

Why Immerse?

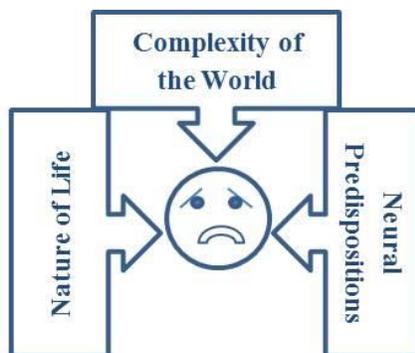
I have struggled all my life with self doubt and negative emotions. Some of this struggle, I believe, comes from early childhood experiences. Let me share with you three early strikes I endured as a child that stifled my positivity. First, I must have been six or seven when a bully told me that I didn't belong to my family and that I had been picked up from a garbage dump. I believed his every single word and spent countless hours silently worrying that I would soon be disowned and sent back to where I belonged.

Second, one of our middle-school teachers, in an effort to tame us, cautioned us to stop laughing for frivolous reasons. Expounding his twisted logic, he said something like, "Kids, the numbers of times you laugh and cry are the same in this life. So don't laugh without a good reason, because then you'll have to cry for a good reason." From that day on, I stopped finding it funny when a crow jumped on the back of a donkey or a goat chased a cow. Even if I found something funny, I chose to contain my mirth, worried my giggles might seed a future pain.

Third, as a teenager I witnessed one of the worst industrial disasters of all times; it happened a few miles away from my home. Thousands of people perished in my hometown of Bhopal that night, suffocated by a toxic chemical spill. I remember waking up to the pounding on the door at 2:00 a.m., and then rushing with a sea of humanity, fleeing the fumes of methyl isocyanate. Two days later, when I showed up at the hospital to help, I was completely unprepared for the suffering I saw. By the time I turned eighteen, I had seen more adversity and misery than most people see in their lifetime.

A decade later, with an MD behind my name and my neural pathways fully myelinated, I wondered about my melancholy. Why did I listen to the bullies and the teacher who didn't care about my wellbeing and not to the many others who loved me? Why did I struggle with accepting the reflection that I saw in the mirror? Why didn't I recognize the examples of real courage and resilience through the tremendous adversity I witnessed? These questions assumed a sense of urgency when I traveled overseas and saw the same stress and suffering, without the scourge of chemical spill or abject poverty to explain them. Lucky for me, I was asking these questions when thousands of evolutionary biologists, neuroscientists, psychologists, and philosophers had already begun to piece the answers together.

Talking to them, and learning from their writings, I realized that a confluence of three powerful forces seed unhappiness.



The Three Major Causes of Unhappiness

First is the *complexity of the world*. An unintended consequence of our material and technological prosperity is that we have collectively created a world where our brains must carry a much larger load of uncertainty than they were designed for. Most of us live our lives with dozens (if not hundreds) of user IDs and passwords to remember, countless undone tasks, more choices than our brains can process, and a deluge of news that constantly reminds us of the ugliest places human minds can go.

Second is the *nature of life*. We love control, but we don't have control. We don't get to pick some of the most important aspects of life—our parents, children, country of birth, race, sex, genetic makeup, and so much more. We all are transient visitors on this planet, yet we hate the idea of mortality. We want to protect our loved ones but cannot guarantee that our efforts will succeed. We can't predict the next moment, yet we want it to be favorable to us. The result is a mismatch between our expectations and reality, a mismatch that fashions angst and unhappiness.

The third source of unhappiness resides in our *neural predispositions*. Our ancestors had to make several compromises in their evolutionary struggle for survival. Our brains carry the resulting evolutionary baggage. Here are ten of our tendencies that push happiness away:

- Negativity bias: Most of us selectively attend to, believe, and inflate the negative. I believed the bully and the teacher because they fed this natural instinct of mine.
- Hedonic adaptation: We adapt to and discount the good that becomes familiar to us. Every fabulous toy I acquired, after a short period of excitement, lost novelty and allure. I was raised by loving parents and siblings in a warm home with enough food to eat and games to play, all of which I took for granted.
- Comparison: I compare what I have with what others have. Even if my possessions are adequate for my present needs, if others, particularly those I compete with, have more than I do, I get discontented and envious.
- Imaginary fears: For my brain, imaginary is real. I hurt myself more with imaginary fears than real happenings. Most of my medical self-diagnoses—multiple cancers, three heart attacks, two strokes, sudden death—I have experienced in my mind, not in my body.
- Emotional pain = physical pain: Emotional pain has hijacked the brain pathways that developed to handle physical pain. My brain thus can't tell the difference between emotional and physical pain. (In fact, in one research study, investigators found that paracetamol reduced emotional reactivity.)
- Mirror neurons: When I see others hurt, particularly those who are close to me, my own pain pathways activate. With the information from the remotest corners of the world accessible to us each day, ten minutes of watching the news could show us more pain than our ancestors saw in ten years.
- Short-term gratifications: I can't resist calorie-dense food, I enjoy being a couch potato rather than an exercise buff, and I struggle to keep my fantasies in check – my brain is addicted to short-term gratifications.
- Mental projection: I struggle with both being in the moment and having a long-term perspective. I project just about far enough to be miserable.
- Prediction errors: I am not good at predicting how I will respond to a particular experience, and I confuse *wanting* for *liking*. Once I acquire most of the things I seek for happiness, they either don't satisfy me or give pleasure only for a short time.
- Wandering mind: To top it all, I spend most of my days allowing my mind to wander, lost in an internal monologue, detached from the real world.

Do you see how despite its awesomeness, our brain has some peculiarities that can multiply our suffering? Our brain was designed for survival and safety, not peace and happiness. We pay the price for this natural state in excessive angst, paranoia, and deficits in compassion and gratitude.

Coming back to my journey, as I learned about my brain and confessed to others about the noise in my head, I realized that I had company. Every single person I met struggled with this noise. At some point my quest to understand the problem shifted to the search for solutions. “While the complexity of the world and the nature of life are not in my direct influence, I might have better luck with influencing my neural predispositions,” I thought.

First, I tried traditional contemplative practices, but they didn’t satisfy me. I needed something more practical and easier to adapt to my life, which now included two kids, pagers, urgent e-mails, overnight calls, research-grant deadlines, mortgage payments, and a mound of junk mail. With time and effort, I got several lucky breaks and was able to formulate a structured approach to help myself and others. I describe the resulting programs and skills in my previous two books—*Mayo Clinic Guide to Stress-Free Living* and *Mayo Clinic Handbook for Happiness*.

While writing these two books and applying the ideas to my own life, I realized that if I want to be a good doctor, researcher, educator, and citizen, I must first become a good husband and a good father. That’s the reason my title on the front page of this book reads HD, which stands for *husband and dad* (not *happiness doctor, human development, hard drive, Home Depot, or Harley-Davidson*, although these are all legitimate expansions of this abbreviation).

I feel I am at a better place today than I was one or two decades ago. But I still struggle with my ingrained predispositions. I try to think healthy and prosocial thoughts, avoid speaking harsh words, read the right books, and try my best not to do anything wrong, yet from some unguarded corner an unhealthy craving, fear, selfishness, or ego creeps in. I am far away from my concept of my ideal self. I believe my ongoing struggles come from two challenges—my mind’s tendency to forget, and the difficulty I face in overriding my innate instincts. My mind needs constant reminders because it forgets the values I should be serving and embodying.

I believe I need the discipline to immerse myself in the higher values until they become such an integral part of my life that I become one with them. The Immerse Program is intended to help you and me immerse in these values.

If you feel you need some discipline to effect a positive change in your life, then join me. Together, we will strive to reach a point where deeper presence and higher values become natural to us, like breathing, and begin to provide us the peace and joy we are seeking.

Take care,

Amit

<http://stressfree.org/>