

Happiness is a muscle. Happy is a verb. You can “happy” your life.

Most people would agree that there is much suffering in the world. There is also much happiness and joy. When asked, most people would love to make some of the suffering go away. The problem is, there does not seem to be an easy, universally agreed upon approach to increase overall happiness and reduce suffering. Most approaches involve or require at least some level of spiritual, philosophical or political conviction, common definitions and concepts and shared beliefs. And this is where more suffering is introduced by the attempts to reduce suffering by causing endless arguments, debates and conflicts about whose spiritual, philosophical or political path is the best or the right one.

GhettoZen tries to offer a pragmatic approach to address a small portion of the suffering. GhettoZen tries to address the suffering that people inflict upon themselves or others through the uncontrolled activity of their minds. I call this Self-Made-Suffering or SMS. The GhettoZen approach to reduce SMS does not require adherence to a spiritual manifesto. It does not take a political point of view. It only focuses on you, on your mind, on the here and now and on the life style you are living at this moment. GhettoZen is not trying to change you. GhettoZen is trying help you to live your best life by telling you how to run your own mind.

Following the metaphor of “Happiness is a Muscle”, GhettoZen assumes that your happiness increases the more you exercise the “happiness muscle”. How do you exercise the happiness muscle? By re-training your “Self” away from bad habits, limiting beliefs, negative self-talk and unconscious choices in the following three dimensions:

- **Perception** Moving away from unconscious perception to “Uptime” perception, where you know more about how you filter, modify and delete information
- **Reflection** Moving away from unconscious reflection to “Uptime” reflection where you gain more insight and control on how your mind processes information
- **Expression** Moving away from unconscious expression to “Uptime” expression, where you have more and more control on how you communicate and interact with your “field”, i.e. your world.

By learning more about how the three dimensions of perception, reflection and expression work, interact and contribute to self-inflicted suffering, we discover our happiness muscle. Once we have discovered the muscle, we can use it, nourish and train it every day until happiness changes from a “state” we are in to an activity where we “happy” every day, much in the same way we can en-joy everything we do as an active choice. Happy is a verb. Happiness is a muscle.

GhettoZen Levels: Moving into Uptime

Level / Dimension	Uptime Perception	Uptime Reflection	Uptime Expression
Beginner	Realizes that the finger pointing at the moon is not the moon. The map we make of the world is not the world. Realizes the patterns we encounter that lead us into suffering.	Realizes that we are not our thoughts and that the “Self” is a work in progress. Realizes the stored programs, habits and prejudices that lead us into suffering through self-talk and compulsive valuation and labelling.	Realizes that we cannot NOT communicate. Realizes that the feedback we receive from our world, our “force field” is what defines the self and our experience. Realizes how our choices and interactions can be the cause of suffering.
Advanced	Knows the various filters that are automatically applied to shape, change and augment all of our perceptions. Knows how to achieve an uptime perception state of detached observation. Suffering based on distorted perceptions is reduced. Knows most of the perception shaping communication traps.	Knows how to achieve an uptime reflection state through breathing meditation and uptime contemplation. Knows how to silence the “inner radio” and compulsive judgement processes. Suffering induced by compulsive thinking and negative self-talk is reduced.	Knows how to achieve an uptime expression state where the interactions with the world are conscious and compassionate. Suffering induced by unconscious actions is reduced. Knows how to use and train the happiness muscle.
Master	Clearly perceives the world as it is with a minimum of filtering. Is consciously in uptime perception most of the time . Is aware of the perception shaping techniques and tools used in today’s media rich environment. Suffering from distorted perceptions is minimized.	Mostly lives in a conscious uptime reflection state. Has control over harmful habits, compulsive thinking and strong emotions. Teaches others to achieve uptime. Suffering induced by compulsive thinking and negative self-talk is minimized	Lives in a conscious and compassionate uptime expression state most of the time . Is committed to the teaching of others and to minimizing the suffering induced by one’s own actions. Brings presence and joy to activities. Automatically uses and trains the happiness muscle at the subconscious level.

Chapter 1 – Perception

Here are some useful things to know about the process of perception

- As a rule of thumb, consider that 80% of the sensory information gets filtered out completely and never arrives at the conscious level. The remaining 20% are being filtered by our attention and emotional state. A good example is the background conversations of fellow customers in a restaurant. We only “hear” them if we focus.
- Filtering is a very important process to keep us focused and mentally stable. Our mind would collapse under the onslaught of information from all the senses without filtering.
- Once a piece of information “gets through”, the mind applies knowledge, beliefs, values, pre-conceptions, prejudice, habits, and other cognitive routines to “make sense” of the information. A good example is the image of a full moon on a horizon. When we look at it with our eyes, it often seems large relative to the houses and trees on the horizon. When we take a picture with our phones, it strangely “shrinks” to a disappointing normal size. The brain distorts the image. This kind of distortion happens all the time, with any kind of information.
- The filtered and distorted information that makes it into our mindscape then gets augmented. The brain is used to filling in missing pieces. A good example is seeing “faces” in objects. Since there is a dedicated portion of the brain focused on face recognition and reading of facial expressions, we can “see” faces everywhere. This kind of pattern recognition based on partial information pieces is a very important survival tool helping us to avoid stepping on snakes, for example.
- The filtered, distorted and augmented information then gets stored in short or long term memory. The brain usually adds a “story” to the piece of information. Very few information elements get added without a before/after story element. Other sensory information gets associated with the information, for example the visual element of the “giant” harvest moon gets stored with your emotional state (excited), body state (hungry/cold), and who you are with (spouse) for example.
- Every time we access the stored information, the information gets changed by small amount, based on the overall context we are bringing “to” the memory itself. For example, if someone says: “Remember that harvest moon? That was the night when we had the flat tire.” Now, suddenly, the harvest moon and flat tires are connected. That’s how your brain operates. Your memories are a process. A work in progress.

Uptime Perception

Here is a path to achieve the state of uptime perception, which can help you stay away from misperceptions, misunderstandings and jumping to conclusions thereby eliminating many root causes for suffering.

- Acknowledge the insight that only a small percentage of information arrives at our conscious mind. There is always more to know. Stay curious. Watch for making assumptions and jumping to conclusions. Ask questions. Clarify.
- Practice breathing meditation as often as you can to review the perceptions you have made that day. What do you really know? Where did you distort? What did you augment and add? What are some of your limiting beliefs? What pre-conceptions you have? What assumptions?
- Become aware of the many communication tools and traps that are set out for you by our media-dominated field of interaction. The media industry employs highly skilled professionals that know how to grab your attention, how to generate interest and desire and how to convince you to take action. One example is the communication tool of repetition. By

simply repeating a piece of information over and over many times, the brain will assign that piece of information the attribute of importance. The information will acquire some “truth” value. Repetition will implant that “truth” into your head at the subconscious level. Become aware. We are being bombarded with messages that plant beliefs and emotional states into our subconscious. Learn. Be aware.

- Understand that your emotional state massively influences the filtering, distortion and substitution going on in your perception. When you are hungry, sweet, salty and fatty food will rise massively in your field of perception importance. When you are angry, you will look for things that fuel the anger even more. When you are sad, you filter out and ignore information that might snap you out of the blues so you can stay in the low energy state of brooding contemplation and hopelessness. Learn to read the tell-tale signs of your emotional state and acknowledge: I am hungry, angry, sad, etc. Emotions are twisting my perceptions. Be aware.
- Understand that your mind is a highly evolved and refined machine that is very good at certain things (pattern recognition, face recognition, fear responses, quick reaction to unique opportunities, etc.) That same mind is also very bad at others things (e.g. statistics, estimates, complex calculations). Your mind is massively susceptible to communication tricks. Do not take your perceptions at face value. The chance that you are being fooled and manipulated are almost 100%. Take time to reflect before you act on your perceptions.
- Understand that your beliefs (biases, pre-conceived notions, faith, etc.) almost never change. Beliefs are resistant to facts. Become aware of your beliefs and pre-conceived notions. Become aware that you are filtering a lot of information if they contradict your beliefs.

Chapter 2 – Reflection

There is one key choice you can make in how you reflect about the world. You can either say “This happened to me”. Or you can say “This happened”. The key difference is in applying the “me” to the reflection. Taking things personally unnecessarily is one of the key root causes of self-made-suffering or SMS.

Here are some key things to consider in the process of reflection

- Life happens. Things happen. People happen to do things, not necessarily for you, or against you or because of you. People do things for their own reasons, most of which do not involve you at all. Much suffering is caused by people taking things personally too much.
- We all using “self-talk” to reflect on the world and on ourselves. In our own internal reflection routine, we are using certain statements over and over again. These statements shape how we feel about ourselves and our experiences in the world. For example, we may say to ourselves: “I am too old for this”! Our mind will accept that statement as a belief and then as a “fact” through the effect of repetition. The sentence (language) becomes a sentence (judgement). You sentence yourself to “life in prison” with your limiting beliefs. Everything your experience, perceive and reflect upon will be filtered by that limiting belief. You will begin looking for evidence to make the belief “true”. This is the key element for training your happiness muscle. Find your limiting beliefs. Become fully aware of them. Change the sentence. For example, from “I am too old” to “I am experienced and I am making smart choices”.
- Our subconscious mind applies all the knowledge we have to evaluate situations in terms of fear (is it harmful?) or desire (do we want more of this?). Subconscious evaluation goes on all the time and feeds our assumptions. “This person is like that.”

“That situation will begin to change into that.” “This person will be late.” “That plan is doomed to fail.” Etc. Generalizations (always, never, everyone, nobody) are mostly exaggerations and can cause strong emotions without any real proof or relation to actual reality.

- Language matters. Beliefs are formulated in terms of words. “I am not good enough for this” is a limiting statement that will reduce your happiness and create a fertile ground for suffering to take root. Gossip puts false facts into other people’s belief systems, including yours. The mind cannot process negatives. “Do not think of a pink elephant” will still make yourself think of a pink elephant.
- Things change. Nothing is permanent. Even your “Self”. Especially when it comes to negative emotional states that stand in the way of happiness. While you cannot avoid getting angry, we can prevent our “Selves” from staying angry. Emotions are brain programs to help us take action in order to avoid bad things (fear), and maximize the gain of good things (desire). Much suffering is caused by fear and desire. For example by (a) falsely assuming that things are permanent, (b) fearing the loss of something we have identified with and (c) longing for a things that are different from “NOW”. Using breathing meditation we can (a) accept constant change as a fundamental truth, (b) discover that we are NOT our things NOR are we our thoughts and (c) active en-joyment of the NOW is a muscle we can train.
- Emotions are “actions trapped by thoughts” and can be “dissolved” by taking conscious action. Happiness is a muscle. Happy is a verb. You can “happy” your life.

Uptime Reflection

Here is a path to achieve the state of uptime reflection, which can help you stay away from compulsive thinking, judgement and ego/identification, which are root causes for suffering.

- Use breathing meditation as often as you can during the day. 15 times 2 minutes works better for people with a busy life than trying to carve out a solid, silent 30 minutes between work, family, social obligations, hobby and rest. Teach yourself to just observe. Don’t judge. Don’t compare. Let things be. Be grateful for what you have in this moment. 4 thousand million years of the evolving, ever changing universe produced YOU, in THIS moment. Let this moment be enough. Be grateful.
- Discover and change your limiting beliefs. Find your limiting beliefs. Become fully aware of them. When you have a limiting belief, think about all the suffering the belief has already caused you in the past, the suffering it is causing you now, and the suffering it can cause in the future. Then make a choice to change the self-limiting belief. How? Through repetition. For example: Change the sentence “I am too old” to “I am experienced and I am making smart choices”. Believe that you are making smart choices. Tell that to yourself often. Remember all the smart choices you made. Think about what choice you are making next. Think how many chances you will still have to make smart choices because you are full of experience. Rinse. Repeat.
- Do not take anything personally. Ever. Life happens. Things happen. Reflect on what happened without putting yourself into the center of it all. This is a key dimension on how to train your happiness muscle. Being happy means you are okay with what happened. Now is enough. Nothing else needed.
- Become aware of your assumptions. Use breathing meditation to calm down and reflect on your assumptions. What do you really know from personal experience? What are you making up in your mind? Watch out for generalizations (always, never,

everyone, nobody). These generalizations are mostly exaggerations and cause strong emotions. “Nobody likes me” is a limiting belief that can become a self-fulfilling prophecy very easily by taking root in your subconscious mind. Replace the assumption with “I will find more people that are like me”.

- Become aware of your language. Language matters. Change your language through reflection. Beliefs are formulated in terms of words. “I am not good enough for this” is a limiting statement that will reduce your happiness and create a fertile ground for suffering to take root. Use breathing meditation to calm down and become aware of your choice of language when you reflect on the world and yourself. Can you replace “I am not good enough” with “I still have much to learn” or “I have plenty of room for growth in this area”? When you say to yourself “must avoid eating chocolate”, all your mind can think of is “chocolate” since Non-Chocolate is not a thing but an abstract category. Instead, change the language to “I choose to switch to healthy snacks like fruit when I need a boost”. Watch out for the phrase “I can’t”. Change the phrase to “I won’t” or “I choose not to”. “Can’t” implies control by others or circumstances beyond your control. “Won’t” and “Choose not to” sets your mind into a state of control and conscious choice. Watch out for the word “but”. Replace the word “but” with “and”. Language matters. Much suffering is caused by language.

Chapter 3 – Expression

The third dimension of the pragmatic program to bring more happiness to your life through GhettoZen is the process of expression. We are in a constant “feedback flow” of perception, reflection and expression. We express ourselves in the world through presence and action. A key insight of GhettoZen is that our “Selves” are social constructs that “happen” in interaction with our “field of existence”. Our field of existence is everything we are in contact with, our own minds, our environment and our community. Even just being present in the environment brings us into a feedback process. Uptime expression is a masterful state where we are consciously aware and in control of the messages and interactions we have with our “field”. Here are some facts to know about the process of expression.

- We cannot NOT communicate. This is an old adage from 1930’s communications scholar Alfred Korzybski, who also coined the phrase “the map is not the territory”. What this means is that even through mere presence in a situation, we are sending out communications and entering into interactions with our field of existence. Pets are hyper-sensitive to this. For humans, this works too, but on a more subconscious level. When in interaction with other beings, non-action becomes action. Silence speaks. Your body language paints a picture. Your words matter. Your attention matters. Your presence can be a present. It’s a choice and we can choose to be present in a mode of en-joyment, where we bring joy to the moment.
- Most of our actions are being triggered at an unconscious level. Science has shown that our choices are being triggered even before we become consciously aware of them. We often watch ourselves do things or say things even against our best interests because of the situation or other people in the situation. Does this mean that there is no free will? Not at all. It means that “We”, i.e. our “Selves” are a social construct that changes based on circumstances. It means that we are very much governed by our habits, beliefs, assumptions and programs, and by becoming aware

of these programs we can change our “Selves” in the direction of more happiness and joy.

- Unhappiness and gratitude are not compatible. One cannot be depressed and feel grateful at the same time. It is hard, if not impossible, to make our Selves feel grateful when we are down in the “dumps”. But it is possible to train ourselves to use gratitude as a guiding principle for our actions and reflections. And it is possible to realize and remind ourselves that unhappiness is usually caused by reflection, not by conscious, present action. By taking action, even in the smallest steps, towards the direction of gratitude we can minimize our self-made suffering; by (a) either making someone feel grateful, or by (b) expressing gratitude. Happiness is a muscle, happy is a verb. And we can “happy” ourselves a tiny little bit out of a state of sadness and depression with small, conscious actions that reconnect us to our community, that make people grateful and that make us grateful for the experiences we encounter. Emotions are actions trapped by thought. Escape the thinking trap through actions in the direction of gratitude and joy.
- Our mind-body system is a closed loop feedback system. When we feel happy, we smile. The converse is true, too. We make our selves smile (even when we force it), we will begin to experience the happiness feeling. We can observe our happy state in all its dimensions (smiling, muscle relaxation, calm breathing, acceptance, enjoyment of the moment) and induce the happy state consciously as part of our daily contemplation routine by running the happiness program.
- Happiness is in the moment. We cannot be happy in the past. We cannot be happy in the future. The past and the future are antidotes to the happy state, because they induce fear, desire, judgement, comparison, expectation and desire. Now is the only time we can be happy.
- Happiness is not in the “having” of things. Happiness is the enjoyment of the being in the moment. Happiness lies in the active application of presence and joy to whatever it is you are doing at the moment.

Uptime Expression

Here is a path to move into the direction of more joy, more happiness and less SMS (self-made-suffering through the process of expression of your SELF in the world.

- Bring awareness to your communication. Remind yourself you are constantly communicating. Even when you are silent, or staying away from a relationship, for example, you are still communicating. Take charge. Be explicit. Be aware of what you see, be aware of what you feel, be clear about what your needs are. What outcome do you want? Communicate that in as simple and direct way you can. Be aware of your body language. Bring presence to each communication, be there 100%. Be aware of your filters. Be aware of your preconceived notions, beliefs and habits. Much suffering is caused by misunderstandings, by exaggerations, by distortions, by deletions and augmentations of communication. Become a master in communication.
- Accept the fact that your SELF is a work in progress. We are very influenced by our “field of existence”, by the beings around us, our pets, friends, family, colleagues, community, village, countrymen. Accept that one of the key factors for happiness is to be recognized and accepted by your community. Nobody is an island. Reach out. Help someone. Get feedback. Start seeing yourself as being part of a thing that’s

bigger than yourself. Engage with the community, give and take, flow with the up's and the downs.

- Discover compassion. There is much suffering in the world. Everyone suffers on their own terms. Everlasting happiness is a fallacy. For happiness to exist, suffering must exist. An ocean without a shore is just a lot of water. Suffering is the Yin to the Yang of happiness. Compassion is the Yin to the Yang of Joy. Joy is the path to happiness.
- Discover choice. One of the key dimensions of happiness is the discovery of the power of choice. People that are out of choices, with their back to the wall, have a hard time experiencing any level of happiness. Become aware of the amazing number of choices you are making every day. Peel an apple. Take a shower. Buy a sandwich. Make your choices consciously. Express the happiness of choice.
- Bring gratitude as a guiding principle into your life. Making someone feel grateful is a good path towards happiness. Expressing gratitude for something is another path. Both paths are important. Practice random acts of kindness. Teach. Do not expect anything back. Expectation is an antidote to happiness.
- Smile. Smile with your whole body once a day. What is your body expression for happiness? Do you sing when you're happy? Then sing! Do you dance when you're happy? Then dance. Do you jump up and down? Jump up and down! Do you listen to loud music? Listen to music loudly! Practice your happiness. Happiness is a muscle. Happy is a verb.
- Observe your emotions. Avoid acting in an emotional state. Never act in anger. Accept that emotions are programs your brain is running to help you. Discover what your emotional state is trying to do: Avoid something, secure something, increase something. Choose conscious action wherever you can. Take a time out. Breathe. Never choose an action that you know will cause suffering in yourself or others.
- Express compassion. Listen. Be there for someone that is lonely, depressed, down on his luck, sick or just unhappy. Be there. Don't judge. Bring the gift of presence. Or bring a present. Not everyone has as many choices as you have, use your choices to help somebody. Compassion is the counter point to joy which is the path to happiness.
- Meditate often. One minute here. One minute there. Happiness is in the moment. We cannot be happy in the past. We cannot be happy in the future. Now is the only time we can be happy. Practice acceptance whenever you can. Don't be harsh on your SELF. We are only human. Not perfect, but pretty darn impressive. Good enough.
- En-Joy the moment. Bring the joy to everything you do. The world owes you nothing. It just is. Things are just things. They don't mean anything until you bring meaning to them. Be there, in the moment, 100%, with full attention in whatever you do. Tying your shoe? En-joy that. Drinking a glass of water. En-joy that. When you're in pain, or suffering, or grieving: there is no sane way to en-joy that! But you can avoid adding to the suffering through lamentation, judgment and personal identification with the

suffering. The suffering is the ocean that defines itself through the shores of joy and happiness. Once you reached the shore, be there as a conscious human being and enjoy your day on the beach.

- Be patient. This is a process. Yes, happiness is a muscle, but if you try to lift a 400 pound dead weight right now, you will rip every muscle unless you're trained. Take small steps. Repeat every day. This might take a few months to take root. But once you have cracked an opening into the dark cave of self-made suffering, once the light of joy gets in, the crack will get larger, and more light will get in as you go.

Happy is a verb, happy every day, as many times as you can.

CHHO

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