‘We need to get back to civic life’



◆ It’s impossible to be happy all the time, so instead pursue a way of living that has more meaning, purpose, community and friendship, says Dr Mark Fabian, author of Beyond Happy

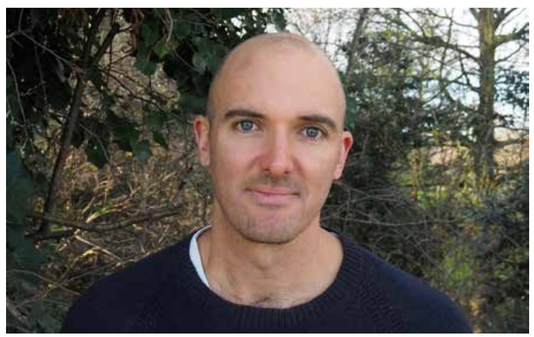
We’ve written a lot of books about happiness. Why haven’t we figured this out yet? Well maybe we have, our knowledge is just scattered.

I went to a bookstore the other day. What did I find in the happiness aisle? One book all about relationships, they’re certainly important. Another about emotions, also critical. A few about how to get rich written by people who got rich by teaching people how to get rich. Sounds like a con; maybe skip those ones. Oh, there was one about habits – hard to get anywhere without those, but which ones?

Most of these books are good, but many could have been a blog post. Each is a piece of a larger jigsaw puzzle, and none gives you the whole picture.

A lot of self-help books are bad. We’re suckers for ‘10 quick and easy ways to true happiness’, and commercial imperatives mean everything is marketed that way. But simple tips just leave you with 1001 jigsaw pieces in your head and you don’t use any of them.

I’ve spent 20 years assembling the whole puzzle. Depression led me to the bookstore in my teens, but I couldn’t find what I was looking for. So I did a degree in philosophy, then a PhD in economics and psychology so that I could read the science the self-improvement gurus misrepresent. Now I’m a professor working on wellbeing in an interdisciplinary way.



Mark Fabian, above, says finding your tribe is a key part of wellbeing

“The first thing is to turn off the influencers, whether it’s your parents or social media

There’s a lot of good wellbeing science, but also plenty of junk and reinventing the wheel. Humans found happiness for eons and our wisdom about it is stored in folk tales, religion, literature, art, and common sense.

I’ve put all this together and written the book I couldn’t find – Beyond Happy: How to rethink happiness and find fulfilment. It’s not simple. A good jigsaw puzzle never is. But it’s fun, accessible, and galvanising.

Most importantly, it’s comprehensive. It’s not one idea dragged out for a whole book. It’s dozens of ideas explained in a way that allows you to put them all into practice together.

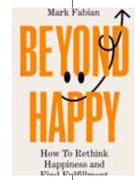
Let’s look at some of the most important ones.

When people say “I just want to be happy” they’re complaining about the hedonic treadmill. It has two parts: mood and dissatisfaction. Let’s start with mood. Think about the last time your doctor’s appointment was running late, or some other minor annoyance. How long were you s****y for? A couple of hours maybe.

Our moods, whether good or bad, tend to dissipate quickly. There are techniques for mood management – I’ll teach them to you – but there’s no way to be happy all the time. Get beyond happy.

What about dissatisfaction? Evolution is a constant battle to stay one step ahead of predators and parasites, so we’ve been wired to see ways that life could be a teensy bit better. This keeps us hustling but leaves us perpetually agitated.

So our culture is full of stories about getting to the end of the treadmill. Nowadays there’s the materialist fiction that if you could just afford that plusher couch you’d finally have tranquillity.



You won’t. Buddhism was hip to this millennia ago, which is why it taught people to get off the treadmill. Be grateful for what you have, think about what you can do for others, and cultivate peace and harmony.

I like Buddhism, but I think we can do better than getting off the treadmill. That has an anti-life vibe to it. I suggest we make the treadmill somewhere we want to be. Start by making the treadmill pleasant – reduce sources of chaos, remove yourself from toxic workplaces, cultivate nourishing relationships, and secure your basic needs.

Then we must think about finding fulfilment and creating value. For that we need authenticity and community. Authenticity is so elusive. Young adults and the newly divorced both wonder how to figure out what sort of life is right for them.

The first thing is to turn off the influencers, whether it’s your parents or social media, and stop looking out there. Turn inwards and learn to listen to your own advice.

That advice will come primarily in the form of emotional signals. This is another way in which we need to get beyond happy – happiness is information, not a goal. It’s a signal that you’re getting warmer.

Emotional signals are often complicated. For example, you might find yourself energetic in an anxious way to get your garden just right, but when it blooms you feel relief rather than joy or achievement. This is a sign of introjected motivation – you don’t authentically like gardening, you’re probably just worried about what the neighbours think.

Not all social feedback is so toxic. If your old friends complain that you’re flaky and controlling you should probably listen, lest you find yourself with no friends at all. To unpick the wisdom in emotional and social feedback, you need to learn how to introspect on it. Armed with new insight, you can recalibrate who you’re trying to be so that it’s better aligned with your intuition and experiences.

By following this process of action, feedback, introspection, and recalibration repeatedly we can gradually build a compass for life.

That’s when it’s time to find your tribe. Wellbeing is something we do together. To find fraternity you need emotional intelligence. One of the most powerful tools for this is a simple question: next time you or someone you care about is having some big feelings, ask: “do you want to be helped, heard, or hugged?”. I used to be rational-manly-man and foolishly assumed people only ever wanted help. But when someone is venting, or messy, trying to solve their problem comes across as impatient and callous. They might want validation, or simply care and tenderness.

We’ve increasingly professionalised and commercialised care in recent decades, outsourcing it to therapists and expecting 160 hours of training to look after a child. That makes us feel unqualified to offer care, and nervous to ask for it because we’re worried that we can’t repay it. Yet to feel loved and cared for is an innate human need and we know instinctively how to offer it. We can certainly learn by doing. We desperately need more care generously given, both to deal with the stresses of modern life and to rebuild our social fabric.

One reason why the social fabric has frayed is because we lack shared culture. Authenticity requires us to be a values-driven person, but society doesn’t provide the values anymore. Finding them for ourselves is hard and often lonely. We want to practice our values with other people, and to do so ritualistically.

This is the hole that churches and local community organisations plugged for centuries. In our individualised modern era, we have a vacuum instead. I am not advocating a return to the old ways, I am saying that we need to get back to civic life, to organising in groups towards collective goals, instead of hustling in our individual struggles.

Culture needs spaces, like the community centres and neighbourhood fetes we’ve defunded for decades. In their absence, it’s up to us to become priests for our social networks, to notice people on the edge and bring them back into the flock, and to facilitate social life.

Then we can be well together in a well world.

Beyond Happy: How to Rethink Happiness and Find Fulfillment by Mark Fabian is published by Bedford Square, priced £20, out now