there were a pill I could take that would allow me to think or feel what a person is thinking or feeling. I wanted to understand people better. And I wanted others to take that pill to understand each other better and communicate more effectively and compassionately instead of communicating with anger, bitterness or resentment. There was no pill, though, so I had to wonder, guess and figure things out on my own.

Over time, I stretched my mind through all this mental exercise. I became increasingly open to different perspectives, even opposite perspectives. It became a habit to always look for different angles to a story or even an entirely different story, especially when there seemed to be a consensus on only one "true" story.

I began to question and question. "Who says *this* is the story?" "How do you know it's true?" I became a bit loud-mouthed, argumentative and probably a pain in the ass at times.

Though I did not realize it at the time, I was beginning to put my hand on an important concept: Everything begins, and ends, *in our mind!*

It became apparent to me that human behavior was triggered by human thought. And since behavior affects outcome, then it follows that if we change our thoughts and behaviors, we can change our outcomes.

This is hard to accept at first because it puts the power in our hands, which is a little scary. It means that, to a large extent, we are responsible; it's on us to experience life as we want it. It might be easier to think that the power is outside us, that life is happening to us and that our role is small in shaping our lives. But, it's incredibly empowering to believe the opposite because that opens up a world of possibility and opportunity!

While taking charge of our lives can seem daunting, it's equally exciting and liberating. It means that change is possible and that we can change our lives for the better if we choose to.

So, your happiness starts and ends with *you*, with the thoughts in your mind that then affect your emotional state and lead to action, or inaction, as the case may be.

To set the stage, I want to address a controversial yet fundamental concept before we delve further into happiness.

IS IT "ALL IN YOUR HEAD"?

We often hear the statement "It's all in your head" used negatively as a form of gaslighting, and I am very much opposed to that usage. I would like, however, to address it quite literally. The truth is that, for the most part, things *are* in your head! Sometimes, things move to your body, and sometimes, physical conditions and environmental factors affect you. However, even those are processed in your head. Therefore, your happiness is very much in your head.

Think about it. You are processing life and interpreting life's events through *your* senses. So that means anything happening "out there" is an image, thought process, sound,

feeling or sensation *inside you*. Life is literally in your head! No matter how hard you try, you will never be able to experience or process life other than through your senses, through your mind.

Therefore, nothing is what it *seems*. Rather, you perceive it to be a certain way based on your mind's filters: your beliefs, past experiences, values, preconceived ideas, etc.

Therefore, there isn't one world; there is a unique and ever-evolving interpretation of the world inside each mind.

By the same token, the world outside you is a reflection of the world inside you.

Now, the value of this concept is that when you take charge and start working on your inner world, you can improve your outer world. Life can truly change.

And the beauty is that you already have all the answers and all the resources that you need to be able to do that. They are already inside you, in your unconscious mind, waiting for you to tap into them so that you can begin to learn, grow and create the life that you want.

For every problem you have, you also have a solution of which you may be unaware.

For every dark struggle, there is a light inside you that you can come to find and learn to shine.

The statement "it's all in your head" should never be used with the intent to belittle something or dismiss it as invalid, unreal or unimportant. We essentially *live* in our heads, so whatever is there *does* seem real to us and *is* important, even if it is not true and need not be permanent. "It's all in your head" doesn't mean that you're imagining it or that it's your fault or that you should "get over it" or that people aren't accountable for their actions. It simply means that you have the power within you to eventually work through and rise above the circumstances and perhaps even influence the outcome.

If the statement is to be used at all, let it be to illustrate the power we each have as human beings. Let it be used to recognize the abundance of beauty and resources inside each and every one of us at any given moment; resources that are often hidden in the deep recesses of our minds and perhaps more difficult for us to access, yet there nevertheless. The more you tap into your own resources and a happiness mindset, the more you will be able to achieve your desired outcomes and move towards the world that you would like to see and be a part of.

Fundamental #3

Happiness is NOW.

Think about it: *When* do you want to be happy?

Do you want to be happy in the past?

Do you want to *only* be happy in the future?

You most likely want to be happy right here, right now.

So happiness isn't about the past, and it isn't about the future.
It's about now.

As I pressed the "save" button, I knew something was wrong. I somehow wanted the keyboard to disobey or fail me. It didn't. I stared at the screen in disbelief. Eight years' worth of notes for my book *gone*, just like that, because I should have pressed "save as" instead.

I wasn't sure what to think or feel. Temporary paralysis soon led to a tsunami of emotions, which eventually paved the way for deep thought.

"Would I give up or move forward?"

"You know the drill," I told myself in an effort to conquer an overpowering sense of hopeless defeat. "Shit happens, and you deal with it. And you come out strong."

It took a while, but I slowly began to open up to absorbing the powerful lesson that was here for me to grow through.

Yes, I had spent years diligently writing, and sometimes frantically scribbling pages and pages of notes for the book I knew I eventually wanted to write. Scattered all over the place in notebooks, sheets of paper, word documents and notes on my phone, I had labored for days, if not weeks, to compile all the notes into one document. Not just that, but in a remarkably uncharacteristic feng-shui-like fashion, I had systematically decluttered by deleting all the original sources as I moved the various notes to their new home.

And then the fatal error. And then there were none.

But as hidden as lessons often are, an important one was beginning to make its way out from beneath the rubble and head to the limelight for a phenomenal stage entrance!

As painful as it was, and it was painful, this was indeed a powerful lesson in letting go and living in the moment. After all, I soon realized, I was still here.

Why are my past thoughts so important when the same mind that thought those thoughts is here *now*, along with all the learnings of all the moments that led up to this very moment?

I created a new file and started to type, knowing that this would soon be just another story, one of many stories that matter in this giant story called life.

And here I am today, immensely grateful for that fatal error that allowed me to start from scratch, almost forcing me to have faith in myself and bring life to my new, raw and most likely improved thoughts through this book that would not have otherwise seen the light.

Too often, we are either living in the past or worrying about the future. Neither practice serves us!

The past no longer exists, and the future is ours to shape.

Think about it. Anything you do, whether it's related to the past or the future, is being done *now*. And since the past and the future don't exist and now is all you have, it serves you best to focus on it.

The moment you are currently experiencing is not only valuable, it's the only moment you are guaranteed. It's at this moment that you can find happiness.

Thus, happiness is not a pursuit and is not a destination. In fact, the pursuit of happiness has been found to make some people quite miserable! If you are pursuing it, that means you are postponing it until you get a particular outcome or result.

We often chase things like a fancy job, the "perfect" body, "perfect" grades, true love, a new car, or the latest gadget, thinking they will make us happy.

Yet, research has found that we quickly adapt to those things when we get them, which is known as hedonic adaptation.⁷ And they do not impact our happiness for long. Due to impact bias, we tend to overestimate the influence of events, whether positive or negative, on our emotional state. We think things will be better than they turn out to be or worse than they turn out to be.⁸

So again, beware of postponing happiness. And beware of attaching your happiness to objects or people.

The key is to find purpose and joy in the journey itself to wherever you want to go, to focus on the present moment, while looking towards a bright future, equipped with positive learnings from the past.

Happiness is right *here*, right *now*, waiting for us to *choose it*. The more we choose it, the more it becomes a habit and the more we can spread it.

What are you waking up every day and choosing?

I invite you to wake up every day and choose happiness. And if you're not sure what that means or how to go about it, keep reading. By the end of this book, you will!