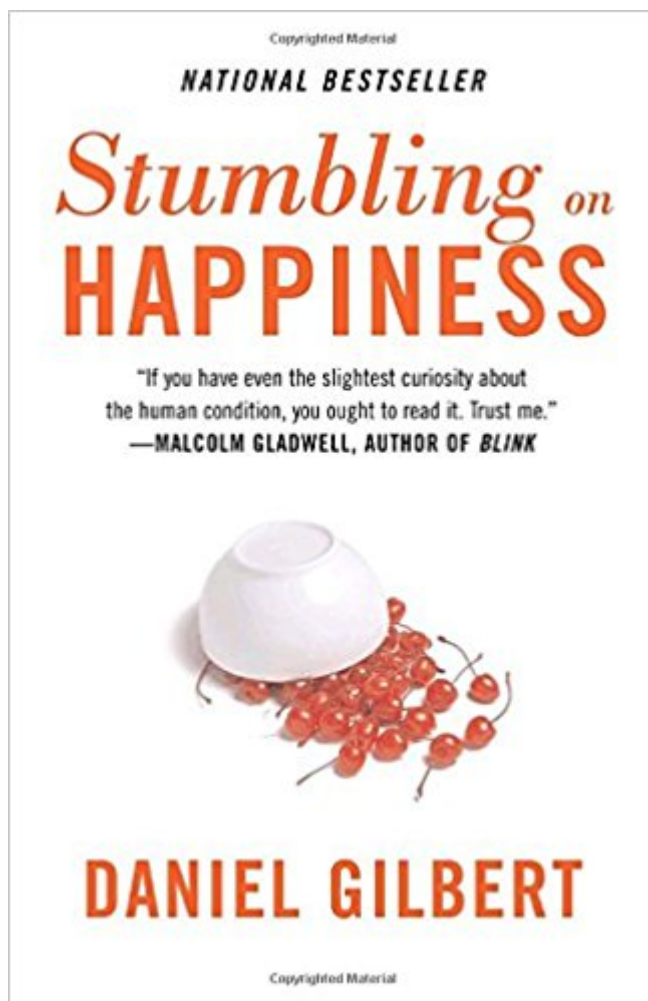


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# Stumbling On Happiness



## Synopsis

Bringing to life scientific research in psychology, cognitive neuroscience, philosophy, and behavioral economics, this bestselling book reveals what scientists have discovered about the uniquely human ability to imagine the future, and about our capacity to predict how much we will like it when we get there. • Why are lovers quicker to forgive their partners for infidelity than for leaving dirty dishes in the sink? • Why will sighted people pay more to avoid going blind than blind people will pay to regain their sight? • Why do dining companions insist on ordering different meals instead of getting what they really want? • Why do pigeons seem to have such excellent aim; why can we remember one song while listening to another; and why does the line at the grocery store always slow down the moment we join it? In this brilliant, witty, and accessible book, renowned Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert describes the foibles of imagination and illusions of foresight that cause each of us to misconceive our tomorrows and misestimate our satisfactions. With penetrating insight and sparkling prose, Gilbert explains why we seem to know so little about the hearts and minds of the people we are about to become.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Do you know what makes you happy? Daniel Gilbert would bet that you think you do, but you are most likely wrong. In his witty and engaging new book, Harvard professor Gilbert reveals his take on how our minds work, and how the limitations of our imaginations may be getting in the way of our

ability to know what happiness is. Sound quirky and interesting? It is! But just to be sure, we asked bestselling author (and master of the quirky and interesting) Malcolm Gladwell to read *Stumbling on Happiness*, and give us his take. Check out his review below. --Daphne Durham Guest Reviewer:

Malcolm Gladwell Malcolm Gladwell is the author of bestselling books *Blink* and *The Tipping Point*, and is a staff writer for *The New Yorker*. Several years ago, on a flight from New York to California, I had the good fortune to sit next to a psychologist named Dan Gilbert. He had a shiny bald head, an irrepressible good humor, and we talked (or, more accurately, he talked) from at least the Hudson to the Rockies--and I was completely charmed. He had the wonderful quality many academics have--which is that he was interested in the kinds of questions that all of us care about but never have the time or opportunity to explore. He had also had a quality that is rare among academics. He had the ability to translate his work for people who were outside his world. Now Gilbert has written a book about his psychological research. It is called *Stumbling on Happiness*, and reading it reminded me of that plane ride long ago. It is a delight to read. Gilbert is charming and funny and has a rare gift for making very complicated ideas come alive. *Stumbling on Happiness* is a book about a very simple but powerful idea. What distinguishes us as human beings from other animals is our ability to predict the future--or rather, our interest in predicting the future. We spend a great deal of our waking life imagining what it would be like to be this way or that way, or to do this or that, or taste or buy or experience some state or feeling or thing. We do that for good reasons: it is what allows us to shape our life. And it is by trying to exert some control over our futures that we attempt to be happy. But by any objective measure, we are really bad at that predictive function. We're terrible at knowing how we will feel a day or a month or year from now, and even worse at knowing what will and will not bring us that cherished happiness. Gilbert sets out to figure what that's so: why we are so terrible at something that would seem to be so extraordinarily important? In making his case, Gilbert walks us through a series of fascinating--and in some ways troubling--facts about the way our minds work. In particular, Gilbert is interested in delineating the shortcomings of imagination. We're far too accepting of the conclusions of our imaginations. Our imaginations aren't particularly imaginative. Our imaginations are really bad at telling us how we will think when the future finally comes. And our personal experiences aren't nearly as good at correcting these errors as we might think. I suppose that I really should go on at this point, and talk in more detail about what Gilbert means by that--and how his argument unfolds. But I feel like that might ruin the experience of reading *Stumbling on Happiness*. This is a psychological detective story about one of the great mysteries of our lives. If you have even the slightest curiosity about the human condition, you ought to read it. Trust me.

--Malcolm Gladwell

Not offering a self-help book, but instead mounting a scientific explanation of the limitations of the human imagination and how it steers us wrong in our search for happiness, Gilbert, a professor of psychology at Harvard, draws on psychology, cognitive neuroscience, philosophy and behavioral economics to argue that, just as we err in remembering the past, so we err in imagining the future. "Our desire to control is so powerful, and the feeling of being in control so rewarding, that people often act as though they can control the uncontrollable," Gilbert writes, as he reveals how ill-equipped we are to properly preview the future, let alone control it. Unfortunately, he claims, neither personal experience nor cultural wisdom compensates for imagination's shortcomings. In concluding chapters, he discusses the transmission of inaccurate beliefs from one person's mind to another, providing salient examples of universal assumptions about human happiness such as the joys of money and of having children. He concludes with the provocative recommendation that, rather than imagination, we should rely on others as surrogates for our future experience. Gilbert's playful tone and use of commonplace examples render a potentially academic topic accessible and educational, even if his approach is at times overly prescriptive. 150,000 announced first printing. (May) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

This book was a worthwhile read as it presented original ideas I had not previously encountered on how to predict what may or may not make us happy in the future based on what makes us and others happy in the present. I was expecting self-help, pop-science and recycling of commonly talked about studies, so this new and refreshing take on the topic of happiness was a pleasant surprise. I think back to this book now when trying to factor future happiness into my decision making process and goals. One of my favorite reads of the year, and a simple one at that.

As the author best words it: "Despite the third word in the title, this is not an instruction manual that will tell you anything useful about how to be happy...Instead, this is a book that describes what science has to tell us about how and how well the human brain can imagine its own future, and about how and how well it can predict which of those futures it will most enjoy...Weaving together facts and theories from psychology, cognitive neuroscience, philosophy, and behavioral economics, this book allows an account to emerge that I personally find convincing but whose merits you will have to judge for yourself." Daniel ends the book on the following note: "There is no simple formula for finding happiness. But if our great big brains do not allow us to go surefootedly into our futures,

they at least allow us to understand what makes us stumble."A very highly recommended read for anyone trying to better understand how we remember our past, see our present and imagine our future. A truly creative masterpiece.Below are excerpts from the book that I found particularly insightful:1- "We insist on steering our boats because we think we have a pretty good idea of where we should go, but the truth is that much of our steering is in vain - not because the boat won't respond, and not because we can't find our destination, but because the future is fundamentally different than it appears through the prospectiscope."2- "Happiness refers to feelings, virtue refers to actions, and those actions can cause those feelings. But not necessarily and not exclusively."3- "Our experiences instantly become part, present, and future, and like any lens, they shape and distort what we see. This lens is not like a pair of spectacles that we can set on the nightstand when we find it convenient to do so but like a pair of contacts that are forever affixed to our eyeballs with superglue."4- "...the act of remembering involves "filling in" details that were not actually stored; and second, we generally cannot tell when we are doing this because filling in happens quickly and unconsciously."5- "When they (people) are asked to judge the dissimilarities...they tend to look for the presence of dissimilarities and ignore the absence of dissimilarities."6- "The problem isn't that our brains fill in and leave out...No, the problem is that they do this so well that we aren't aware it is happening. As such, we tend to accept the brain's products uncritically and expect the future to unfold with the details - and with only the details - that the brain has imagined."7- "...most of us have a tough time imagining a tomorrow that is terribly different from today, and we find it particularly difficult to imagine that we will ever think, want, or feel differently than we do now."8- "We cannot feel good about an imaginary future when we are busy feeling bad about an actual present. But rather than recognizing that this is the inevitable result of the Reality First policy, we mistakenly assume that the future event is the cause of the unhappiness we feel when we think about it."9- "...if we want to predict how something will make us feel in the future, we must consider the kind of comparison we happen to be making in the present."10- "A healthy psychological immune system strikes a balance that allows us to feel good enough to cope with our situation but bad enough to do something about it."11- "Because we tend to remember the best of times and the worst of times instead of the most likely times, the wealth of experience that young people admire does not always pay clear dividends."12- "This tendency to think of ourselves as better than others is not necessarily a manifestation of our unfettered narcissism but may instead be an instance of a more general tendency to think of ourselves as different from others - often for better but sometimes for worse."

After seeing the author speak recently at a conference I decided that if the book was half as

entertaining as the author's presentation then it would be worth the price of purchasing it and I was not disappointed. The book focuses on how we develop and envision our future happiness and why it is that reaching our future goals so often fails to meet our own expectations. The book provides fantastically simple examples to help illustrate our own shortcomings in our predictions of future happiness. The author sheds light on the flaws in our own expectations and helps explain why we repeatedly fall victim to the traps of envisioning our future happiness. It was an easy read, which left me feeling quite enlightened when I was finished.

Gilbert's book is fascinating, funny, and inspirational and should be read by everyone who wants to know more about human behavior or who wants to stimulate their brain a little. One of the first studies Gilbert mentions is one that showed how learning new information actually makes us humans happy. This was certainly the case for 'Stumbling,' especially when you consider all the witty remarks of personalized remarks about your brother in law eating cheese dip on the couch. While most of the book focuses on fascinating psychological findings and scientific studies, he doesn't tie them in concretely to his ultimate conclusion of why people aren't happy when they think they're supposed to be. He does, however, make a clear case for why people look for happiness in certain things and fail to achieve it. Ironically, Gilbert falls into a trap, which he criticizes within his own book. Two-thirds into the book, the author notes that the ending of an event leaves a more permanent mark than the entire event, and this is the case especially when one is disappointed by the end. Gilbert uses 'Schindler's List' as an example of how the monologues at the end ruined a great film up until then. The author's memory of the entire film was negative due to this.

Unfortunately, after a nearly flawless book, 'Stumbling' suffers from a similarly marring section. After fully explaining every point he has until the end, when the last section arrives, Gilbert throws in undeveloped ideas about making money and having children as the root of unhappiness in today's society. It's one of those instances where you can instantly come up with questions that would put his points in doubt. I was conscious of his powerful ending theory, however, and I refused to let this cloud my judgment of the entire book as a whole. What 'Stumbling' can offer is much too good to be tarnished by a last-minute unfounded theory. It's no wonder that Malcom Gladwell, another talented writer, has a guest review on this book. Gilbert's style is reminiscent of Gladwell's, though 'Stumbling' is quite a bit more humorous. In addition, while reading this, I was stunned by how many ideas that I've been working on for a future book of my own about psychology and personal relations that Gilbert came to in this book. It's a credit to Gilbert that he's come to some of the insightful conclusions before I've had the chance to pen them myself. I could stand to do without

some of the conclusions Gilbert makes as well as the many drug references, but overall, this is a great must-read.

Really loved the authors way of explaining different concepts of happiness from a scientific point of view! Is a great one to read more than once!

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