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Unhappiness Is Not a Disease

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Unhappiness is a natural brain function that helped our ancestors survive, yet modern culture tells us it's a disorder requiring "treatment." The result is that a huge percent of us think we have a disorder.

The disease model of mental health is so deeply embedded in our world that we don't notice it the way a fish doesn't notice water. The disease model tells us that happiness is the natural default state, which "normal" people get automatically. It was sold in the name of the greater good, but it does more harm than good. It trains us to feel powerless over our natural distress and expect "experts" to manage our brain for us. It leads us to blame genes and society for our natural distress instead of building skills to manage it.

And the disease model is not even true. Basic biology makes it clear that bad feelings are natural, inevitable, and manageable. Here is the basic biology we need to find our power over painful emotions, and concerns about why no one tells us this.

Why Unhappiness Is Natural

Bad feelings are a release of cortisol. This chemical creates a full-body sense of alarm that motivates an organism to act fast to make it stop. Animals have the same cortisol that we have, and they manage it with the same basic brain structures. Animals can't talk, so our mammalian limbic brain can't tell us in words why it's releasing cortisol. This is why a surge of bad feeling is so hard to explain, and why we accept explanations from others. Ancient humans explained their feelings as direct messages from the gods because everyone else in their culture believed that. Our verbal brain has no insider information about the chemical brain it's attached to, so it's always looking for plausible theories.

Today, cortisol is often explained with images of cave men running from predators. But we are not running from predators, so this explanation is not really satisfying. It just feeds the belief that bad feelings are evidence of a disorder.

We are taught that cortisol is "stress," and "our society" causes stress. This feeds the belief that cortisol is caused by things outside you that you can't control.

In the short run, making others responsible for your cortisol feels good. But in the long run, it leaves you feeling powerless, which leads to more cortisol. We are better off knowing some

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biological facts about cortisol. It's like paving on your neural pathways, wiring you to protect yourself from anything that hurt you in your past. You don't have to touch a hot stove twice because your brain builds a pathway the first time. Now, the sight of a hot stove sends electricity to the "on" switch of your cortisol, and you pull back in time to protect yourself. We are constantly anticipating pain because that's our brain's way of noticing threats in time to avoid them. Small-brained animals have a small capacity to anticipate pain, while the huge human cortex has a huge capacity to anticipate pain.

When you feel bad, you don't think of it as electricity flowing down a pathway built by your past cortisol. You think there's a real threat. You don't want to ignore the threat because cortisol is designed to make you feel like you will die if you don't make it stop. The more you know about your cortisol, the easier it is to see it as an internal response rather than the external truth. Here are some cortisol facts that everyone needs in order to put their bad feelings into perspective:

1. Our Brain Is Designed to Scan for Threat

Our ancestors lived in a world full of threat, so they would have starved to death if they refused to go out until it was perfectly safe. They survived by scanning constantly for anything linked to threats in their past. They also absorbed the fears of others with *mirror neurons*, the way animals run when the herd runs. thanks to mirror neurons. When there's no immediate threat, the brain scans further out for signs of potential threat. Today, most of us are so safe in our immediate world that we scan quite far out in time and space. When we find a potential threat, cortisol makes it feel like it's happening here and now. Animals only respond to threat signals reaching their senses, but the big human cortex can activate threat signals internally. We have ten times more neurons going from our brain to our senses than we have in the opposite direction. That means we are ten times more equipped to find the threats we look for than to process whatever floats in. A lot of cortisol results.

2. Disappointment Triggers Cortisol

If you don't get the pony you wanted for your birthday, you don't consciously think it's a survival threat. But the brain releases cortisol whenever rewards are less than expected. This is a very

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effective survival mechanism. Since our energy is limited, our brain constantly monitors the reward you are getting for your investment of effort. When a reward is more than expected, the great feeling of dopamine is released. When a reward falls short of expectations, cortisol alarms you with a bad feeling. Dopamine prompts you to move forward toward the reward, while cortisol prompts you to stop and find an alternative. The cortisol of disappointment has enormous survival value. If our hunter-gatherer ancestors failed to find water where they expected it, the bad feeling of cortisol motivated them to look elsewhere. They hated to give up because thirst triggers cortisol too. They gave up when the cortisol of disappointment exceeded the cortisol of thirst. This is why disappointment feels so bad. Today we are told to never give up, but you would not survive if you kept looking for water in a place that had none. The cortisol of disappointment helps us to be realistic about the return on our efforts. Of course, that means we feel bad when our expectations are not realistic.

3. Neurons Connect When Cortisol Flows

We are born with billions of neurons but very few connections between them. Connections build when our chemicals turn on – it's nature's way of telling you "this information is important." But this wiring is not built from rational analysis. We simply link all the neurons active at the moment when the chemical is released. In the future, we use these pathways without conscious awareness because the electricity in the brain flows like water in a storm, finding the paths of least resistance. This is why we are quick to feel bad when we see anything linked to a past bad feeling. Each time you activate that pathway, it grows stronger, so we all see the world through the lens of bad moments in our past. Since we're not aware of our pathways, we believe we're just seeing the facts.

Biology makes it clear that cortisol is inevitable. When the bad feeling turns on, it's hard to ignore because it evolved to command your attention. When a gazelle smells a predator, it would rather keep eating, but it survives because cortisol is so good at grabbing attention.

A gazelle doesn't just run when it smells a predator, because it might run in the wrong direction. It quickly gathers information before it takes action. A tiny brain does a tiny bit of information gathering, and our huge brain collects a huge amount of data on potential threats. This can lead to a cortisol spiral, where more evidence of threat triggers more cortisol, which triggers more scanning for threat. Our brain evolved to promote survival, not to make you happy.

Managing cortisol is a learned skill. It's harder to learn if you see your cortisol as a disorder and a societal problem. You expect others to fix your brain and fix society, so you are less focused on your power to redirect your flow.

Of course, it's hard to send electricity into new neural pathways. It's like trying to divert a river into a soda straw. We prefer our old pathways because an effortless flow of electricity in a big pathway gives us the sense that we know what's going on. We hate to leave the main roads of the brain and explore back roads, even when the main roads lead to unwanted behaviors and emotions. We need to know that new pathways build from

repetition, and start to flow in time.

We can learn to honor our cortisol as a valuable survival tool. It is very good at motivating a body to do what it takes to make the bad feeling stop. It motivated our ancestors to go out in the snow to find firewood. Today, our physical needs are easily met, but we are still relieving cortisol by repeating behaviors that relieved cortisol in our past. If partying relieved the bad feeling of failing a math test, your brain built a pathway that suggests partying the next time you fail a test. If video games relieved loneliness in your past, you have a surprisingly strong urge for a video game the next time you are lonely. You would be better off knowing the simple biology of cortisol.

In the state of nature, things that feel good are good for you. Today it may seem like things that feel good are bad for you. This reinforces the belief that something is wrong with the world. To unravel this conundrum, we need to know the biology of good feelings.

Why Happiness Is Not Natural

Good feelings come from chemicals inherited from earlier mammals, like dopamine, serotonin, and oxytocin. We want these good feelings all the time, but they're not meant to flow constantly like blood or saliva. They're released in small spurts when you meet a survival need. Thus, we are fated to want them without actually having them. It's frustrating, but it's not a disorder. It's nature's way of motivating survival action.

The brain rewards you with a happy chemical when you meet a need, so we want to repeat behaviors that meet needs to get more good feelings. Any happy chemical you manage to spark is quickly metabolized, so you always have to do more to get more.

These facts may be hard to accept because we don't consciously link happiness to meeting needs. You may hate the idea that selfish needs are the core of good feelings. You may insist that meeting other people's needs makes you happy. Let's take a close look at how an organism defines its "needs." We'll see how our beliefs about higher values meet social needs and thus spark happy chemicals.

Dopamine

Our hunter-gatherer ancestors didn't know where their next meal was coming from, so they were very happy when they found a fruit tree. That happiness was a dopamine surge. Today, food is so easily available that it's hard to understand why the act of seeking makes us happy.

A hungry lion enjoys a dopamine surge when it sees a gazelle it can catch. It may see hundreds of gazelle, but it must target one of them to meet its needs. If it just runs toward the whole herd, they all get away. So a lion carefully scans the prospects with neural pathways built its own from past hunting successes. When it sees a good prospect, its dopamine surges. That releases its reserve tank of energy, which helps it prevail. We love that energy surge and the "I can get it!" feeling, even if we're just playing a video game or scanning the scene at a nightclub. Dopamine motivates you to take action when a reward seems likely.

Lions are not born knowing how to hunt and our ancestors were not born knowing how to find fruit trees. We are not born to seek the rewards that preoccupy us. Neurons connect when dopamine flows, so each brain seeks rewards in the ways that worked for them before. Each of us is wired to seek whatever sparked our dopamine in the past.

A negative view of dopamine has become popular in recent years. People have learned to fear excess dopamine from their devices and to blame dopamine for their addictions. The normal healthy function of dopamine is widely overlooked. To understand it, let's take the perspective of a newborn baby. Its cortisol is triggered by low blood sugar when it needs to eat, and that triggers crying. Milk arrives and that triggers dopamine. Connections build between all the neurons active at that moment, so the next time the baby hears its mother's voice, its dopamine turns on. It doesn't know what milk is or what a mother is, but it knows how to anticipate a reward. You can call this "love," but you should know that dopamine creates our sense of urgency about things that met a need in our past.

It's often hard to see the link between joy and meeting a need in your past, so we find other ways to explain our joy. Metaphysical explanations surround us, and they fill the need for an explanation if you don't have another. Once you accept an explanation, your pattern-seeking brain is good at finding evidence to support it. We tend to overlook facts that don't fit our explanations. Here are some facts about good feelings that are widely overlooked.

Dopamine stops once you get what you seek because it has already done its job. This dopamine dip is frustrating if you expect to be happy forever once you reach a certain goal. We need to know how dopamine dip helped our ancestors survive. Their excitement about finding a fruit tree was short lived, so they moved on to find protein as soon as they ate their fill of fruit. They had to meet another need to spark more dopamine. They had to seek constantly, but dopamine made it feel good. In today's world, people complain about a treadmill feeling. They hate the constant pressure to do more, and blame society and disorders for it. We'd be better off knowing about the operating system we've inherited. Instead of expecting endless joy and being disappointed, we could celebrate our power to spark dopamine with our next step.

Dopamine is confusing because our brain evolved to focus on the survival of your genes rather than your body. Anything that helps spread your genes sparks your happy chemicals. Your appearance and your kids' SAT scores get you going because they're linked to what biologists call "reproductive success." You can say you don't care about your genes, but natural selection built a brain that rewards you with a good feeling when you promote them.

Our awareness of death complicates things further. Humans are more aware of their mortality than animals because our big cortex can anticipate the future. It knows we will fail to survive someday, and the thought triggers cortisol. You change that bad feeling to a good feeling when you create something that will survive when you're gone. For most of human

history, grandchildren did that. When you taught them your skills, it sparked the good feeling that your unique individual essence would survive. Today, few people get to teach their grandchildren, for so many reasons. So we look for alternative ways to create things that survive. Any step that builds your legacy sparks your dopamine.

Another complication is "jackpot dopamine." If you win big at gambling, a big dopamine surge builds a big pathway. It wires you to expect more good feelings from more gambling. This is why gamblers repeat behaviors that harm themselves. Most of us don't gamble, but we have our own jackpot circuits based on our own jackpot rewards. Whenever you find yourself repeating a behavior that harms you, a jackpot in your past will be motivating it.

Often, the jackpot was a social reward rather than a physical reward. In today's world, our physical needs are met more easily so we have a lot of energy to invest in social needs. The social chemicals are explained below, but we need to know that they often work in tandem with dopamine, which motivates the pursuit.

Oxytocin

The pleasure of letting down your guard is produced by oxytocin. When a gazelle is alone, it can hardly eat because it's so busy scanning for predators. When it's with the herd, it can safely lower its guard and relieve its hunger. We would like to enjoy that good feeling all the time, but letting down your guard all the time would not promote survival. Our brain saves the oxytocin for moments when you find a safe opportunity to let down your guard. The good feeling motivates you to find such opportunities.

If it were easy, we wouldn't need a reward to motivate it. In fact, an animal pays a high price for sticking with the herd. They are surrounded by grass that was soiled by others, which brings deadly intestinal worms. A gazelle would rather go its own way toward greener pastures, but its cortisol surges when it sees that it's isolated. Returning to the group replaces that bad feeling with the good feeling of oxytocin.

People lived in tribes for most of human history. Going their own way did not seem safe because tribal lore emphasized the threat of enemies. Today, we are free to go our own way, but we often feel unsafe. We see images of tribes and herds and packs, and we imagine them having the sense of community that we are missing.

We compare our friends and family to idealized notions about herds and packs and tribes, so they often fall short. We need to understand the profound selfishness of herd behavior. A gazelle is trying to save itself when it runs to the herd to escape a predator. Gazelles push toward the center of the herd where it's safer. Elder gazelles end up around the edges where they're more likely to be picked off. They have already reproduced, so the species survives, but they are not choosing to sacrifice themselves for the greater good. They are simply pushing and losing.

It's hard for a mammal to find the protection that makes it feel safe. So the brain looks for anything that sparked the good feeling before. Anything linked to social support in your past built a pathway that turns on your oxytocin more easily today. Habits that are bad for you in the long run are alluring if they strengthen your social alliances in the short run.

Animals cluster tightly when they face a common enemy, and it's easy to see that humans bond around common enemies too. Leaders often focus on common enemies because it's such an effective way of motivating mammals to stick together. Internal tensions relax when attention turns to an external threat. But you still end up feeling threatened. It's not easy being a big-brained mammal.

Hugging is often presented as the way to get oxytocin. But hugging someone you don't trust does not spark it. Your inner mammal is looking for reliable protection, and decides that with neural pathways built from your own past oxytocin.

In time, you learn that offering protection to others helps you get it. Reciprocation is a core mammalian survival strategy. You pick bugs out of another monkey's fur and they pick bugs out of yours. You remember a friend's birthday and they remember yours. You defend a friend from bullies and hope they'll defend you. Such "transactional" relationships may offend our "higher values," but we love the oxytocin that's released when someone protects us. Oxytocin is known for its role in maternal labor and lactation, so it's useful to see the transactional aspect of parenthood: your child promotes the survival of your genes more than anyone else could.

Transactional relationships have problems, of course. Monkey often fail to receive a grooming after they give one, and you may feel disappointed by the people you groom. Monkeys don't limit themselves to one-for-one reciprocation. Their grooming partners are more likely to defend them when a predator attacks or remember them during mating season. If they don't, a monkey finds a new grooming partner. The monkey brain keeps score. You also weigh favors given and received in your quest for oxytocin, but you're too nice to admit it, even to yourself.

Transactional relationships often lead to more than you bargained for. Your group mates expect your support when they do things you don't agree with. Your classmate may expect you to help them cheat on a test. Your buddy may want you to lie to the police for them. People who break the law together build strong bonds because they need each other's protection. We like movies about this because we love the oxytocin of strong social alliances. In real life, we may be tempted to do things that sustain our social alliances, even when it's against our better judgment.

Oxytocin is released in short spurts that are quickly metabolized, so we're always longing for the next confirmation of our social support. When you hear a cow moo or a monkey chirp, they are saying "I'm here, where are you?" When a response comes, oxytocin comforts them for a few minutes. They still want their

space because conflict erupts when they get too close. So the mammal brain constantly weighs the costs and benefits of the herd vs. greener pastures. We have inherited a brain that constantly weighs the costs and benefits of our social alliances.

We're taught that it's wrong to think this way, so we can't consciously notice it. Instead, we embrace idealized notions of "connection" that leave us disappointed. We're taught that "unconditional support" should be expected because we "deserve" it. Such expectations lead to disappointment and cortisol. But it seems like others are getting unconditional support and you are left out. It seems like you are giving support and others have failed to do their part. We are better off with realistic knowledge of oxytocin, but no one tells us this.

Serotonin

Serotonin is widely discussed in the context of anti-depressants, but its natural job is rarely mentioned. You may not like the facts because they conflict with popular beliefs about ethics.

A century ago, a biologist discovered a literal "pecking order" among chickens. Then, such hierarchical behavior was discovered in many other species. Half a century ago, researchers found that a monkey's serotonin rose when it had a moment of social dominance. This work was done by respected institutions like the US National Institutes of Health and UCLA's Neuropsychiatric Institute. But it made people so uncomfortable that the field was abandoned. It was left to massage therapists, who not surprisingly conclude that serotonin is sparked by "relaxation."

But animals do not survive by relaxing. A hungry monkey forages with a group for protection from predators, but if it reaches for a fruit near a stronger individual, it gets bitten. Every young monkey has been bitten, and that wires them to compare themselves to others before they reach for food. If a monkey sees that it's in the position of strength, serotonin is released and it relaxes its self-restraint and goes for it. When it sees that it's in the position of weakness, cortisol is released and it pulls back. We have inherited a brain that constantly compares itself to others and responds with strong emotions.

This leaves us with a complex dilemma. We long for the good feeling of serotonin, but we're taught that it's "not nice" to seek social dominance. So we deny this feeling in ourselves, while easily seeing it in others. It seems like "they" are putting you down because you can't accept your own urge to put yourself up. It seems like others are judging you because you can't acknowledge the judging you do yourself. We are better off knowing that we produce the relentless social comparison inside us, even when we consciously oppose this mindset.

Serotonin is not aggression; it's calm confidence in your ability to assert yourself to meet your needs. Serotonin feels so good that you want it all the time, but if it were on all the time, you'd get into conflicts that you would lose. We are designed to seek serotonin all the time, but not to actually have it all the time. This frustration is part of life, not evidence of something gone wrong.

Animals do not expect to enjoy the serotonin feeling all the time. When two mammals meet, each quickly checks out the other. An individual who perceives itself as stronger will make a dominance gesture like raising its head and staring. The other might agree and make a submission gesture, like lowering its head and eyes. Or it might think it's stronger and make a dominance gesture of its own. Now, #1 either backs down or fights. Animals rarely fight because injuries can be fatal and they're so good at predicting who would win; but animals are on the brink of fighting a lot. Serotonin has a calming effect on the dominant individual, so it doesn't need to bully. Once the dominance ritual is out of the way, two mammals can get along and even cooperate, albeit with the understanding that one of them will dominate any resources that come along.

It's easy to see why humans have such strong feelings about social comparison. A one-down moment feels like a survival threat because our brain is inherited from animals who competed successfully for food and mating opportunity.

To complicate life further, serotonin is quickly metabolized and the good feeling is gone. This is why humans strive for a one-up moment again and again and again. But we can't admit to the impulse, so we find socially acceptable ways to justify it. If you're the boss, you say you only want to serve others. If you score, you thank your team. If you strive for world domination, you claim to do it for the greater good.

The urge for serotonin is so hard to see in yourself that we need a less controversial example. Consider the good feeling of winning a hand of poker or a game of Scrabble. Serotonin makes winning feel good. Games provide a socially acceptable opportunity to express the urge to win, within limits. Of course, you can also lose, but it's not a survival threat. However, cortisol is released each time your urge to win is disappointed. You may end up seeing yourself as a little monkey who never gets the banana, and not even know that you've created this feeling yourself.

Imagine two toddlers grabbing the same ball. The one who gets it feels good, but adults may intervene and teach them that it's bad. Adults may force the child to give up the ball, and then praise them for it. Praise puts you in the one-up position and sparks your serotonin. Neurons connect when serotonin flows, and each of us gets wired to seek the one-up feeling in ways that worked for us before. We urgently strive to repeat behaviors that spark our serotonin, without consciously knowing why.

Now imagine you're the toddler who loses the ball to a bigger kid. Cortisol makes it feel like a threat, though you don't know why. We have inherited a brain that makes a big deal out of small wins and losses.

There's no easy way to satisfy the natural urge for serotonin. You may think others float through life on an endless cloud of serotonin because you don't see their struggle. Even the person you think is on top of the world is just a mammal worried about losing their one-up position. The brain habituates to any status you have, so it takes something new and improved to spark it.

You are born with an urge to be special in a world where 8 billion others want to be special as much as you do. Serotonin droop happens to everyone.

We're encouraged to see that droop as evidence that something has gone wrong. We are trained to blame a "chemical imbalance" and to blame "our society." We would be better off with the facts about serotonin. The brain habituates to serotonin even when it's in pills. Every society is made up of serotonin-seeking mammals. Why are the facts ignored? Why are we taught that happiness is the default state and unhappiness is a disease? Why are we trained to seek a fix and instead of building power over our brain?

How the Disease Model of Mental Health Became "THE Science"

The disease model of emotions is now called "THE Science," so you're dismissed as an anti-science nut if you question it. Let's see how this came to be.

In 1769, naked girls rowed canoes out to greet European sailors arriving in Tahitian waters. The news spread like wildfire around the world and people struggled to explain it. Jean-Jacques Rousseau said that this is the natural state, which civilization has robbed us of. Intellectuals embraced his explanation and it became entrenched in our education system. It presumes that life is effortlessly happy in the state of nature. We're given the impression that coconuts fall when you're thirsty and fish practically jump into your lap. This leaves you free to make love all day and there's never a shortage of willing admirers. Rousseau omitted the fact that the Tahitian girls were pressed into service by their families because the compensation was one nail, and metal was not otherwise available. The theory of primal happiness was false from the start, but it's so appealing that it kept growing.

A century later, Karl Marx asserted that we could return to the happy state by tearing down "our society." "Any means necessary" to tear down the old society was justified by the promise of universal happiness, including guns and bombs.

Fifty years later, guns and bombs had failed, so a new strategy emerged. Intellectuals decided that education and culture could be used to destroy the old society. Europeans developed "social sciences" to generate "evidence" that other societies are happy and "our society" has messed things up. Their "studies" showed that animals are happy, children are happy, and hunter-gatherers are happy. The obvious conflict among animals, children and hunter-gatherers is widely ignored because social science ignores it.

This paradigm was brought to the US by scholars escaping the Nazis. A prestigious teacher-training program was developed at Columbia University, and from there, it enveloped American education in the presumption that "our society is the problem." Students were trained to generate "data" to show that "the system" causes unhappiness.

At the same time and place, a young Arthur Sackler began

searching for a pill to make people happy. The Sackler family is now associated with Oxycontin, but they pioneered in psych meds long before that. Arthur and his two brothers were licensed psychiatrists at Creedmoor, a historic hospital for mental illness. But Arthur had worked in advertising to put himself through school, so he had plenty of advertising skill to apply to the behavioral medications he developed. He also used his insider status in the medical community to blur the lines between advertising and research. Within a few decades, the world was persuaded that pills can cure unhappiness, “according to the science.”

We are not told that drug makers themselves have produced “THE Science” behind behavioral medication. Nor are we told about the pressure on doctors to prescribe these drugs. Doctors who resist the pressure can be accused of falling below the “standard of care,” exposing themselves to lawsuits and licensing problems. In recent years, the aggressive marketing of pain pills has gotten attention because so many deaths resulted, but the aggressive marketing of depression, anxiety, and ADHD pills is still widely overlooked.

The media have played a huge role in the acceptance of the disease model of mental health. They frequently publish “warning signs” of mental health problems, as defined by pharma-funded sources. These warning signs are so general that most people find something to identify with. The warnings take the guise of public service, without acknowledging that drug-company advertising plays a huge role in the survival of many media outlets. If you see less pharmaceutical advertising today, it’s because they are now using social media influencers to advocate for behavioral medication. The pervasiveness of these messages makes it easy to see your natural dips as symptoms of a disorder.

Who decides what “THE Science” is? The opinions of prestigious journals, conferences and academics end up in media coverage, but the pharma funding they receive does not get media coverage. Healthcare administrators determine the “standard of care” that doctors are judged by, and healthcare administrators get huge gifts from drug makers. We are always left with the impression that “the data” support the belief that unhappiness is a disease that medication can cure. Yet simple biology shows why this is wrong. Happiness is not our natural default state. Unhappiness is natural, while happiness is a skill we must learn.

Happiness Is a Skill

No one is effortlessly happy because the happy chemicals evolved to reward steps toward meeting needs. Everyone is unhappy sometimes because unhappy chemicals evolved to alert us to obstacles to meeting needs. These chemicals are controlled by pathways built from past experience, and cortisol builds the big pathways. Fortunately, we have billions of extra neurons ready to build new pathways. We can learn to redirect our electricity from potential threats to potential rewards, and thus shift ourselves from threat chemicals to happy chemicals. Each time we do this, we build the neural pathway that makes it easier the next time. Humans have strived for this skill since the beginning of time because it’s the only way to wrest happiness

from our threat-seeking brain.

But it’s hard, because our thoughts seem like facts rather than electricity flowing into old pathways. It’s hard to let go of negative expectations because they feel like protection from a dangerous world. With practice, anyone can build the skill of redirecting, but we have to notice our responses before we can redirect them.

So why are we taught that bad feelings are a disease? Why are we encouraged to let “experts” manage our brain for us? Why are we sold the belief that joy is the norm and society owes it to us?

There’s plenty of blame to go around, but blame just leaves you feeling powerless. Instead of blaming drug companies and “the culture” and “the system,” we can learn to recognize our natural urges. We naturally long for fast, easy spurts of happy chemicals and rush to escape from threat chemicals. The demand for fast, easy happiness creates the supply.

It’s hard to acknowledge your mammalian impulses when everyone around you accepts the disease model. It’s easier to blame your genes and “our society” than to redirect your impulses. But doing what is easy leaves you unhappy. You wait for “them” to fix it, and your life passes by.

We are better off accepting our unhappy biology. It’s uncomfortable to think that you’re wired by your own past experience. And it’s uncomfortable to think that your emotions turn on for reasons that don’t make you look good. It helps to know that we’re all in the same boat because our brain is wired in youth. A young brain has a lot of myelin, the fatty substance that turns neural pathways into superhighways. Our myelinated pathways are so efficient that we rely on them a lot. They cause us to see adult life through the lens of early experience. Children and adolescents have a lot of fear because they are not able meet their own survival needs. Fear builds real physical pathways that spark real physical chemicals. If we don’t know how we construct our fears, we justify them with fancy talk.

Nothing is wrong with your brain. It’s an evolutionary triumph. Humans have a very long childhood compared to other species because it takes so long to wire a brain from lived experience. Turtles have no childhood at all. They leave home the instant they’re born because their survival skills are hard-wired. Lizards leave home at birth and if they don’t run fast enough, a parent eats them. Reptiles are born with the knowledge of their ancestors, but little ability to store new knowledge. Their survival rates are low because you can only go so far on old wiring. Few baby reptiles live long enough to reproduce.

A mouse’s childhood is two months long, so it can be a grandparent by four months of age. A gazelle must run with the herd when it’s a day old, and it reaches sexual maturity in less than two years. Apes reach adulthood in about six years. A human childhood is extremely long by this standard. That didn’t evolve so we could delete all of our early learning. It evolved to build the neural network that guides us for life. This is why our

wiring is so hard to change. Yet we tend to ignore this early wiring and presume we learned everything for ourselves after we left home.

We all end up with some circuits we'd like to change, and we can do that with practice. But we need to do it with realistic expectations. No one has happy chemicals all the time and no one completely escapes threatened feelings. It would be nice if someone could rewire you while you sit in their chair. It would be nice if you could get your brain fixed the way your car is fixed. It would be great if "society" could spark your happy chemicals for you. But it's better to know the biological facts.

Here's a modest proposal. We have learned to stop eating food that grandma wouldn't recognize as food, so we could stop labelling our emotions in ways that grandma wouldn't recognize.

Grandpa takes pride in working on his car, but we have been taught that we should leave it to professionals because it's too complicated. We're also taught to leave our brain to professionals, but we can take pride in working on it instead.