

The Tutti Frutti Book of Wellbeing Supplement 2

Book reviews: *Awaken the giant within*, Anthony Robbins 1992, 2001 edition, Pocket Books, London (~500 pp.)

This is a difficult book to review.

The central premise is that we go through life without realising our decisions are based on values, beliefs, and rules that we had very little conscious involvement in setting up. Robbins contends that we can choose to change our system of internal thought processes and, in so doing, better navigate our mental, emotional, physical, and financial well-being. He adds that “the best strategy in almost any case is to find a role-model, someone who’s already getting the results you want...learn what they’re doing, what their core beliefs are, and how they think.” (p. 25)

While he writes well enough his style is repetitious and the book lacks a coherent overarching framework. The first ten chapters are relatively easy to grasp. The remaining 16 chapters, with some exceptions, feel more like stocking fillers. Perhaps this is a reflection of his advice in chapter 1, that you don’t have to use or believe all of the book to make some major changes (p. 29). On the same page he writes, for example, “that [by] merely changing one word that is part of your habitual vocabulary, you could immediately change your emotional patterns for life.” The flow of the text is loudly and frequently interspersed by quotes from other writers and sources, for example, “If we all did the things we are capable of doing, we would literally astound ourselves—Thomas A. Edison”. Many of these are quite good; too often I found they interrupted the flow of my reading. Elsewhere Robbins writes that repetition truly is the mother of skill (p. 402). Perhaps that is why he repeats his ideas, sometimes three or four times on the same page.

It does not now help that it was written in 1992. I expect many advances have been made in neuroscience in the past quarter of a century yet I cannot tell if these have been incorporated into the book. Many of his tropes are outdated, and potentially have little relevance to younger people (who stand to benefit the most from his approach to life). The language comes over as faintly misogynistic, including a half-dozen references to rape (pp. 52, 75, 90, 113, 125, 400), two of which are not listed in the index. Nor did I appreciate the many instances of in-text advertising to Robbin’s other products.

A recurring theme is that the avoidance of pain and the pursuit of pleasure shapes our lives. We are more

comfortable with putting up with a small amount of day-to-day pain than we are with contemplating our fear of the unknown or the potential loss associated with change, even if that change offers the prospect of increased pleasure. Put another way, most people work harder to keep what they have rather than to take the risks to get what they really want. On the other hand, if the prospect of enough pleasure can be generated then people often become willing to overlook their fear of change. Robbins refers to this practice as the Science of Neuroassociative Conditioning™ (NAC). He contrasts it with Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), the programming component of which he found assigned too much responsibility to the programmer rather than the recipient of the programming.¹

It is not important to know how to change; what’s important is to decide you will find a way, no matter what. As Robbins puts it: 1) decide what you want; 2) take action; 3) notice what’s working or not; 4) change your approach until you get what you want. There are no failures in life, only results

That said, Robbins posits that when people do want to change, they focus on changing their behaviour or feelings rather than addressing the cause behind the behaviour or feelings. For example, to avoid negative emotions people may use alcohol or drugs; or engage in overeating or gambling. Such short-term solutions will become long-term problems. Or if will power is relied on to change behaviour, the will-power reserves run out. If we can instead associate massive pain with not changing, and associate the prospect of massive pleasure with change, then this will likely generate enough leverage to facilitate permanent change.

“...if we fail to direct our own associations to pain and pleasure, we’re living no better than animals or machines.” (p. 60)

¹ Robbins still uses NLP techniques (p. 111) despite there apparently being little scientific evidence supporting their theoretical basis, since they were first published in 1975 (Bandler R & Grinder J, *The Structure of Magic I: A Book*

About Language and Therapy, Science and Behavior Books, Palo Alto, CA). The question of a scientific basis was not further addressed as part of this review.

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In chapter 14, Robbins explains what he refers to as the “master system” that determines how we evaluate everything that happens in our lives, and which directs all human behaviour. There are five components to this system:

Our mental and emotional state

The questions we ask e.g., “What is happening? “What does this mean?”; “Does it mean pain or pleasure?”

Our hierarchy of values

Our beliefs and rules, which often control what we’re even willing to evaluate in the first place

Our reference experiences i.e. everything we’ve ever experience or imagined, and which—according to how we interpret them—shape our values and beliefs.

As a system, each component interacts with the other four. Change one and this will impact the others. Examining our master system represents “metacognition” or awareness and understanding of one’s own thought processes. As such, we don’t have to allow the programming of the past to control our present and future.

On beliefs, Robbins asserts that these often result in people treating the symptoms of their troubles while at the same time nurturing their causes (p. 96). He asks, “Are your beliefs strengthening your foundation by moving you to action in the direction you want, or are they holding you back?” He discusses the Japanese concept of *kaizen*, which advocates gradual, simple improvements, and that *kaizen* can be used to improve the quality of life by constantly growing and expanding. He uses a mnemonic called CANI™, which stands for “constant and never-ending improvement.”

Elsewhere in the book can be found guidance or tools for achieving change, including state management (chapter 7); powerful questions (chapter 8); and vocabulary and metaphors (chapter 9). After chapter 10, and with the exception of chapter 14, it becomes harder to grip up what he writes about.

In chapter 9, on metaphors, I was struck by this passage:

A metaphor that I use to remind myself...is comparing life’s ups and downs to the changing of the seasons. No season lasts forever because all of life is a cycle of planting, reaping, resting, and renewal. Winter is not infinite: even if you’re having challenges today, you can never give up

on the coming of spring. For some people, winter means hibernation; for others, it means bobsledding and downhill skiing! You can always just wait out the season, but why not make it into a time to remember?

I found this to be a powerful way of viewing the journey of life.

A related and underappreciated concept is *learned helplessness*. When people experience enough failure at something—and Robbins writes, “you’d be surprised how few times this is for some people”—they perceive their efforts as futile, and develop a permanent and pervasive mindset of being unable to change anything in their lives, or the lives of other people. He suggests attaching so much pain to this belief, combined with taking the attitude that this too will pass, and that “if you keep persisting you’ll find a way.” (p. 83)

Chapter 14, on personal values, was possibly the best of the book for this reviewer. Robbins discusses how our beliefs and rules flow from our values; the distinction between achieving your goals congruent with your values; and living your values. It is the latter that will sustain you long past your achievements, important as these are. The examples of what Robbins calls values hierarchies, and how these look before and after the individuals concerned reflected on their lives and priorities, are outstanding.

Towards the end of his book Robbins exhorts us to weed the garden of our mind. This is a powerful metaphor given it could reasonably be said that through life’s experiences we often enrich our minds and seldom pay much conscious attention to examining the values, beliefs, and rules that underlie our negative feelings and thinking patterns. Many of these values, beliefs, and rules have been subconsciously inculcated into us by parents, peers, teachers, TV, advertisers, and culture, without any conscious design input on our part. While some will be helpful others may be holding us back, without our knowledge, from living our lives with satisfaction, contentment, and fulfilment.

Despite the semi-rambling and dated nature of this book, its shortcomings appear to be significantly outweighed by its strengths. It is the kind of book that will benefit from repeated study, as helped by its extensive and incomplete index. And be a smart consumer. “Think for yourself, and never mindlessly follow a guru like a lemming.”²

² <https://medium.com/s/the-test-of-time/the-big-ideas-and-bunk-advice-from-tony-robbins-awaken-the-giant-within-fca81f9ae7dd>

The Tutti Frutti Book of Wellbeing Supplement 2

Another review of Tony Robbins' *Awaken The Giant Within*

Tony Robbins is a well-known figure in the field of motivational speaking. His book, "Awaken the Giant Within," published in 1992, is regarded by many as a seminal work in self-help literature. While some find his seminars and teachings transformative, others criticize his approach as superficial and more akin to pop psychology than grounded theory. Nonetheless, Robbins has a large following, with many willing to pay substantial amounts for his coaching sessions.

"Awaken the Giant Within" serves as a guide to self-mastery and fulfillment. Robbins' key messages encourage readers to believe in themselves, take control of their lives, commit to consistent action, and manage their emotions. Despite his sometimes hyperbolic statements, such as the claim that belief systems can both create and destroy, there are practical insights to be found, especially in his goal-setting strategies.

However, not all of Robbins' advice is universally accepted. Some suggestions are vague or outdated, and his lack of formal qualifications in psychology or therapy has drawn criticism. Robbins, a multimillionaire high-school dropout, presents himself as an expert in personal mastery, which some find problematic.

Readers should approach "Awaken the Giant Within" with a critical mind, discerning between practical advice and less substantiated claims. Robbins' emphasis on neurolinguistic programming, which lacks strong scientific backing, and his handling of serious issues like trauma without adequate support, highlight the need for caution. Pushing aside negative emotions, as Robbins suggests, can be counterproductive, with research showing that accepting and managing such emotions is more beneficial for mental health.

"In particular, *Awaken the Giant Within's* approach to dealing with so-called negative feelings runs counter to what [creates positive mental health](#) [1] and psychological resilience. Robbins urges readers to replace stress, sadness, and other complex emotions with [better ones](#) [2] like gratitude, love, and cheerfulness. But a great deal of research shows that minimizing unpleasant emotions backfires. Pushing your feelings away is a form of avoidance that can result in highly critical self-talk, like "Why do I suck so much? I'll never be happy." When you [feel bad about feeling bad](#) [3], you're less likely to feel confident and tackle lofty goals head-on.

A better solution? Combining [self-acceptance](#) [4], [cognitive restructuring](#) [5], and [mindfulness](#) [6] to deal with life's inevitable setbacks. Negative emotions are normal and healthy.

Counterintuitively, they are a sign of emotional well-being. You just have to learn how to [accept them]."

Source: Wilding M 2018, The big ideas (and bunk advice) from Tony Robbins' 'Awaken the Giant Within', <https://medium.com/s/the-test-of-time/the-big-ideas-and-bunk-advice-from-tony-robbins-awaken-the-giant-within-fca81f9ae7dd>

Despite these flaws, Robbins' work on goal-setting and self-awareness can be impactful. His principles, such as associating bad habits with pain and good ones with pleasure, align with established behavioural science practices. These methods can help reshape habits and improve well-being, though they require active and consistent effort to implement effectively.

To make the most of Robbins' teachings, it is important to apply his strategies thoughtfully and adapt them to one's unique circumstances. Evaluating internal beliefs, triggering positive emotions alongside good habits, and setting and adjusting goals are practical steps that can lead to personal growth and resilience.

In summary, "Awaken the Giant Within" offers valuable insights but should be read critically, recognizing both its potential benefits and its limitations.

1. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/negative-emotions-key-well-being/>
2. <https://www.tonyrobbins.com/mind-meaning/cultivating-positive-emotions/>
3. <http://bigthink.com/articles/dont-feel-bad-about-feeling-bad-study-says>
4. <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/318933.php>
5. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/shyness-is-nice/201305/stop-fighting-your-negative-thoughts>
6. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/03/well/mind/the-year-of-conquering-negative-thinking.html>