

BOOK REVIEW

HAPPYNESS

Life Lessons From a Creative Addict

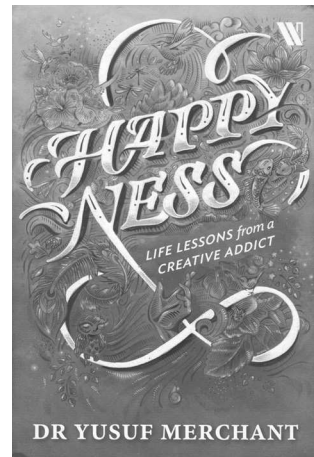
ALOK SARIN
ANANYA
MAHAPATRA

Happyness: *Life Lessons from a Creative Addict* is a title meant to catch your eye. It is, in equal part, a memoir by Dr. Yusuf Merchant, a history of his rehabilitation centre, and musings on life and the nature of addiction. While ‘happiness’ has been seen as an abstract, elusive concept—something that happens to you passively, if you are lucky—‘happy-ness’ is more in the nature of an active state. The term is intriguing in that it compels you to see happiness as an outcome that you can achieve yourself. By the second chapter, however, Merchant dispels this myth, saying that happiness ‘is not an outcome. It is a process. And a by-product of a good value system’.

While this book is about achieving that state (which, actually, is the process) of ‘happy-ness’, it is also many other things. For instance, it is also in parts an unflinching memoir. Merchant delves with candour and humour into his past, his life, and his relationships, and utilises them to inspire the reader. Almost every chapter features an anecdote, a significant memory,

**HAPPYNESS: LIFE LESSONS
FROM A CREATIVE ADDICT**

Author: Dr. Yusuf Merchant
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or a past event from his own life to make his message relatable as well as interesting.

This book is not only about seeking happiness, but also a cautionary account of the perils of various forms of addiction. It tries to inform the uninitiated of the manner in which addiction can take hold of one's life, and how one might recover. In parts, it also charts the trajectory of Land, the rehabilitation centre run by Merchant for the recovery of people battling drug addiction.

Contemporary readers will find the book's language breezy and relatable. Merchant has steered clear of technical jargon or intellectual verbiage, so that even those completely unfamiliar with disorders of mental health and addiction or concepts of psychology/psychiatry will find it an easy read, simple to understand and to relate to. The book is divided into five sections and each contains numerous chapters carrying an individual message, each significant on its own. Although reading them in sequence adds to the overall coherence of the narrative, each chapter stands on its own and can be read in exclusion of the others. The chapters are brief, to-the-point, and communicate their messages clearly. Merchant uses myriad references to prove his points and they range from the ancient history of Greece to the laws of physics, to Twitter trolls on the Internet. Interspersed between the chapters are interesting sketches.

The first chapter of the book begins with a very positive and reassuring observation: 'In the universal frame of reference, everything is flawless the way it is [...] It's when we become the centre of the universe and our perceptions become the only frame of reference that we see things as imperfect.' This sets the tone for the whole book, which is extremely encouraging and self-affirming. Merchant has emphasised in many ways the importance of a good value system, gratitude, and, above all, love, in seeking happiness.

His words have principles derived from various schools of thought. The most significant of them is mindfulness. He has repeatedly demonstrated the importance of being mindful of one's thoughts so that we respond to them appropriately and in non-dysfunctional ways. Drawing on a variety of sources, which range from the philosophy of the Upanishads and the Advaita Vedanta to existential philosophy, his discourses—because that is what they are—are clearly influenced by a multiplicity of readings, ranging from Hindu scriptures to the writings of Victor Frankl and Rhonda

Byrne, on the one hand, to modern advances in epigenetics, on the other. Although his teachings derive inspiration from different schools of thought, they are lucid and coherent and have been presented in a simplified manner that readers can apply to their daily lives with ease.

What the book does not address, however, is the ongoing debate on the elements of mental health issues: biological, psychological and social. If at all it does, it places itself very squarely in the psychological corner. In a sense, the real difficulty with medicine has been what is called the ‘medical gaze’, or looking at everything through the lens of medical pathology. The book lucidly makes a point for the reverse-looking at pathology through the lens of experience, knowledge and affirmation, and, hopefully, overcoming it. In making this case, like all advocates, Merchant perhaps overstates his argument. Viewing depression as simply repressed anger, and looking at exercise, sunlight, massage and diets as the solution may be an oversimplification of the biological or even social factors that underlie the causation of distress. This view also does little justice to the fairly large body of literature in this field.

It may perhaps be wise to remember here that these ‘binaries’, of looking at the world either one way or the other, may be incomplete in and of themselves, and we may want to incorporate other lenses for a more progressive view of the world.

As practising clinical psychiatrists, I think we would unhesitatingly accept the impressive nature of recovery demonstrated by many people who have been to Merchant’s centre. Equally clearly, other people do not seem to benefit. While this is undoubtedly the ‘nature of the beast’, as it were, the fact remains that different people will certainly have different problems. One philosophy, therefore, for dealing with the bewildering array of problems that mental health disorders will inevitably present—in a vast variety of people, and in hugely different circumstances—may be somewhat limiting.

That said, if a lucid presentation of this nature can stimulate discussion and debate on the many factors that influence the causation, the presentation and the recovery from mental illnesses, the effort would certainly be worthy.

