

CHAPTER 1

WHY ARE YOU CHOOSING TO BE UNHAPPY?

Something we have found that many people have in common in the Grey Zone is that they wish their lives were better, and they spend time thinking and daydreaming about how things could be different. While having dreams for the future is great, Grey Zone daydreaming is different.

It's not being excited for something you're working towards, but rather wishing for an escape from where you're at without actually doing anything about it. Or knowing that you're capable of doing something amazing, and fantasising about doing it, but then making excuses and rationalisations for why you're not trying it out – as one of our survey respondents said, 'Life's getting in the way'. Empty wishing without any real motivation or intention to take action is not getting you anywhere.

Grey Zone inhabitants don't take any action because they don't really believe that what they dream about could come true, or are terrified of failing. And many people become bitter that they don't have what they want already. They stop truly dreaming about what they could achieve, and start wishing

they had already achieved it. It's a kind of giving up; resigning themselves to the comfortable grey life, while simultaneously wanting to escape.

Kids aren't like this.

Kids dream about being an astronaut, or a ballerina, or a pilot, and they really think that's what they'll be one day. There are no limitations on what's possible. They don't worry about whether they'll succeed or fail. When they play-pretend that they're an astronaut on a spaceship going to the moon, they know that it's play, but the enjoyment they get from it is as if it's real. They're not annoyed that they aren't an actual astronaut yet! Quite the opposite: for them, imagining what it would be like is motivating, it encourages them to read books on space and look through their telescope, and they feel fulfilled.

Then gradually school teaches them that trying and failing is bad – that there are wrong answers, and that it's embarrassing. Adults may well tell them that their dreams are unlikely to happen, and as they grow up they start to believe it too. We are programmed as we grow up to be filled with doubt and negativity, so that doing what we actually want and making changes to get there seems incredibly difficult. Impossible even.

Part of the work we do as coaches is to get rid of all this negative programming so that people can start to dream like they did as a child, and to start making decisions that are actually right for them so they can experience the outcomes they want.

The art of play is something that kids naturally understand, and adults often don't. It's enjoying being in the moment, and the process of getting to where you want to be, every bit as much as enjoying the end destination. It's about having fun right here, right now, as part of the journey to what you want long-term. Compare that to how most of us think: wishing that we were somewhere else, someone else, doing something else, but never believing that it's possible, whilst at the same time feeling life is unfair that you don't have it, what a paradox!. In this case, kids' thinking makes more sense. When was the last time you just let go and played like a kid?

The bottom line – the reason behind all this daydreaming – is that people want to be happy. And it's a good aspiration. There've been lots of surveys and

studies about happiness over the years, and patterns are starting to emerge on what it takes. One group of researchers from Harvard¹, after looking at a lot of data over a long period of time, suggested that the secret is choosing to be happy with whatever you do, strengthening your closest relationships, steering the direction in which you want to contribute, doing more of what you're good at and taking care of yourself physically, financially and emotionally. We'll be looking at a lot of these ideas throughout the rest of the book.

The problem today is that people confuse happiness with short-term pleasure. Many of us chase hits of feel-good brain chemicals, such as dopamine, that rapidly fade away rather than building a life of deeper contentment. We're happiness machines bouncing from one external thing to another – the new car, the new partner, the new shoes; even the one-day self-development motivational event that gets you fired up but doesn't get you to actually change – never looking inward to make things better.

This is partly because we don't always know what is good for us, but also because short-term dopamine hits don't require effort. You can always stop off for a burger and fries at the drive-thru on the way home from a job where you're bored out of your mind. But long-term contentment does take work.

Exploring your decisions is a good place to start. Before making a decision, ask yourself whether it's going to only give you short-term pleasure, or contribute to your long-term happiness. Quite often you'll find that it's either one or the other. Eating a bag of doughnuts will give you a hit of dopamine, but if it makes you fat, will it contribute to your long-term happiness? Probably not.

To avoid confusion throughout the book, rather than using the word 'happiness' we'll now call the goal 'contentment', or 'peace of mind'. Because even in the best life, sometimes things suck. Terrible things outside of your control can happen. You can't be happy all day every day. But you can have a deeper sense of contentment, even on a bad day. You can get rid of the nagging voice that's

¹IPSOS Global Trends Survey: Fragmentation, Cohesion & Uncertainty – this 2017 survey was conducted with 18,180 adults aged 16–64 (USA and Canada), between 12 September and 11 October 2016. The survey looked ahead to the following 12 months, at areas of life that the adults were optimistic or pessimistic about. We also utilised our own adult surveys carried out between January and October 2018.

there every morning telling you that something's not right. And you can be more happy, more of the time.

Another big factor in the age of social media is that we're constantly comparing ourselves and our levels of happiness with those of other people. We look at people's lives on Facebook and Instagram and everything seems so perfect. Perfect house, perfect dog, perfect holiday in the Bahamas.

But we're comparing our reality with their shop window. All you see is the bits they want you to see (and they may well have spent an hour just getting the photo right). You don't see all the bad parts, because of course they don't post that online. It's impossible to compare your happiness to theirs, because you have no idea how happy they are.

But even outside of social media we're plagued with the idea of 'keeping up with the Joneses'; that whatever we have is only worth something in comparison to what other people have. It's the very definition of giving control away: we can't be content if the neighbour's TV is bigger than ours. Well they can always buy a bigger TV, so I guess we'll never be content. Not a good plan!

We know of so many people who daydream about winning the lottery, reading up on lottery winners and feeling envious. But the truth is you don't need millions of pounds. In fact, having lots of money can bring new issues you never imagined. You need to actually understand what drives you, what you want to do, and what makes you fulfilled, and then what other people have in comparison makes no difference. It's an internal thing.

Look at young kids – before the age of seven or so. They'll be happy playing with a new toy, no matter what other kids have. They'll be happy playing even without any toys, just using their imagination. As a society we could definitely spend more time enjoying what we do have than wishing for what other people have.

What's the alternative to living in the Grey Zone and empty wishing? Plan your life rather than aimlessly following the expected path. Take control. Don't end up in the trap by accident, where you feel like you can't escape the life you're in and aren't sure how you even got there. And if you're in the trap already, realise that something has to change to get out of it, and the only person who can make that change is you.

The rest of this book will help you with this. We first just want to bring your attention to what is happening in so many adults' lives. Too many of us think of life as a struggle towards an eventual utopia – hoping that 'one day' things will be great. In Victorian times this was called the 'jam tomorrow' promise, where kids were told they'd be happy in heaven, but for right now they had to climb up a chimney and clean it.

In today's society, retirement is the time when people hope to be happy. And while many of us might be happier when we're finished with work, wouldn't it be better to also enjoy life for the 50 years or so of adulthood before then, while we're still fit and young?

BE MORE KID

If you want something, work towards getting it. Take responsibility for your decisions, your actions, and your peace of mind. Start today. Don't worry about failure – remember, kids don't. And this book is all about being more kid.

The following chapter will unpack 'overthinking' and why it's not good for us, as well as providing practical tips on how you can focus your thinking in a productive way instead.