

Misunderstanding: The Hidden Trap

***"None are more hopelessly enslaved than those
who falsely believe they are free."***

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe
Poet, playwright, novelist
and philosopher

"An addict is someone who's trying to use a *visible* solution to solve an *invisible* problem. . ."

I was no stranger to addiction when I heard this. I started drinking when I was 12 years old and didn't stop for good until I was 30. On the journey of recovery, my life improved in ways that I didn't even imagine were possible. But, in the process, I discovered an even deeper addiction at the very heart of modern culture. This addiction is so subtle, it's almost *invisible*, a life-eroding trap that has hooked countless millions of people. . .

The hidden hamster wheel

The hidden hamster wheel is one of the most common barriers to clarity. It's based in a misunderstanding that's taken to be "obviously true" by most people. It's so subtle and pervasive that it shows up in everything from children's books to leadership programmes, from movies to marketing campaigns.

The Power of Misunderstanding

In the 1800s, it was widely accepted that illnesses such as cholera and the plague were caused by "bad air" (also known as atmospheres or miasmas). At the time, huge numbers of people were moving to Soho in London, with an associated increase in sewage. The council of the day decided to dump the excess waste into the river Thames, unknowingly contaminating the water supply, and causing a cholera outbreak that claimed the lives of 618 Soho residents in just a few weeks.

The miasma theory was a misunderstanding that was seen as fact. As a result, the decision to pump sewage into the water supply was taken from within that misunderstanding. While you and I know it's crazy to let human waste into your drinking water supply, that's because we have a better understanding of reality.

Misunderstanding can lead to needless misery, suffering and even death. But as soon as people get a clearer understanding of the nature of reality *as it already is*, there can be a massive and widespread improvement in quality of life.

Thought Experiment

Imagine this: It's 1853, you live in Soho, London. It's a crowded city, with only rudimentary sanitation. The air is full of strong odours, so you're in the habit of carrying a posy, a small bunch of flowers to protect you from illness. Everyone you know does the same thing, and the posy industry is big business.

Then one day you meet a scientist who's convinced diseases *aren't* caused by bad smells. He tells you disease is actually transmitted by tiny invisible creatures, but when you ask for evidence, he explains that we don't currently have the equipment that could show you the little creatures (or "germs" as he calls them). He tells you, however, that he can show you phenomena that can only be explained by the existence of these germs.

Would you believe it? Maybe, maybe not. Most people would probably say *"Don't be silly – everybody knows that illness is caused by bad smells. It's obvious. . ."*

My guess is that until I had some compelling evidence to the contrary, I'd be tempted to keep buying posies, and so would you.

An essential question

If you were to be presented with the evidence that one of the most widely held beliefs of modern society was in fact a misunderstanding about how life works, would you be able to listen with an open mind? The fact that you're reading this means the answer is probably "yes," so here goes. . .

The life-damaging misunderstanding that I call the *hidden hamster wheel* is the mistaken belief that our "core states" such as security, confidence, peace, love, happiness and success can be provided or threatened by past, present or future circumstances, by something "visible."

We have this belief because we've been conditioned to believe that there's somewhere to get to, and that "there" is better than "here." And "there" comes in a variety of tantalising flavours that look something like this:

I'll be [*happy/secure/fulfilled/peaceful/better/successful/ok*] when I . . .

- Find the right work/hobby/partner/community – the "there" of doing and relationships
- Get the money/write the book/start the business/lose the weight – the "there" of accomplishment

- Change my thinking/my limiting beliefs/do my affirmations – the “there” of mindset
- Meditate properly/find the right practice/get enlightened – the “there” of spirituality

I know, because I’ve done it – virtually everything on this list and more. I got value from many of my efforts, but sooner or later, after a week or a month or a year, I’d find myself feeling in some ways like I was back where I started, feeling like there was something missing, something wrong, something I couldn’t quite put my finger on. . .

As it turns out, the story behind that sense of “something missing” doesn’t just stop people from enjoying their lives to the full – it often stands in the way of having the life you *truly* want. You see, as strange as it may sound, we’ve fallen into a trap. And it’s a trap that’s so subtle, most of us have never even noticed it. Subtle, powerful and all-pervasive.

The “*I’ll be happy when. . .*” trap is an example most people can identify with. The core states and circumstances vary, but the basic structure of the superstition is the same:

I’ll be [*core state*] when I have [*circumstance*].

It’s based on an even simpler structure:

[*circumstance*] causes [*core state*].

And like pieces of Lego, this simple structure can be used to assemble all kinds of larger structures:

- I couldn’t be [*core state*] if I lost [*circumstance*].
- I’m [*core state*] because of [*circumstance*].
- I can’t be [*core state*] because I don’t have [*circumstance*].
- I was [*core state*] until I lost [*circumstance*].
- I’m convinced that [*core state*] comes from [*circumstance*].

They can take a variety of shapes, but at heart they're all based on the idea that our felt experience of life comes from something relatively visible.

You may have seen studies that show that feelings of well-being and high self-esteem come from accomplishments or from doing vocational work or from meditating. But that's all an example of the misunderstanding in action. When I use the word "circumstance," I'm using it in the widest possible way to refer to pretty much anything you can imagine (and at any point in time, past, present and future) for instance:

- Physical environment (e.g. home, holiday destination, working environment)
- What a person does (e.g. work, hobbies, exercise)
- Techniques (e.g. meditation, neuro-linguistic programming [NLP] state change, emotional freedom technique [EFT] tapping)
- Stuff (e.g. houses, boats, cars)
- Status (e.g. job title, position, medals)
- Material wealth (e.g. money, shares, income)
- People (e.g. partners, friends, children)
- And so on

The idea that our core states are at least to some degree the result of our circumstances seems so obvious to people that calling it into question can seem ridiculous at first.

And while many people who have explored the domains of "brain change" (through NLP, spirituality, personal development, meditation, etc.) would say that they "know" that their core states don't come from their circumstances, their behaviour often suggests that they don't really know it ("I know that intellectually but. . .").

In fact, people often replace one set of circumstances with a "higher level" version of the same thing. . .

- I'll be happy when I change my limiting beliefs.
- I'll feel fulfilled when I know that I'm on purpose and doing work I love.

CLARITY

- I'll be on track once I become an authentic leader.
- I'll feel secure when I'm generating passive income.
- I'll feel a sense of freedom when I have the lifestyle I want.
- I'll be OK when I go on the next course/read the book/do the exercises and so on.

The circumstances may be different but the superstitious structure is still in place:

[*circumstance*] causes [*core state*].

Once again: We've been conditioned to believe that our clarity, security and well-being come from the *outside*, that there's somewhere to get to, and that "there" is better than "here."

Reality Check

"Don't be silly!" I hear you say. "Everybody knows that circumstances give us feelings. I'll give you some examples right now. . .

- *My sense of security comes from the fact that I've got a good job and money in the bank.*
- *I feel a sense of love and connection because I've found the right partner.*
- *I feel stressed out because I've got a stressful business.*
- *I feel peaceful when I go for a walk in the park.*
- *I feel relaxed when I go on holiday.*

Are you really trying to tell me that these examples aren't real? That my work doesn't actually stress me out? That my security doesn't come from money? That I don't feel love because of my partner? That I don't like going on holiday?"

Yes and no.

Your examples of your experience are real for you. I'm sure you can identify numerous situations where you reliably feel a certain way. I'm not saying you don't enjoy the things you enjoy or that you shouldn't want the things that you want. What I'm saying is that the feelings aren't the result of the circumstances – they're coming from something else entirely. And, as you start to understand where they're coming from, and how the system works, some wonderful things can start to happen.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

These days, I experience more clarity than I ever thought possible, with all the considerable benefits it brings. But I didn't get here in the way you might expect.

In brief: I grew up in an alcoholic household and started drinking heavily when I was 12 years old. By age 19, I was a scholarship engineering student and a full-blown alcoholic. The alcohol was like rocket fuel for my life: I got jobs, was promoted rapidly, and started experiencing many of the trappings of success – expense accounts, foreign travel, luxurious surroundings – but on the inside, I was slowly falling apart.

At the age of 30 I got married. A month later, her bags were packed so I decided to stop drinking in order to save my marriage.

Oh yeah – I missed one. I'll be happy when I get a cigarette/a drink/a line of coke – the “there” of *addiction*.

That was in 1996, and I haven't had a drink since. Today I live a fulfilling life that's beyond anything I dreamed was possible for me, but how I got here is a story of struggle, frustration and heartbreak (much of which I could have avoided if I'd known what you're going to be discovering in this book).

Just to give you an idea, in the time period from 1996 to 2008 I . . .

- Got married, had two children and moved to London.
- Managed multimillion-pound projects and became fascinated with the process of how people and organisations change.
- Was paralysed by a combination of fear of failure and fear of success (I felt like I was a fraud, always worrying that I'd be “found out”).
- Read hundreds of personal development books and went on dozens of personal development courses.
- Quit my job and became a consultant, doing strategy workshops, teambuilding, executive coaching and training.
- Tried my hand at stand-up comedy and overcame my fear of public speaking (mainly by doing lots of public speaking).
- Lost weight, gained weight, lost weight, gained weight, lost weight, gained weight.

- Spent countless hours talking to a Freudian psychoanalyst and participated in various addiction recovery programmes.
- Learned NLP, built a successful training company and grew a tribe of many tens of thousands of people who follow my work.
- Was left by my wife, and struggled with worry, anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts.
- Had numerous false horizons, thinking I'd finally "got it," only to find myself feeling like I was back where I started.

By the end of 2008, I was unhappy, stressed out and at the end of my tether. I felt like I'd been giving it everything I had for over a decade, and while some areas of my life were better than ever, in many ways I felt like I'd been running on the spot. While I had many of the *trappings* of success (passive income, time freedom, foreign travel, etc.), I wasn't having a *feeling* of success. I was on the verge of giving up.

Then I was introduced to the understanding you're going to be discovering in this book. As I write the second edition, it's 14 years on, and they've been the best years of my life. I'm experiencing a sense of clarity, peace, security, love and aliveness unlike anything I've had before. As my level of understanding has continued to increase, my relationships, results and external circumstances have been improving too. And the good news is that it can be replicated. My clients are getting similar results:

- Less stress, more clarity and peace of mind
- More creative and innovative, finding solutions to problems more easily
- Better working relationships and more harmony in their personal lives
- More productive individuals and teams, getting more done and having more free time
- Better business results and better performance where it counts
- Fears, anxieties and limitations falling away effortlessly
- Natural motivation, making real progress with the things that matter
- Better health, with more vibrancy and aliveness

It's working for them, so it can work for you, because seeing through a misunderstanding can give you a disproportionate increase in the results you get. Why? Because a misunderstanding is just a piece of flawed logic, a perception that often leads to unwanted. . .

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| ● Stress | ● Irritation | ● Divorce |
| ● Pressure | ● Frustration | ● Poverty |
| ● Poor productivity | ● Resentment | ● Bullying |
| ● Dissatisfaction | ● Addiction | ● Criminality |
| ● Conflict | ● Mental illness | ● Violence |
| ● Worry | ● Depression | ● And so on |
| ● Anxiety | ● Burnout | |

But the great news is that the moment an individual starts to wake up from this misunderstanding, their quality of life starts to get better and better.



So how do you escape from this addictive, life-damaging trap? How do you start to dissolve the misunderstanding, and begin to experience an enormous increase in clarity and quality of life (even if it's already great)?

keep exploring ✧ connect with others
share your discoveries ✧ deepen your understanding

Thought Experiment: *We all fall into the "I'll be happy when. . ." trap from time to time. As you reflect on your life so far, what are some of the ways you now realise you've been accidentally hoodwinked by this illusion until now?*

What the Research Says: The classic paper “Lottery Winners and Accident Victims: Is Happiness Relative?” was published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* in 1978 and has been cited over 3700 times.

Three groups were studied: (1) people who had wins on the lottery of between \$50,000 and \$1,000,000, (2) people who had been seriously injured in accidents and rendered paraplegic or quadriplegic, and (3) a control group. The study found that “lottery winners were not happier than controls and took significantly less pleasure from a series of mundane events.” The accident victims “exhibited a strong nostalgia effect, rating their past as much happier than did controls.”

The study’s authors drew the conclusion that people tend to “overestimate the overall magnitude and generality of the positive or negative feeling generated by an event.”

Brickman, P., Coates, D., & Janoff-Bulman, R. (1978). Lottery winners and accident victims: Is happiness relative? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 36(8), 917–927.

You can access the paper at www.JamieSmart.com/research/Clarity1



Additional Resources

www.JamieSmart.com/Clarity1

