

MINDSCAPING

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A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR
HOW TO BE HAPPIER

DONOVON JENSON

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CONTENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR	vii
PREFACE	ix
1 THE HAPPINESS FRAMEWORK	1
2 THE MIND AS A LANDSCAPE—THE MENTAL ECOSYSTEM	25
3 SURVEYING THE LAND—SELF-REFLECTION	45
4 CREATING A BLUEPRINT—PERSONAL VISION	105
5 HOMEBUILDING—CONFIDENCE AND ESTEEM	155
6 LANDSCAPING—EXECUTING GOALS	217
7 GENERAL MAINTENANCE	301
8 NATURAL DISASTERS—DESTABILIZING LIFE EVENTS	315
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS	331

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Donovon Jenson is a software engineer at Google, holding degrees in both health policy and psychology from the University of Utah. He is the author of *Surviving Customer Service* and *Real Resolutions*. Donovan teaches several courses, including Goal Setting Challenge and Happiness Challenge, each with over 3,000 students. He also runs the website How to Happy, which focuses on tools and information for optimizing happiness using psychologically sound principles. In his spare time, Donovan enjoys creating rap and poetry. He teaches courses on these subjects as well. His corresponding Youtube channel has had over 1.3 million views. You can contact him at howtohappy.com.

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PREFACE

People's thoughts and actions have always fascinated me, and naturally, I was drawn to study psychology in college. Like most psych majors, I dabbled in cognition, clinical, social, personality, human factors, etc. Classes were interesting, but I never felt fully satisfied. I couldn't pin it down, but something was missing. We'll circle back to that...

During my senior year, life started to unravel. While there wasn't a single overwhelming or traumatic event, several stressors combined to erode my confidence and esteem. For the first time in my life, my next step wasn't planned. With graduation looming, the full existential weight of freedom came crashing down on me: *What am I supposed to do now? What is the point of all this? How do people live?* Added to this, my three-year romantic relationship was falling apart and my thesis was months behind.

It wasn't long before every waking moment was unpleasant. I felt worthless and directionless. I ramped up my relationship with alcohol and other recreational substances to numb my feelings. My college work was slipping, but I

didn't care. I did only the minimum necessary. Each day was a struggle, with substance abuse staving off depressive thoughts just long enough to amplify them the next day. This bled into the rest of my life. I felt distant from friends and family, lacked empathy, and occasionally contemplated more powerful forms of escape, like harder drugs, leaving the country unannounced, suicide, etc. I went through the motions of life, miserable and uninspired. Nothing mattered. Nothing was interesting.

My response to seemingly standard or trivial problems may appear overblown. After all, I wasn't paralyzed, my family didn't die in a car accident, and I wasn't starving. I was graduating from college and experiencing a breakup. Life could have been much, much worse. Maybe this is why I didn't share how I was feeling with anyone. Pride also played its part. I studied psychology, after all, but I didn't make much progress. Each thought was an assault on my happiness. So, I escaped them however I could.

FINDING THE MISSING PIECE

My intention in telling this story isn't to elicit sympathy, but to explain my mental state at the beginning of my happiness journey. To explain that I don't have a natural disposition toward happiness. In fact, I come from a lineage ripe with predispositions to depression and anxiety.

The specific problems aren't important and are as real and debilitating as we allow them to be, regardless of the

details. What is important is how unruly I allowed my mind to become. I had lost sight of what happiness was or how to create it.

That's what was missing from my education in psychology. We discussed plenty of theories, but few practical tools. Most information was far too context-specific and experimental, and so it was impossible to apply in daily life. I learned the mechanics of the mind, but almost nothing about how to improve my personal quality of life. Accordingly, I was unprepared to manage stress, rejection, pain, uncertainty, and negativity.

I was assigned a business book near the end of that year. As with the rest of my schoolwork, I only skimmed it enough to pass the test. By luck, a few concepts trickled through my hazy, substance-altered consciousness. The content was different than my psych texts—less theoretical, more immediate, and personal. One of the concepts eventually connected with my failed relationship: “We can emotionally manage more when we realize others are not objects to fulfill our desires, but individuals with their own desires. Try looking at others in this way.”

I wondered: *Could this apply to me?* The way I framed the relationship repeatedly caused pain. I always planned quality time, bought gifts, and was emotionally supportive. *She was supposed to reciprocate. Instead, she acted like it meant nothing. How could she? What is the point of investing in relationships?* I saw the relationship as a transaction. What did she want? Primarily, someone with similar religious beliefs.

That wasn't me. Her lack of desire to continue the relationship had nothing to do with my worth or investment in the relationship. That realization alone didn't fix my mindset, but it certainly helped—one breath of fresh air in a toxic mental landscape. I finally felt some relief. That's when the momentum shifted. I stumbled upon another book, and another useful idea tumbled out:

.....
Focusing on events outside your
control only leads to frustration. Focus
only on what you can influence.
.....

I finally saw a path to restoring balance in my life. I needed more exposure to practical information regarding relationships, happiness, productivity, and mental health. Resources focused on action and results, not just the mind's structure.

I developed a list of generally well-regarded self-help, philosophy, communication, and practical psychology books. Finally seeing a path forward, consuming information became a priority. The process produced mixed results. Many resources were insightful. Others were misguided, confusing, and potentially harmful as some mixed illogical frameworks with useful exercises and vice versa. I oscillated between intrigue and frustration, parsing out what seemed both plausible and valuable.

Over the next few years, I experimented with a range of tools from varying disciplines. I explored adding variants of “happiness habits” to my routine, zealously testing for efficacy. I created my own life plan with meaningful goals instead of trying to figure out what was expected of me. Life kept improving. The steps became clearer. For the first time in years, I believed I could be happier.

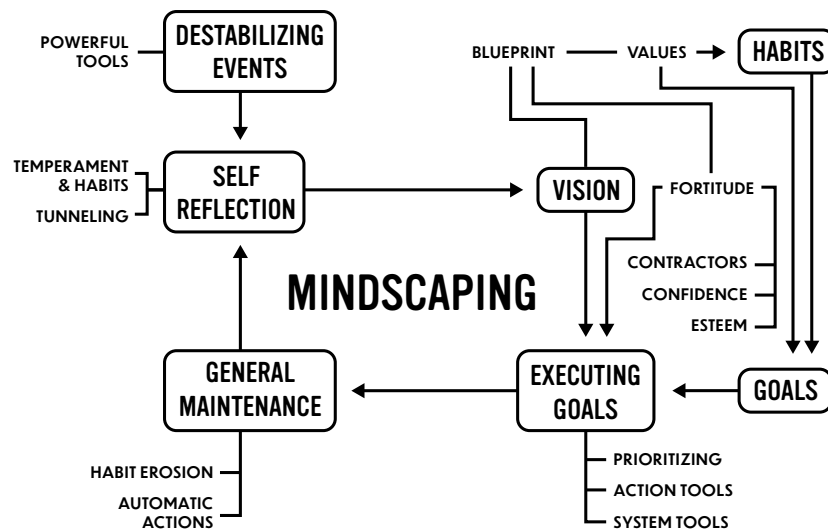
I wrote a book about a personal goal-setting experiment, then turned the associated insights into a course. I started writing blog posts about happiness, interviewing others, and reviewing the books I read. I created another course based on those insights.

I still spend a large percentage of my time consuming, trying, and distilling happiness-based content. I regularly test ideas and tools against practical, logical filters to parse what’s most sensical. This book is my attempt at extracting the high-level insights I have gained and presenting them in a practical, straightforward framework.

WHAT’S IN IT FOR YOU?

This book is designed to guide you through the process of creating a lifelong happiness-optimization process. It contains practical ideas, and each section includes specific exercises, but the framework is meant to be generalizable. You should be able to use it to determine how other resources impact your happiness as well.

Below is a visual overview of the key mindscaping concepts. Each major theme mirrors landscaping in some way. In essence, it is simply a cyclical process of surveying, planning, and executing. In practice, however, knowing the details and nuances of this process is important. A framework makes it far easier to conceptually package your thoughts, actions, and intentions toward happiness.



Treating happiness this way may seem restrictive or technical, but having the vocabulary to accurately describe your experiences makes it easier to optimize. A framework clarifies what aspects of life are currently most relevant to your happiness. This streamlines your attention, generating results more quickly. Ideally, you spend more time fulfilled or working toward it and less time wondering what to do next.

Disappointing as it may be, this book won't provide an instant cure. Nothing exists at such a broad level, even for

marketing purposes. Instant unshakable happiness, a perfect, problem-free life, and infinite productivity aren't realistic goals. There are no shortcuts to a meaningful, pleasant life. It takes time and effort. I can, however, confidently say that channeling effort through this framework produces tangible increases in happiness over time. It is a logical process for identifying, adjusting, and developing positive habits that produce happiness. Everything else gets cut out. You can't be happy all the time, but you can absolutely be happy more often.

This book is my best attempt at condensing years of knowledge and experimentation into an approachable, concise package. It is designed to help you find a range of valuable techniques for improving happiness, and my hope is that you'll find something valuable here, regardless of your life circumstances.



THE HAPPINESS FRAMEWORK

Imagine standing near the edge of a cliff overlooking two landscapes. On one side, the sun radiates golden rays across a verdant valley. Clusters of lush gardens and massive trees are visible for miles. Elegant pathways interweave the greenery, leading to features such as a tennis court, gazebo, and cabin, to name a few. You can just make out a shimmering blue lake, complete with a dock, off in the distance.

In the center of this landscape lies what can only be described as a modern castle. Massive pillars laced with gold decorate an imposing structure. Intricate, colorful designs snake their way up the walls. Near the entrance is a perfectly manicured lawn, a massive fountain trickling in the center. Everything has been meticulously kept. The view is breathtaking.

You can barely look away, especially compared to the other side of the valley. It roughly mirrors the first landscape, but in an unsettling and uncanny way. It is a waste-

land: chaotic, random, and overrun with weeds. Muddy paths haphazardly zigzag in incomprehensible patterns, seemingly leading nowhere. The corresponding lake is more of a murky, brown swamp.

The building in the center of this landscape is so small it's hardly visible. From what you can make out, it is a dingy, unstable shack made of cardboard and planks. It appears as though it might collapse at any moment. Glass is scattered everywhere, presumably from what were once windows. Huge chunks of the walls are torn down, exposing the interior to the elements. It's also confusingly placed. No pathways lead there. You could walk right by and never notice.

Which landscape would you rather live in? It's barely worth asking. The answer is clear. Yet, many of us allow our minds to exist much like the second, disheveled landscape. Without knowing how to shape our mental landscapes, many fall into disrepair. This metaphor may not be clear yet, but in the following chapters, we will explore how the mind is like a landscape, why that's useful knowledge, and how you can optimize happiness by maintaining your mind like a piece of property.

CORE HAPPINESS QUESTIONS

In my journey to understand the mind, countless questions have arisen. Digging into topic-specific resources answered many of them. Unfortunately, happiness wasn't one of

those topics. I found some useful bits and pieces, but no single resource comprehensively explained how I should live to be happiest. I particularly struggled with the following three questions:

WHAT IS HAPPINESS AND WHY IS IT SO ELUSIVE?

Most resources don't even bother trying to define happiness. Others felt vague. Is it pleasure? Satisfaction? Contentment? Being in the moment? What do *those* mean? When can someone say they are experiencing happiness? When two people say, "I'm happy," do they mean the same thing?

WHY IS THERE SO MUCH CONFLICTING INFORMATION ON HAPPINESS?

There are volumes of conflicting advice. Some claim religion is the only route to happiness, while others claim happiness comes from not being religious. Others say religion is irrelevant, and happiness is actually rooted in relationships. Are some individuals born happy and others miserable? What are the variables?

Even smaller, specialized tools can be confusing. One expert touts positive thinking as the answer to stress. Another says positive thinking doesn't help at all. One guru says hypnosis is key for health, another one says it's time in nature. The results are inconsistent as well. One method works marvelously for half the population and fails for

the rest. Are they implementing the tools incorrectly? Are people lying about the results? Why are happiness tools so inconsistent? What actually works?

WHAT ACTIONS OPTIMIZE HAPPINESS?

Learning how the mind works can be helpful, but how can we actually produce happiness? Ideas aren't useful without knowing how to implement them. Phrases like "choose to be happy," "let happiness find you," and "be happy in the present" may appear meaningful but are hollow upon further inspection. How do we live these platitudes? If happiness was one simple choice, we would have all made it by now.

Yet, I've seen these phrases repeated and spouted as pillars of sound advice. For those struggling with happiness, it is not only unhelpful but also detrimental. *Happiness should come easily. What's wrong with me? It's my fault for not letting happiness find me.* Are most individuals broken, or is the advice too naive? How, exactly, can we consistently increase happiness? What's an approachable but actionable framework?

These three questions and their corollaries have racked my brain for years. After countless hours of research, contemplation, and trials, I've finally refined satisfactory answers. In this book, I'll guide you through my exploration of these questions. It takes time to fully unpack the details,