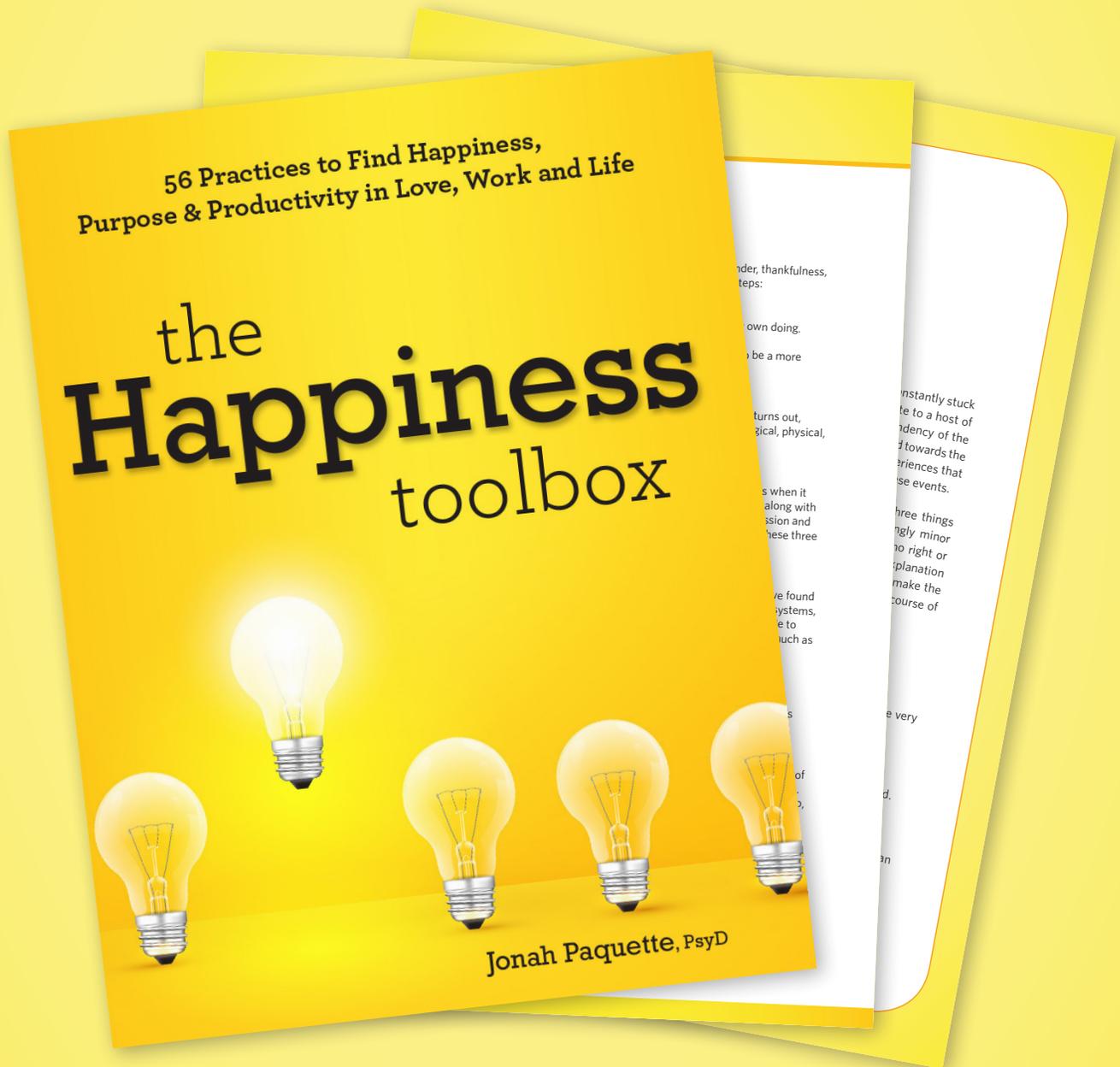


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# INTRODUCTION TO GRATITUDE PRACTICE

## What Is Gratitude?

The world's foremost expert on gratitude, Robert Emmons, defines gratitude as "a sense of wonder, thankfulness, and appreciation for life." He notes that gratitude consists of two separate but interconnected steps:

- First, we acknowledge the goodness that is present in our lives.
- Second, we recognize that the source of these blessings lies at least partially outside of our own doing.

Gratitude can be an external, visible behavior, such as the act of thanking someone. But it can also be a more private or internal process, such as acknowledging and reflecting on the good aspects of our lives.

## Why Practice Gratitude?

An explosion of research on the many benefits of gratitude has marked the past decade or so. As it turns out, gratitude is not merely an emotion that feels good; it actually holds the key to a number of psychological, physical, and social benefits as well.

## The Psychological Benefits of Gratitude

Studies show that individuals who regularly practice gratitude perform better across a number of areas when it comes to mental and emotional health. Indeed, gratitude has been linked to lower rates of depression, along with helping to buffer against future depressive episodes. It has also been shown to decrease rates of depression and stress, while also enhancing positive mental states such as joy, optimism, and tranquility. Please enjoy these three worksheets featured in The Mindfulness Toolbox.

## The Health Benefits of Gratitude

Not only are grateful individuals happier, but research suggests that they are healthier as well. Studies have found that individuals who regularly practice gratitude have improved overall physical health, stronger immune systems, and reduced rates of stress-related illnesses. Not only that, but research has linked the practice of gratitude to other benefits such as getting better sleep (as much as an extra hour per night), and exercising more (as much as 90 minutes more per week).

## The Interpersonal Benefits of Gratitude

Many studies have shown that grateful individuals have stronger interpersonal relationships, including more satisfying romantic relationships. They also are more altruistic, making them more likely to donate to charities and engage in volunteer work, and they are even able to let go of resentments easier and foster forgiveness.

## The Grateful Brain

The practice of gratitude is believed to impact our brain in several ways. First, on a structural level, the practice of gratitude has been linked to two areas of the brain in particular: the hypothalamus and the left prefrontal cortex. Though small in size, the hypothalamus is mighty in function, and it impacts things like our stress level, our sleep, and even our metabolism. The left prefrontal cortex, conversely, has been linked to positive emotional states, including happiness, compassion, love, and joy.

On a chemical level, gratitude has been linked to several neurotransmitter systems, including serotonin and dopamine. Serotonin influences a number of bodily functions and is thought to be strongly connected to our moods. Low levels of serotonin are thought by some researchers to be linked to higher rates of depression, and gratitude may increase our levels of serotonin in our brain. Dopamine, on the other hand, is considered to be a "feel good" neurotransmitter and plays a role in our ability to anticipate rewards and pleasure. Studies suggest that the practice of gratitude may increase levels of dopamine in our brains.

# GRATITUDE PRACTICE

## THREE GOOD THINGS

**Duration:** 10 minutes

**Frequency:** Daily, for at least two weeks

**Level of Difficulty:** Easy/Moderate

**Overview:** Because of our brain's built-in negativity bias, many of us find ourselves constantly stuck on problems, or ruminating about negative events from our day. This helps to contribute to a host of problems, including depression and anxiety. Research suggests that to combat this tendency of the mind, we must deliberately and consciously shift our attention away from the negative and towards the good. In this exercise, you'll be taking the time to notice and appreciate the positive experiences that occur throughout your day. Over time, this will help shift your focus more naturally to these events.

**Instructions:** Each night for the next two weeks before you go to bed, write down three things that went well for you that day. These good things can be relatively small, even seemingly minor occurrences throughout your day. Or they can be larger, more significant events. There's no right or wrong answer. Simply write three positive experiences from the day, followed by a brief explanation of your contribution to it, or why you think it happened. To challenge yourself further, and make the exercise even more powerful, I recommend never repeating an item from your list over the course of the two weeks (or longer, if you so choose!).

### **Example:**

*Good Thing #1:* I had a fulfilling day at work and my sessions with patients went well.

*Why this happened/My contribution:* I made sure I got plenty of sleep last night, and I tried to be very present and attuned in my sessions.

*Good Thing #2:* My partner cooked my favorite dinner, spaghetti and meatballs.

*Why this happened/My contribution:* I expressed gratitude and thanked her the last time she cooked.

*Good Thing #3:* It was a beautiful and sunny day when I was driving to work.

*Why this happened/My contribution:* I took the time to notice and appreciate the weather, rather than being stuck on "autopilot" as I drove.

**Practice:**

*Good Thing #1:*

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*Why this happened/My contribution:*

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*Good Thing #2:*

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*Why this happened/My contribution:*

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*Good Thing #3:*

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*Why this happened/My contribution:*

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**Key Points to Consider:**

Make sure your “good things” are experiences from the same day you’re journaling, rather than more general sources of gratitude.

By never repeating an item on your list, you force yourself to stretch your comfort zone and make the exercise even more powerful.

Don’t worry about spelling or grammar.

Make sure you write down your good things; although mentally reflecting on positive experiences never hurts, research suggests that taking the time to actually write them down is much more effective.

**How and why it works:** As you continue to practice this skill, you’ll begin noticing a shift in your outlook and the way you view the world. Rather than focusing on sources of stress or negative things that happened throughout your day, you’ll find yourself having more and more appreciation for the positives in your life. Over time, you may even begin to find yourself seeking out things to be grateful for throughout the day, in anticipation of writing in your journal. By becoming more able to notice good things as they occur, and to savor them in hindsight, you’ll be able to cultivate a deep sense of gratitude and thereby increase your overall happiness and well-being.

# INTRODUCTION TO MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

## What Is Mindfulness?

We spend much of our lives on autopilot, aimlessly shifting from task to task, with little conscious awareness of where we are, or what we're doing. For example, we drive to and from work, with little memory of the actual experience. Or we eat a meal, and it's gone before we know it. These experiences are quite common, and are the hallmark of mindlessness. In fact, one notable study found that we spend nearly half our waking hours in this sort of state. Worse yet, we tend to be most unhappy during these periods when our mind is wandering.

The antidote to this state of mindlessness is in fact mindfulness, an ancient practice that's only more recently come to be understood and appreciated by modern science. In a nutshell, mindfulness refers to:

- Maintaining moment-to-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, sensations, and surrounding environment.
- Practicing acceptance of these experiences without judgment, meaning we observe what's happening around and within us, without wishing for them to be any different than they are.

## Why Practice Mindfulness?

The past decade has seen a surge of research on the many benefits of mindfulness. As it turns out, the practice of mindfulness has been linked to a host of positive outcomes, including improved psychological health, enhanced physical well-being, and even improved interpersonal relationships and job performance.

## The Psychological Benefits of Mindfulness

Studies show that individuals who regularly practice mindfulness perform better across a number of areas when it comes to mental and emotional health. For example, people who practice mindfulness have been found to have lower rates of depression, stress, and anxiety, while having higher rates of happiness, well-being, and positive emotional states. Additionally, mindfulness has been linked to improved memory, concentration, and focus, along with enhanced problem-solving skills and creativity.

## The Health Benefits of Mindfulness

Not only are mindful individuals happier, research suggests that they are healthier as well. Studies have found that individuals who regularly practice mindfulness have better overall physical health, require fewer hospital visits, and spend fewer days in the hospital than their less mindful peers. Additionally, they have stronger immune systems, and have been found to be better equipped to combat chronic illnesses. Some studies have even found that mindfulness practice has been linked to lower levels of physical pain, even among patients with chronic pain.

## The Interpersonal Benefits of Mindfulness

Individuals who practice mindfulness reap a number of rewards beyond their physical and mental health. For example, interventions examining mindfulness in schools have found that students who practice mindfulness are less prone to behavioral problems and have higher rates of achievement. Furthermore, in studies of workplace success, researchers have linked mindfulness to higher rates of both job performance and job retention. Finally, studies examining the impact of mindfulness on relationships have found that mindfulness practice is strongly linked to closer interpersonal relationships, including enhanced romantic relationships.

## The Mindful Brain

The practice of mindfulness is believed to impact our brain in multiple ways. On a structural level, the practice of mindfulness has been linked to increased activation in the left prefrontal cortex, a part of our brain connected to positive emotional states. Additionally, practicing mindfulness over time has been connected to decreased activation in the amygdala, an area of the brain implicated in our fight-or-flight and stress responses.

Furthermore, regions of our brain pertaining to memory, learning, and emotion regulation have all been linked to the practice of mindfulness as well. A recent study conducted on individuals who regularly engaged in mindfulness practice has also found that mindfulness helps slow down a process known as "cortical thinning," which refers to the process in which we slowly lose brain cells as we age.

# MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

## EVERYDAY MINDFULNESS

**Duration:** Flexible

**Frequency:** Daily for one week

**Level of Difficulty:** Moderate

**Overview:** As shown in the “raisin meditation,” the practice of mindfulness can transform normal, everyday activities into something far more wondrous and meaningful. In this exercise, you are invited to take the lessons from the “raisin meditation” and apply them to other day-to-day experiences. Indeed, if we can turn the simple experience of eating a raisin into something profound, imagine what can be done for other areas of our lives.

**Instructions:** Begin by reflecting on a handful of activities that you engage in on a day-to-day basis, but which you often do in a “mindless” manner. Common examples of these may include (but are not limited to):

Walking the dog

Taking a shower

Driving to and from work

Brushing your teeth

Doing the dishes

Cleaning your home

Eating a meal

For the next week, choose one of these activities to focus on each day. You don't have to change anything about your normal routine; rather, the idea is to instead change the way you experience it. When doing each activity, try using all of your senses to fully immerse yourself, rather than simply rushing onto the next thing or finding your mind drifting aimlessly. For example, while taking a shower, you might pay particular attention to the sensation of the water hitting your skin, the temperature of the water, the smell of the soap or shampoo, and so forth. Remember, it's normal and natural for our minds to wander off, and that's okay! Simply redirect your awareness each time to the experience you're focusing on. *At the end of the week, using either this space or a separate piece of paper, take a moment to write down any reflections or reactions you have regarding your experiences:*

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**Key Points to Consider:**

Start with shorter activities as you get used to the practice, or break your activities up into smaller chunks. For example, if your commute to work takes an hour, don't worry about being "mindful" for the entire drive. Rather, commit to spending a shorter time period (even five minutes) in a more present manner.

If your mind wanders off, that's totally okay! The most important thing is that we simply notice this happening, without judgment, and gently redirect our awareness back to the present.

**How and why it works:** Countless studies have shown the link between mindfulness and improved mental and physical health. Although formal meditation is a great way to cultivate the practice of mindfulness, it can be just as helpful to practice through more informal methods. There are numerous activities that we often engage in mindlessly, with our thoughts taking us just about anywhere except the present moment. In this exercise, you are invited to choose one such activity each day, and approach it in a different manner.

**Notes/Impressions:**

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# INTRODUCTION TO OPTIMISM PRACTICE

## What Is Optimism?

The concept of optimism may mean different things to different people, and therefore requires a bit of unpacking. The word optimism itself comes from the Latin word optimum, which roughly translates to mean “best.” At its core, to be optimistic is closely connected with the ability to see things in a good light, both in terms of our future as well as events that are occurring in our lives. The key type of optimism that we will be practicing in this book is referred to as dispositional optimism, and is defined as follows:

- Having hope or confidence regarding the future
- Believing that challenges and obstacles can be overcome

In other words, when we reflect on our future, do we look forward to it with anticipation, expecting that things will turn out well? Or do we nervously glance ahead with worry, believing that storm clouds are approaching? Generally speaking, optimists believe that the coming days will be positive, and that they will be able to accomplish many of their hopes and dreams. Optimism does not mean that life is without challenge or pain, and in fact a key component of optimism is to be able to see things in a realistic (rather than overly pessimistic) light.

## Why Practice Optimism?

We are often told to “look on the bright side” or learn to “see the glass as half full.” Although these sorts of recommendations seem trivial, they nonetheless hold great truth. In short, there have now been countless studies showing both the negative consequences associated with pessimism, as well as the numerous benefits linked to optimism. By training ourselves to become more optimistic, we can reap a wide range of benefits for our mental health and physical well-being.

## The Psychological Benefits of Optimism

Whereas pessimism has been closely linked to a number of negative outcomes including depression, anxiety, and even suicide, optimism has been found to be among the most important ingredients for a life of happiness and well-being. Studies show that individuals who are more optimistic have lower rates of depression and anxiety, higher rates of life satisfaction and happiness, and are more resilient in the face of stress. It is thought that one of the key benefits of optimism is that it short-circuits rumination, which is strongly linked to negative mood states like depression and anxiety.

## The Health Benefits of Optimism

Not only are grateful individuals happier, research suggests that they are healthier as well. Studies have found that individuals who regularly practice gratitude have improved overall physical health, stronger immune systems, and reduced rates of stress-related illnesses. Not only that, but research has linked the practice of gratitude to other benefits such as getting better sleep (as much as an extra hour per night), and exercising more (as much as 90 minutes more per week).

## The Interpersonal Benefits of Optimism

Grateful individuals have stronger interpersonal relationships, including more satisfying romantic relationships, across a number of studies. They also are more altruistic and likely to donate to charities and engage in volunteer work, and are even more able to let go of resentments and foster forgiveness.

## The Optimistic Brain

Cultivating optimism impacts our brain in a number of ways according to the latest research. First, optimists tend to display greater activation in their left prefrontal cortex, an area of the brain closely linked to positive emotional states. Additionally, they show decreased sensitivity in their amygdala, the small part of our brain that fires up our fight-or-flight response during times of stress. Finally, optimists display greater activation in a region of the brain known as the orbitofrontal cortex, which is associated with helping us to better regulate our emotions and decrease our anxiety.

# OPTIMISM PRACTICE

## SLOW AND STEADY WINS THE RACE

**Duration:** 10 minutes

**Frequency:** As needed

**Level of Difficulty:** Easy

**Overview:** Pessimism often stems from feeling that we cannot possibly reach the finish line from where we are standing. We look off in the distance and see our goals, but the ground in between where we are standing and where we wish to go can feel insurmountable. But just as we cannot scale an entire ladder in one single step, we must remember that the path for reaching our goals can be a longer journey.

The Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu famously stated that the “journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” When it comes to fostering hope towards the future and moving towards meaningful goals, it can help to keep this spirit in mind. In this optimism-building exercise, you’ll be identifying important goals that you have for the future, and breaking them up into more manageable sub-goals. Whereas the larger goals can sometimes feel unattainable (like viewing the summit of a mountain when you’re just about to climb it), the steps in between can often feel much more manageable. By focusing on these instead, we can begin shifting from a place of pessimism to a more optimistic mindset.

**Instructions:** Take a moment and reflect on some of the goals and dreams you have for the future. Consider various domains of your life, including your professional life, relationships, friendships, family, and hobbies. Although reflecting on these goals can feel exciting, it can also bring about feelings of dread or pessimism particularly if they feel rather far off. To overcome this obstacle, it helps to break down our larger goals into shorter sub-goals that can be completed one small step at a time. Feel free to use the prompting questions to help get you started:

*A long-term goal I have:*

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*When I hope to achieve this by:*

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*What is the first step I need to take in order to achieve this goal?*

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*Who can I turn to for support in helping me reach this goal?*

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*If I made progress towards this in the coming weeks, what would that look like?*

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*If I made progress in the coming months, what would that look like?*

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In the process of setting sub-goals, it can help to keep in mind the concept of “SMART Goals.” SMART Goals are:

**S**pecific—the goal is clearly defined (e.g., who, what, where, when, and why)

**M**easurable—the goal can be tracked in terms of progress (e.g., how much, how many)

**A**chievable—the goal is attainable and realistic

**R**elevant—the goal is worthwhile and related to our larger goals and dreams

**T**imely—the goal has a time limit (e.g., when will it be accomplished by?)

By combining the focus questions contained above with the parameters of SMART Goals, you’ll be well on your way to moving toward your goals!

**Notes/Impressions:**

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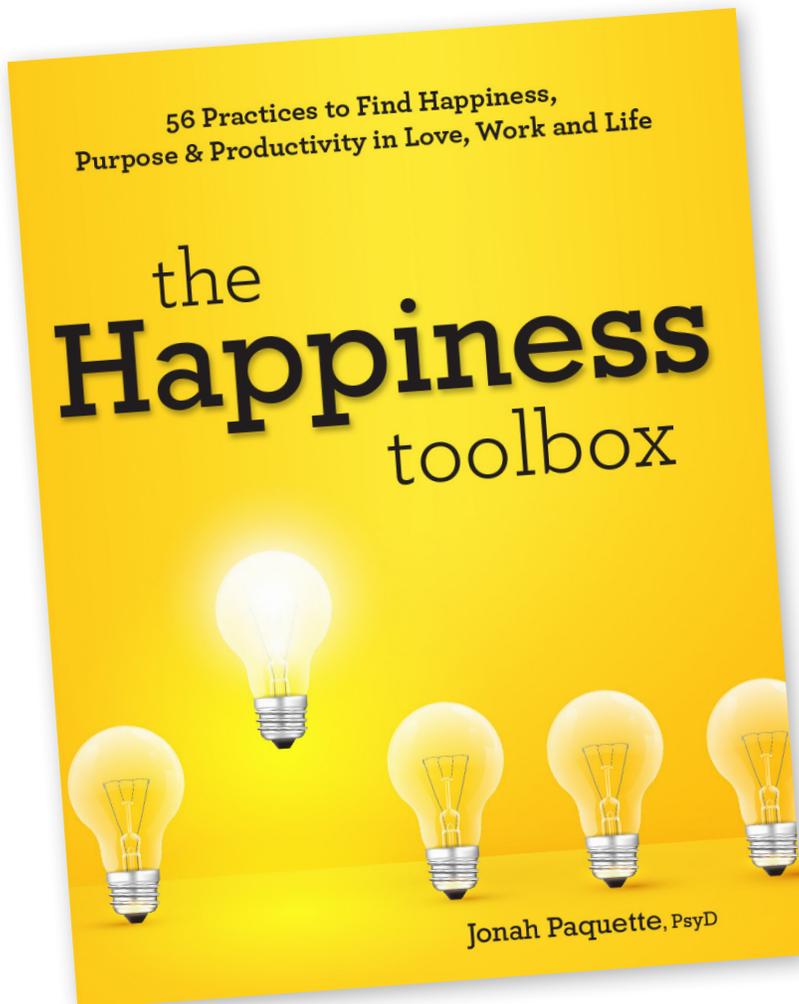
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