

**Self-Help for
the Rest of Us**

**THIS
ISN'T
FINE**

By Brian Stout

A NEW GROUP OF AUTHORS IS TAKING A CLEAR-EYED LOOK AT THE HIDDEN COSTS OF UNFLAPPABLE OPTIMISM AND POSITIVE THINKING.

The global pandemic continues to do significant damage to the physical and psychological well-being of many, and further psychological fallout from illness is on the horizon, but the response has been akin to the widely-circulated “This is fine” meme, even while our collective house burns down. Belief in scientific inquiry is optional. Expertise is trumped by YouTube research. Many treat evidence, progress, and reality as a buffet, adding the appealing parts to our plates and discarding or spitting out the rest, evidence be damned, asserting their refusal to engage with scientific inquiry with, “We all have the right to our opinions.”

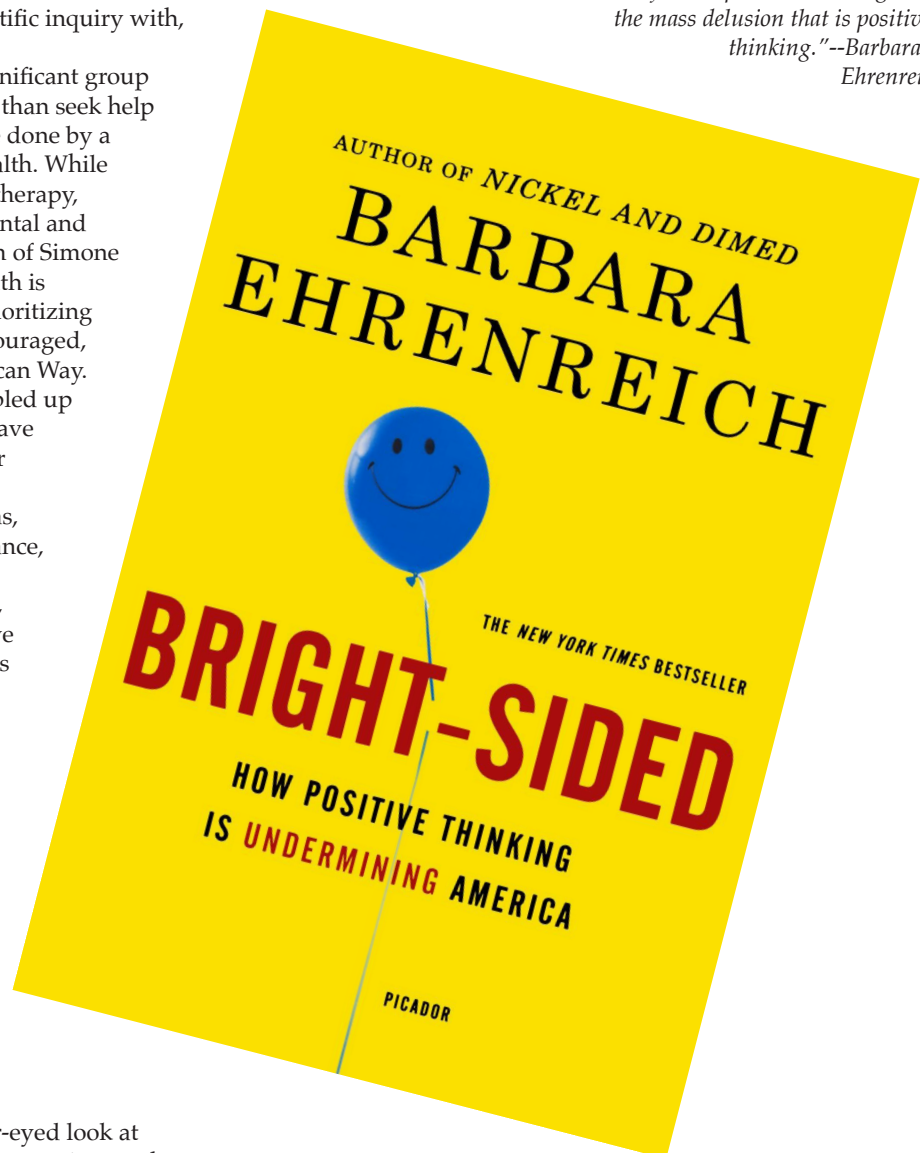
Compounding this collective shrug is a significant group of people who would rather suffer silently than seek help or even take a sobering look at the damage done by a lack of access to care, especially mental health. While many speak more freely about diagnoses, therapy, and medication, we are far from seeing mental and physical health on the same level. Criticism of Simone Biles’ decision to prioritize her mental health is merely the most recent example of how prioritizing achievement over wellness is not only encouraged, but expected. Toughing it out is the American Way. A few years ago, “fuck your feelings” bubbled up as a rallying cry to Own the Libs, but we have a rich history of living that out through our priorities.

Ironically, given our “man up” mantras, the premium placed on positivity, self-reliance, and outright denial of issues to get by has set the stage for a whole host of ineffective, maladaptive thinking and behavior, as if we can will ourselves out of dire circumstances or illness. And for quite a while, self-help bookshelves were stuffed with authors and concepts that promised the world but didn’t deliver, leaving unanswered questions for those of us who are fortunate enough to have the space to examine our lives rather than just survive them.

However, in the past few years, there is a shift in the self-help space. Another group of authors are not promising the world, delivering messages that inspire measured hope and ways to make it through the day rather than visualization of untold wealth and success. They are taking a clear-eyed look at the costs of some of the predominant American ideas such as

unflappable optimism, prosperity gospel, and positive thinking. From debunking unbridled optimism on a global scale to taking the first steps toward deciding which fucks to give in life, these authors are kicking against convention to provide practical, reasonable ways to be a little happier.

“We need to brace ourselves for a struggle against terrifying obstacles, both of our own making and imposed by the natural world. And the first step is to recover against the mass delusion that is positive thinking.”--Barbara Ehrenreich



In *Brightsided*, Barbara Ehrenreich assesses the damage done to our nation by reckless optimism and unchecked positive thinking, from people who try to spin a cancer diagnosis into a blessing to prosperity gospel religious leaders to the “too big to fail” mentality that crashed the economy during the first decade of this century. She questions the emphasis Americans put on projecting happiness and identifies holes in the research that got Americans thinking that projecting happiness can lengthen our lives and improve our health. Of course it is better to be positive than to be chronically sad—is a study really needed to provide support for that notion?

Ehrenreich begins by noting the core challenge of researching happiness—its slipperiness. Is it simply a matter of counting how often we feel happy? What if we feel less happy later in the day? Does that still count as being happy? She goes even further to ask a provocative question—is happiness even a worthy goal to pursue, given this resistance to a standard definition? How would you know when you’ve achieved it?

Then there is also the matter of how well people even understand happiness. A meta-analysis of over a hundred

studies referenced in her book found that Americans ranked 23rd on self-reported happiness, but 150th on The Happy Planet Index, which takes into account factors such as felath, environmental sustainability, and upward mobility, in spite of the predominant American stereotypes of positive self-image. Stacking this faux optimism against global realities, including our underperforming systems, wealth disparity, over-incarceration, and systemic racism shows a country that is fooling itself into deeming itself the best and putting on a happy face, Ehrenreich contends, and it is difficult to not think of the “This is fine” meme.

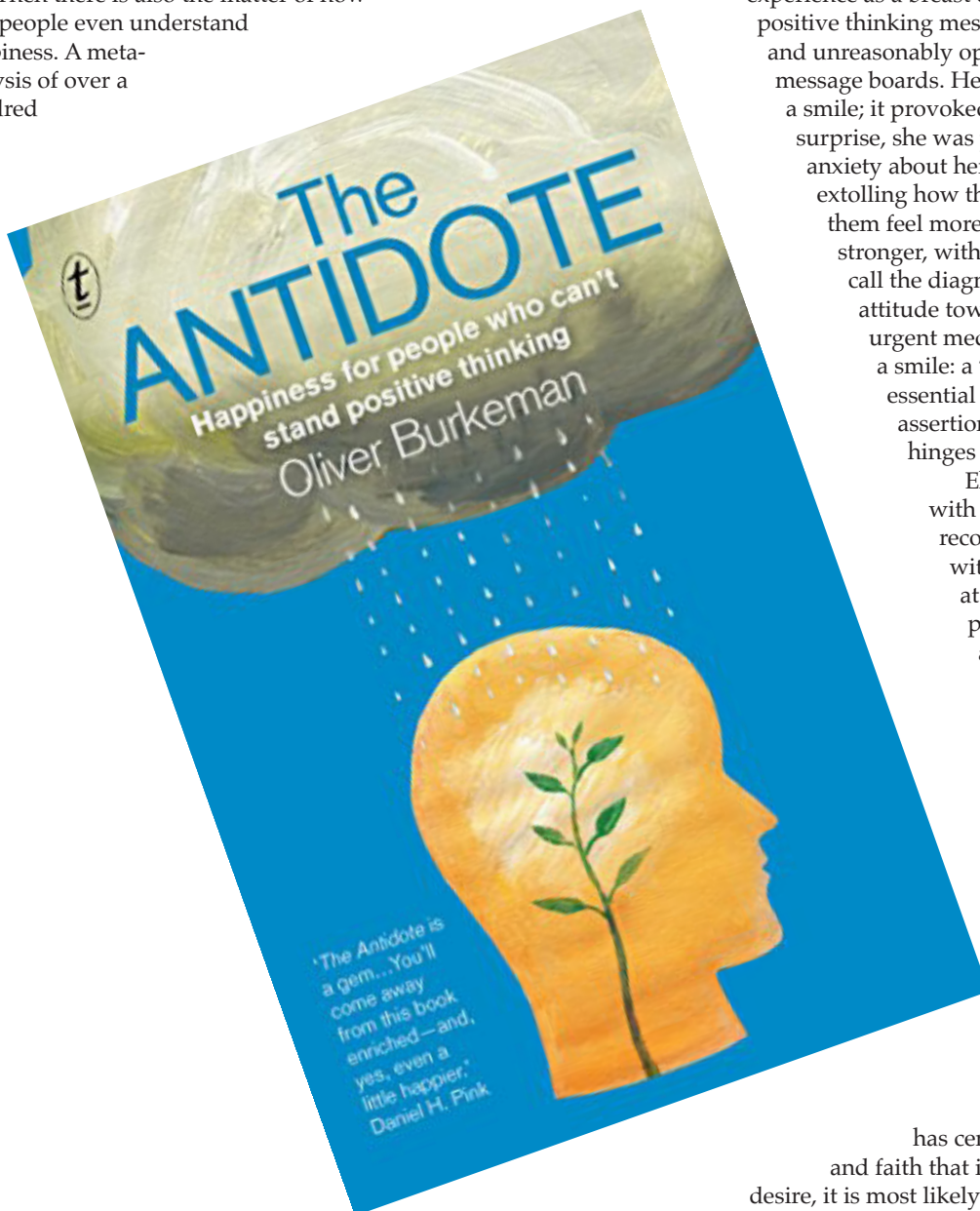
She lacerates the circularity of American positive thinking. If things are getting better, then why is positive thinking needed? Shouldn’t we be able to focus on other matters if things are getting better on their own? These conflicts are precisely what Ehrenreich aims for and obliterates.

Of course, one can easily counter Ehrenreich’s thesis by saying, “What’s the harm in thinking positive?” and she answers that swiftly and powerfully. She describes her experience as a breast cancer patient bombarded with positive thinking messages on the Susan Komen website and unreasonably optimistic phrases on support message boards. Her diagnosis was not greeted with a smile; it provoked fear and anger. Much to her surprise, she was piled on by others for expressing anxiety about her diagnosis, where others were extolling how their breast cancer diagnosis made them feel more spiritual, more feminine, and stronger, with some even going so far as to call the diagnosis “a gift,” that changed their attitude toward life. “There was, I learned, an urgent medical reason to embrace cancer with a smile: a ‘positive attitude’ is supposedly essential to recovery...I encountered this assertion over and over...that survival hinges on ‘attitude.’”

Ehrenreich doesn’t take issue with people trying to keep hope of a recovery alive, but does take issue with this relentless focus on optimism at the expense of denying entirely plausible feelings about fear and anger. She recounts a story of a patient who contacted Deepak Chopra to ask for advice, having incorporated prayer, meditation, and forgiveness to recover, but continually experienced recurrence. Chopra’s advice?

Just keep going, you’re doing the right things, underestimating the potential psychological damage of not acknowledging the reality of her steadily declining health.

She also highlights the ways that positive thinking has cemented ideas in politics, business, and faith that if you’re not getting what you desire, it is most likely because you are not being positive enough. If your business fails or you are downsized, it is because you didn’t try hard enough. Interestingly enough, this seems to



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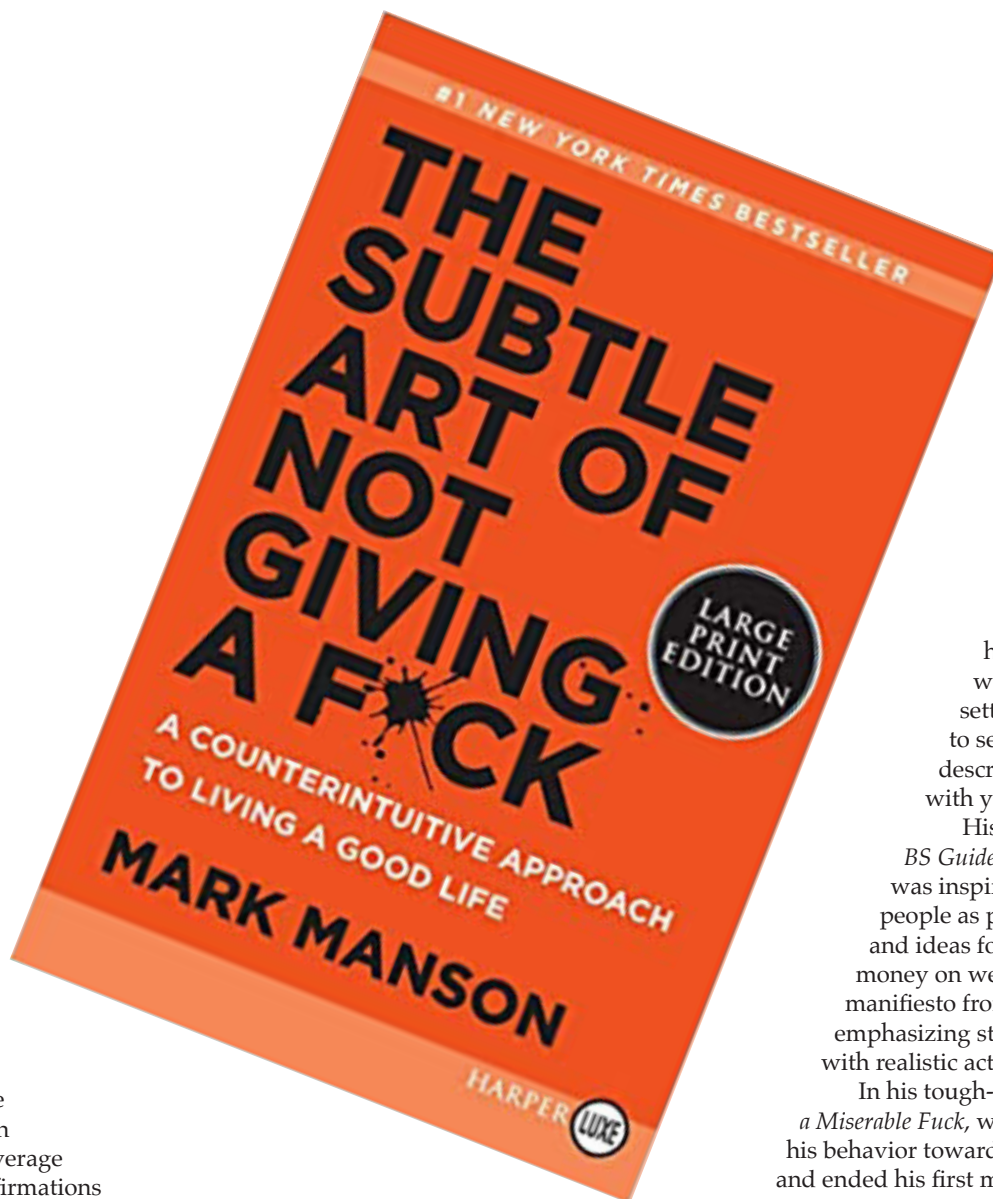
be at odds with how positive thinking manifests itself in illness. By this line of thinking, shouldn't people be saying, "Getting downsized was the best thing that ever happened"? Instead, they worry about how to pay bills and dread a cycle of applications and interviews, hoping that their returns aren't diminished in the next job.

In evangelical churches, "naming and claiming" is connected to the idea that god rewards positive thinking. Joel Osteen has made a fortune towing this line, encouraging people to reprogram their minds through positive mental images, even as he has refused to open his church to hurricane victims and invited Kanye West to share his stage recently to talk about the evils of pop culture, which didn't impress even his own followers. If positive thinking is the missing piece of success, who's to blame when it doesn't work out? It must be that people aren't being positive enough! This conveniently sets up optimism peddlers such as Osteen for repeat business, as people continue to proverbially press the bar, hoping for the pellet. Perhaps those displaced hurricane victims just weren't thinking enough positive thoughts or should have "named and claimed" shelter.

Even more disconcerting is the other behavior that often results from "brightsiding"--ignoring warning signs and information that could help us avoid or better prepare for disaster. She cites examples such as the flight students who were more concerned with flying the plane than landing it just before 9/11 to refusal to heed evolving market conditions that led to the financial crash just over ten years ago. Ehrenreich's work is a sobering account of how those of us who thrive with a more realistic perspective are being derided as naysayers.

Exploring this concept at an individual level, Oliver Burkeman's *The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking* shares how our positive affirmations and thinking can actually be harmful and counterproductive to our pursuit of happiness. His book takes the

other path--that embracing uncertainty and insecurity as facts of daily life rather than feelings to avoid can actually make people feel happier. Thinking constantly about happiness ends up making it more elusive. By removing the inflated expectation that



we can leverage affirmations and positive thinking to happiness, we are free of the disappointment that this thinking inevitably produces. To arrive at these insights, he stares into the self-help abyss with clear eyes, attending seminars and speaking with people who have built their careers around bolstering positivity, but he also attends a silent retreat and studies stoicism.

As Burkeman meets with thinkers both positive and realistic, he also puts himself through experiments to test his assertions. One humorous but insightful passage describes his experience purposefully embarrassing himself on public transit, a suggestion from Albert Ellis, founder of Rational Emotive Therapy (RET), which is grounded in facing fears and worst possible outcomes and imagining how to work through them. Inspired, Burkeman confronts his own fear about public humiliation by calling out the subway stops. He readily admits it is awkward and unpleasant, as expected, but the terrible scenarios he had developed in his mind mostly didn't happen. By facing the worst thing he could imagine and developing a response, he felt more confident to handle life and was sometimes pleasantly surprised when things

turned out better than expected. This experience is the basis of one of his tenets--imagine the worst that could happen and prepare for it. Still, even aspiring to a stoic take on life has no guarantees, so Burkeman advocates for having multiple tools to resolve feelings of anxiety or unhappiness, but most importantly, not feeling bad about not feeling happy all the time.

John Kim, a.k.a. The Angry Therapist, made a career pivot into counseling after his screenwriting career stalled and his marriage ended. He has developed a reputation for holding sessions in coffee shops, during workouts, and other unconventional settings and calls his no frills, approach to self-care "therapy in a shot glass," and describes his style as "casual over clinical, with you over at you."

His first book, *The Angry Therapist: A No BS Guide to Finding and Living Your Own Truth* was inspired by his desire to reach as many people as possible with short, impactful lessons and ideas for those who can't spend the time or money on weekly therapy sessions. It serves as a manifesto from which his subsequent work flows, emphasizing streamlined, bite-size chapters that end with realistic action items.

In his tough-love book for men called *I Used to be a Miserable Fuck*, which takes a lacerating view of how his behavior toward people in his life pushed them away and ended his first marriage. Through highly personal and vulnerable examples from his own life, he outlines irreverent, practical advice for men who want to do better, delivering this wisdom in sections with titles such as "Don't Be Nice, Be Kind," "Do Express Your Fucking Feelings," and "Don't Pee in the Shower." Kim is unsparing in his account of how his time as a miserable fuck cost him his marriage and alienated those around him, and this willingness to open up is effective.

His most recent book, *Single on Purpose*, was a best-seller upon release earlier this year and provides advice on how to be alone but not lonely. Kim takes the reader on his own journey through his divorce and realization that he had never really learned to be alone on his own successfully to illustrate what he learned by doing some internal work. Rather than viewing being single as an obstacle to overcome, he seeks to prepare people for meeting someone new, or for being content on their own.

However, for all of Kim's insistence on differentiating himself by not putting clients on couches and meeting at diners for sessions, his edginess is showing some signs of wear as his profile increases. He is adept at leveraging social media to establish his relatability. His brand has grown from books and a podcast

IS HAPPINESS EVEN A WORTHY GOAL TO PURSUE?

to coach programs and growing a "lifestyle

community." And while mostly adhering to the "therapy in a shot glass" concept, his podcast also has episodes of self-indulgence and solipsism that Kim should know better than to make available to his fan base, such as the episodes that feature Kim in his own therapy sessions.

"Our crisis is no longer material; it's existential, it's spiritual. We have so much fucking stuff and so many opportunities that we don't even know what to give a fuck about anymore." --Mark Manson

Despite the resemblance that the above quote bears to one of Tyler Durden's speeches in *Fight Club*, Mark Manson taps into the existential crises of a whole group of people who are comfortable enough to wonder if this is really all there is.

He also stakes the space of providing purpose-driven, science-based, pragmatic "advice that doesn't suck" on his website and YouTube channel. His most well-known book is *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a Fuck: A Counterintuitive Approach to Living a Good Life*, and it presents perhaps the most streamlined approach to incorporating realism into daily life. In short, Manson's thesis is that it is impossible to give a fuck about everything and unproductive and unsatisfying to give zero fucks, so we must choose which fucks we will give and stick to those. This allows us to let the rest of the surrounding noise of life truly slide and to keep our eyes on what is really important.

Manson upends the impulses many of us cling to; his mission is to embrace, not deny, the unpleasant aspects of life and to acknowledge their place in achievement. "Pain is an inextricable thread in the fabric of life, and to tear it out is not only impossible, but destructive: Attempting to tear it out unravels everything else with it."

If there's a flaw in Manson's book, it's that he could stand to have a more refined focus chapter to chapter. He is adept at providing a wide range of supporting ideas from philosophy, science, and psychology, but the book takes an unsatisfying detour about three quarters in. Eventually, he does get back on track for the conclusion. For this reason, it might be more rewarding to skim the book and subscribe to his YouTube channel and email newsletter. And in fairness, deciding what to give a fuck about could be viewed as a First World Problem.

While not infallible, these authors provide a refreshing alternative to those of us who are unable to commit the time and/or money to therapy, providing sticky, simple principles to manage thinking and expectations that produce results without the saccharine overdose.

In *The Subtle Art*, Manson writes, "Let's be honest; sometimes things are fucked up and we have to live with it." Fortunately, he and Burkeman, Kim, and Ehrenreich have our backs. 