

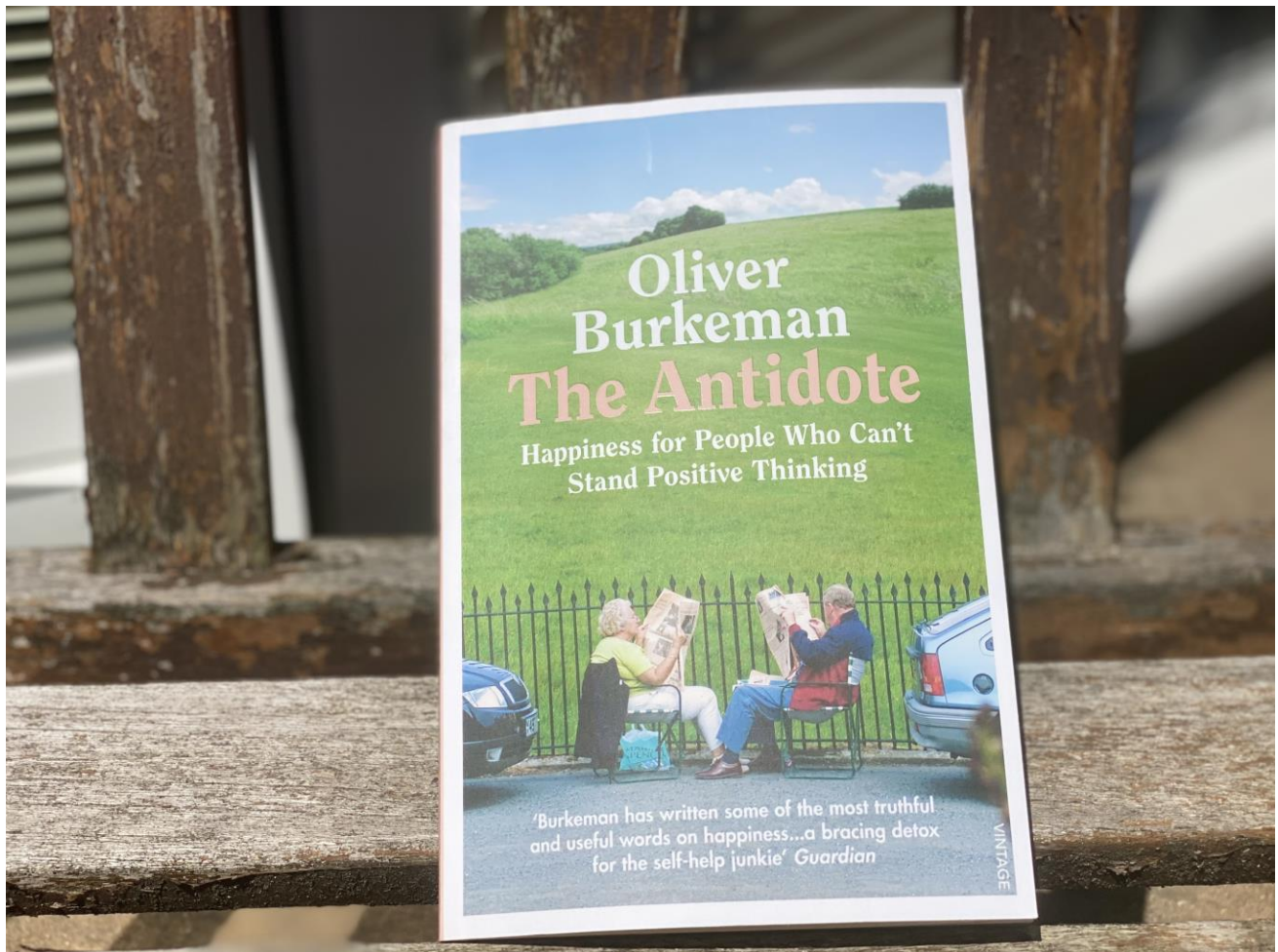
Wealden Business Group

Book Review: "The Antidote" by Oliver Burkeman

Report by Bill Ferguson, 26 May 2021

The Antidote turned out to be yet another "Self Help" book, but with an entertaining slant. At £10 for 212 pages it is good value, you could easily pay 20 times as much for a personal growth seminar and come away with less insight.

The challenge is how to reframe your life experience so that you feel better about it. There are some valuable nuggets, mostly in the first half of the book, then it gets a bit generic.



Chapter 1

Don't Try Too Hard to be Happy – it will have just the opposite effect

The story begins with a motivational event, noise drama and a little hysteria. Remove impossible from your vocabulary! But we soon learn that you can't think yourself happy or motivated for very long. The mental censor takes over and starts to convince you that you are neither happy nor motivated. And even if you achieve a goal: Hedonistic adaptation is a familiar example of how satisfaction rapidly fades after an achievement. The latest iPad, the fanciest car the financial goal that you just achieved. The buzz soon evaporates.

As well we tend to imagine that which we are told not to imagine. Don't think of polar bears is an example of ironic (error) adaptation. Remember the story of two boys climbing a tree – one is told “hold tight”, the other “don't let go”. Guess which one fell out of the tree.

This is a problem for us humans because we tend to visualize an event before doing it. Even getting out of bed in the morning involves a little planning.

Can we get more mileage by turning it around and visualizing unhappiness? What do you fear most: is it poverty, sickness, loss of a loved one, going crazy... practice your response to these outcomes and realise that they are more survivable than you feared. Bonus: having done the exercise you will really appreciate having the thing that you fear to lose. This leads into the next chapter...

Chapter 2

Ancient Greek Stoicism

Marcus Aurelius advises living a virtuous life and nurturing inner tranquillity. To achieve this he faced his greatest fear: poverty. As an experiment he spent days in ragged clothes and lived on discarded food. He not only survived but overcame his fear of poverty and increased his gratitude for the lifestyle that he had. “Imagine the worst possible outcome and prepare for it”, was his advice to his students.

Stoicism teaches equanimity: it isn't other people who make you upset it's your own judgement about how people should behave, that brings you grief? When you feel anger look within, the crazy biker who just scraped off your wing mirror is not the cause of your unhappiness, it is your expectations that are unreasonable. You surely know that the world is not a safe place! Stoicism is not about being unfeeling, but about shifting your mental framework so that you expect and even welcome the worst instead of fearing it.

Marcus Aurelius told his students "Say to yourself in the early morning: today I shall meet ungrateful, violent, treacherous, envious, uncharitable people". Which seems good advice for anyone planning to use Twitter or Facebook.

Chapter 3

Buddhist Thinking beats Positive Thinking

Accept That Life is Unfair and A Struggle. Learn non-attachment. Many people say that Buddhism is boring, some say that about test match cricket as well. Both require time and patience.

We are advised to sit with the problem and observe the changing mental weather, wait for the clouds to move away and reveal the full moon that was there all the time.

Remember that your thoughts are like the clouds, continually changing, you are not your thoughts! You have thoughts, just like you have breakfast. You are not your breakfast, it is just something that you have.

Motivation: Do you always need to visualise yourself doing something before making the effort, or can you set up routines or rituals. Who goes to bed without brushing their teeth? The power of routine can be channelled to avoid procrastination!

Chapter 4

Setting Goals – Prepare to fail

Goals can kill! Example of the Everest climbers and “summit fever”. Is it worth dying for a goal? You can have your goal if you are willing to pay the price but the “Law of Unintended Consequences” means you can never change only one thing.

OB debunks the urban myth “The Yale Study of Written Goals”. It never happened! One of our previous books (Scott Adams) recommended processes, not goals.

Goals set by organisations just encourage lies and perverse ways of working. Self-set goals can become obsessions and suck the joy out of life. Much more fun to be like a frog, only change lily pads when you get bored.

Before you start a project consider how big the loss would be if it fails and put a safety net in place.

Chapter 5

Stop being so egocentric – it's not all about you!

On the nature of self. Descartes was mistaken when he said “I think, therefore I am”, all you can say for certain is that “thinking is occurring”.

How do we know whether or not we are part of the Matrix?

Sit and wait to see what your next thought will be. Too much focus on the future leads to anxiety, too much focus on the past leads to depression. “Your whole life is only ever now.” Focus on the spacious present, that way your ego won't run the show. “Every injustice has an insecure ego behind it”.

Watts, asked the philosophical question. “Where do I end and the rest of the world begin” The boundary is where both sides are equivalent. There can't be “you” without “everything else”.

Chapter 6

Embrace Uncertainty as part of life

We like to feel safe. Where scientific rationality has replaced spiritual faith individuals feel insignificant and unimportant. The price of security is isolation. Feeling secure and living life are opposites.

Beware cognitive bias, we fear the threats that are easiest to imagine. Rolling news programs condition us to imagine disaster and act to avoid what we imagine.

The anachronism of Kibera, a poor township where optimism is unexpectedly high is explained by the social argument that cooperation is essential for survival and so there are close relationships between neighbours. Could vulnerability be a precondition for happiness?

Chapter 7

Embrace Failure as part of life

The museum of failed products. Failure is everywhere, we don't like to dwell on it. The

Prefrontal Cortex; the decision-making part of the brain; screens out failure as irrelevant information.

Perseverance and Charisma are characteristics of very Successful and very Unsuccessful people. Most books and studies focus on the former.

Perfectionists are at higher risk of suicide, driven by fear of mistakes.

Fixed vs Incremental mindset. Fixed believes in natural talent. Incremental accepts failures as part of life's journey and learns from them.

Chapter 8

Embrace Death as part of life

Denial of death is prevalent. Contemplate your own mortality and life becomes sweeter. Why does it work so well? Because when we remember we're going to die, the inane squabbles of daily life tend to fall away, revealing a clarity of purpose. It also stops people getting delusions of grandeur. At the height of their triumphant return to the city, Roman generals had a slave following behind whispering "memento mori". (Source: Life of Brian).

What can we learn from this story?

Samuel Johnson wrote in the 18th century, "When a man knows he is to be hanged, it concentrates his mind wonderfully."

Mexican "día de los muertos". Three deaths: clinical, interment, forgetting. The cult of "Santa Muerte", popular with assassins.

Closing advice: don't obsess about "closure", despite what your shrink tells you.

Get comfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity.

Enjoy the mystery of life while you still can.
