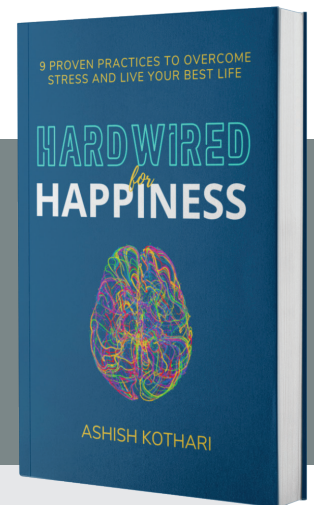


# Hardwired for Happiness

## 9 Proven Practices to Overcome Stress and Live Your Best Life

By Mobius Friend Ashish Kothari



“Beautifully combining storytelling and research, Ashish Kothari provides a map that can help you find the path to your best self. A powerful and accessible guide.”

– TAL BEN-SHAHAR, CO-FOUNDER OF HAPPINESS STUDIES ACADEMY

“Ashish Kothari’s book has given us a foundational and sweeping description of the embodied path to awakening and joy. His offering is at one moment intimate, raw, and a deeply truthful portrayal of his own journey as a seeker and student of truth, and at another moment the output of his years of scholarship and study of the disciplines of well-being from sleep to diet to movement to prayer. This beautiful book is a companion on the journey that can guide one through the cultivation of mature emotional and spiritual intelligence and the development of a truly generous and open heart. The fruits of this inner work are well captured throughout the book in chapters on compassion, kindness, and the path of living with intention. In a truly timely way Ashish will help meet those of us turning afresh to the profound questions of meaning, purpose, community, and service. I urge you not to miss this gem.”

– AMY ELIZABETH FOX, CEO, MOBIUS EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

### Introduction

We live in a world of four major paradoxes. First, we exist in a time of abundance and are more prosperous than ever, with most people in middle class enjoying more comforts and conveniences than kings and queens of the past. However, we are not necessarily more joyful or satisfied. Studies show that happiness among adults has been on a slow decline over the past twenty years. Americans who consider themselves in “excellent” mental health fell from 43 percent to just 34 percent in 2019, according to a Gallup poll. We experience heaviness, meaninglessness, and even the smallest things can trigger and upset us.

Second, we are living longer than ever but not necessarily in better health. Breakthroughs in medicine have extended our life span as we have found

cures and eliminated most of the diseases caused by external organisms (microbes and viruses) that used to kill us one hundred years ago, like influenza, tuberculosis, and diphtheria. Today, the top three causes of death are heart disease, cancer, and stroke, which are primarily lifestyle related. Approximately 85 percent of older adults have at least one chronic health condition, and 60 percent have at least two chronic conditions, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Third, major advances in technology have connected us globally, significantly increased our pace of communication, and allowed us to collaborate over long distances. A century ago, it took two weeks for a post to arrive from England

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to the United States. Today with email or text messages, we can communicate across the world within seconds. Not only that, with Google translate, it is possible today for me to talk to someone in China even if I don't understand Mandarin, and they don't understand English. This speed and ease of communication should allow us to better understand other perspectives, resolve differences, and come closer. But global tension and distrust has never been higher. Across the world, we are seeing a rise of nationalist sentiment and anti-globalization movements. We are also lonelier as individuals than ever, with a 2018 report from Cigna and Edelman highlighting that 61 percent of Americans reported feeling lonely, up from 54 percent the previous year.

Fourth, technology has made everyday tasks much more efficient. Think about how complicated it was to book a trip to another city twenty years ago: you would have to call a travel agent, who would look up the available options, share them with you, and then you'd wait two weeks for paper tickets to arrive in the mail. Today you can go on a travel-booking website like Kayak or Travelocity and complete the whole process in less than five minutes. The same is true for things like banking, ordering food, hailing taxis, and the list goes on. Yet despite these conveniences, we are busier than ever. Our modern, fast-paced world comes at a steep price: each day feels like a race against the clock, executing a long list of "to dos" and collapsing every night, exhausted, in front of a screen with more bad news. We often feel like boats lost at sea, at the mercy of the winds and waves, without a

North Star to guide us. When we come face-to-face with obstacles, we are reactive and defensive. Our anxiety has manifested into a perennial state of stress, exhaustion, and fatigue.

So what explains these four paradoxes that are a core part of modern existence? I believe these paradoxes are a direct result of our brains being maladapted to the world we are living in. The very intelligence that allowed the human species to climb to the top of the food chain—despite not being the strongest or the largest—has turned against us. You see, neurobiologically, we are wired to look for danger. Our brains evolved to keep our bodies safe and alive, not necessarily to keep us content and joyful. Up until around 20,000 years ago, before we as humans settled down, our ability to sense a saber-toothed tiger hiding in the shadows and react with lightning speed made all the difference between life and death. We had to choose fight or flight to survive.

Today, dangerous wild predators have been replaced by an increasingly complex modern existence: balancing a demanding career with equally busy family life, absorbing the 24/7 news and social media cycle that is filled with bad news (because bad news sells!). We see (on continuous replay) reports of volatile and uncertain wars breaking out, climate change driving fires or floods, and weekly if not daily reports of shootings and violence. Feeling the world is spinning out of our control, we are triggered multiple times in a day. Our brains have a hard time separating physical threats from those to our fragile egos and still react in the same way: fight or flight.

© Michael Robbins, Mobius featured artist



We find ourselves constantly trying to make sense of it all and desperate to stay safe. The truth is, despite all our resources, we are living in a heightened state of psychological scarcity and fear—a fear of not being smart or successful enough, a fear of being left behind, a fear of not being loved. As a result of this scarcity and fear mindset, we may experience some joy when things go our way, but the *mood* of joyfulness is not accessible to us.

I grew up in a middle-class family in India and was blessed to have wonderful parents who prioritized my care, education, and stability. From an early age, they instilled in my younger sister and me the core values of family, hard work, and academic excellence. Mathematics came easily to me, and I remember conversations with my parents about my report cards that mixed congratulations for my high marks with gentle encouragement to do better. From the age of eleven my singular focus was to earn an engineering degree after high school. I studied relentlessly and felt only as good as my next test score.

Despite growing up in the birthplace of Yoga and Buddhism, I became hardwired to follow a traditional path of “success” that measured my grades, where I went to school, and the prestige of the companies that hired me. My passport to a better life was the opportunity to escape to the United States, which I did after university when I applied for a computer science job at IBM. At age twenty-three, I walked out of Chicago’s O’Hare International Airport with

\$5,000 and the name of another Indian programmer I had never met. I spent the next twenty years seeking happiness through professional and financial success. I worked sixty to one hundred hours each week, traveling extensively across two to three cities. I had unconsciously normalized an unhealthy level of work to climb the ladder and was afraid of slipping down if I stopped moving.

At forty-two, I had checked all the items that were supposed to bring me happiness: I met my wife, Lizzie and had our son, Ashwin. I had built a wonderful network of friends, mentors, and colleagues. I worked for the most prestigious consulting firm in the world, which also brought great pride to my parents. My work was highly impactful: generating significant return on investment on fees that clients paid for our services. And I had moved to Boulder, Colorado, which some described as “a town nestled within mountains and reality.” I should have been blissfully happy and satisfied, yet I continued to hustle faster, harder, and longer.

In truth, I lived in a state of high anxiety and stress. I had built a deep expertise with over 20,000 hours of consulting work in a field that no longer brought me happiness and in fact was incoherent with my own views. I had gained weight over the years and no longer slept well. Each day left me feeling emptier, but I was frozen in place by fear. I wanted to change my area of expertise but wasn’t sure what would bring me joy. Then there were all the doubts and fears that arise when one contemplates a change: What if I did something different and failed at it? Would

**“Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries.  
Without them humanity cannot survive.”**

THE DALAI LAMA



I disappoint those who had supported me? Would I maintain the same lifestyle for my family?

Then opportunity knocked. I was invited to a leadership program at McKinsey & Company, led by Mobius Executive Leadership, that was designed to create space for introspection and self-awareness, foster connection, and increase effectiveness. The program was held at a site that housed one of the oldest monasteries in Europe. Over the next five days, leveraging the techniques I learned and supported by the mystical, spiritual energy that surrounded me, I discovered three key insights which would change the trajectory of my life.

First, I realized I was happiest and most energetic when I was building and maintaining connections and making a positive impact in people's lives. Second, I saw that I sought safety and success in the external world at the cost of driving emptiness within. I was also exposed to techniques like mindfulness and journaling that had a dramatic effect on my overall effectiveness and how I experienced life. I understood that if I could break away from my fears and shed the layers of armor I had donned to hide them, I could unlock more joy and lightness in my life. Third, I was not alone. Everyone in the class came alive. I realized how quickly relationships develop and love flourishes when we release our deep fears and let others see us as the beautiful, imperfect humans we all are.

Together, these insights helped me discover my personal *Ikigai*, or reason for being. A Japanese word dating back to the Heian period (794 to 1185), *Ikigai* is the intersection of what you love, what you are good at, what the world needs, and is willing to pay for. I was going to dedicate the rest of my life to helping others flourish and find happiness to unlock their human potential and live their best lives, too.

The fields of psychology, neurosciences, and ancient wisdom traditions were completely new to me. Luckily, I was grateful to be at a wonderful company that allowed me to go part time (70 percent) to pursue my passion. The next five years were a tremendous period of personal growth and learning. I read over 500 books and listened to more than 2,000 hours of lectures from thought leaders. I took courses in ontological coaching, neurosciences, and psychology, as well as studying with mystical teachers from the

East, and I formally trained to become a coach myself. I turned myself into a living laboratory, continuously experimenting with new techniques and practices. I didn't accept anything unless it worked and made a difference in my life.

Two decades in consulting meant I was really well-versed in the art and science of helping organizations and people make sustainable shifts in their behaviors and habits to achieve their goals. I had used this to help my clients make substantial and long-lasting improvements in performance, whether it was driving revenue improvements, reducing costs, or increasing the speed of execution. I was going to turn that expertise into helping people integrate what I was learning from these new fields to transform their lives, too. I began helping my clients and colleagues using these techniques through one-on-one coaching sessions. Eventually, at my company, I helped create a brand-new leadership program to support leaders and organizations build adaptability and resilience capabilities to combat rising stress, fatigue, and burnout (specifically from the raging pandemic). On this journey of personal growth, we could help design organizations where people could operate without fear, show up fully, and deliver high performance not at the expense of wellbeing, but because of it.

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An ancient Cherokee tale describes a grandfather and his grandson having a conversation about life. "I have a fight going on inside me," the old man says. "It's taking place between two wolves. One is evil—he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego."

The grandfather looks at his grandson and continues. "The other wolf embodies positive emotions. He is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. Both wolves are fighting to the death. The same fight is going on inside you, too."

The grandson takes a moment to reflect on this. At last, he looks up at his grandfather and asks, "Which wolf will win?"

The old Cherokee says, simply, "The one you feed." Over the course of this book, I will introduce you to

nine practices that will enable you to feed the good wolf on your own journey toward connection, fulfillment, and happiness. As I learned the hard way, trying to fit into an external model of success only keeps you in a place of fear, always afraid of not being enough. If you can tune inward and use your internal compass, you can rewire your brain to seek joy, health, love, and meaning.

### Introduction to the Nine Key Practices That Help Us Become Happier

Each of the nine practices are supported through both scientific research in the fields of psychology and neurosciences, as well as through teachings from ancient wisdom traditions like Buddhism and the Yoga Sutras. Furthermore, I will share evidence of the positive impact of these on the lives of 1,000+ leaders across different fields whom I have supported and coached over my career. Throughout the book I will share examples from my own life as well as stories

from others to demonstrate the great benefits of these practices and to inspire you to forge ahead on your own journey.

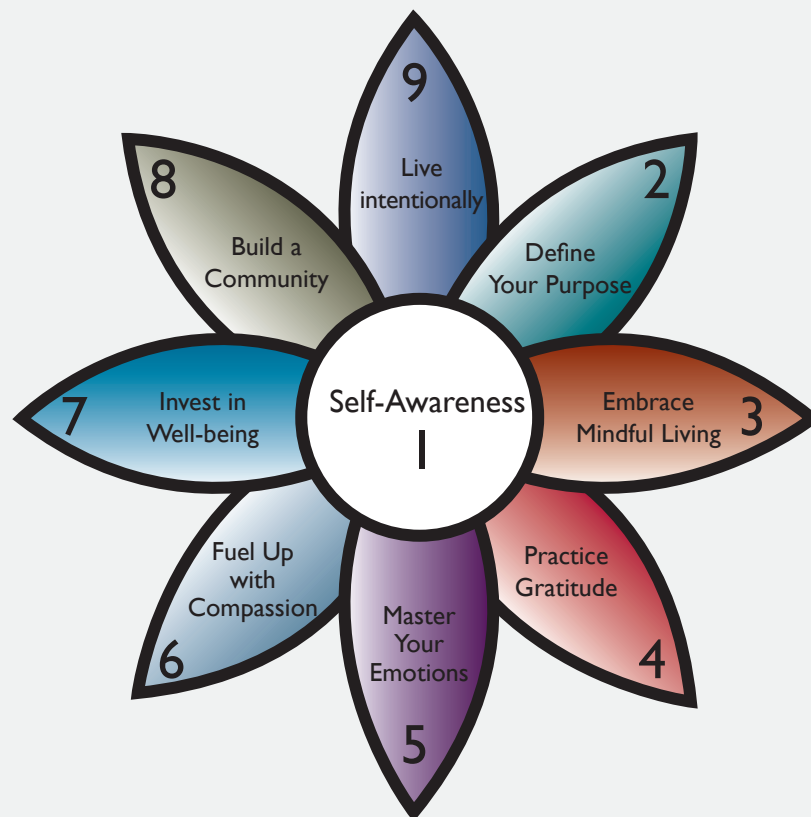
#### 1: Cultivate Self-Awareness to Know Who You Really Are

We are all unique observers who are shaped by the broader cultural contexts in which we grew up: what we learned from our parents, teachers, and role models; and schooled by our own life experiences. In this practice, you will understand who you really are and develop strategies to move past the fears that hold you back. You will deepen your awareness of your starting point as well as habitual responses to stressors; pause to create space; and choose a more conscious response driven not from fear but freedom to evolve into what life is asking from you.

#### 2: Define Your Purpose

Viktor Frankl, an Auschwitz survivor and the father of logotherapy, which describes a search for a life

### Hardwired for happiness practices



meaning as the central human motivational force, said, “Ever more people today have the means to live, but no meaning to live for.” Discovering your personal purpose is critical and will become your North Star to guide you when you are lost in the ever increasing complexity of the world. In this practice you will discover your personal “why” to reveal your core values and beliefs. These are the guiding lights to illuminate the path ahead of you.

### **3. Embrace Mindful Living**

We are blessed with the highest developed brains of any species on Earth. Unfortunately, for most of us, our minds are crowded with too many thoughts all running in different directions. We are unable to focus on any given thought as it is happening, and therefore miss out on the enjoyment at that moment. According to Harvard University research, 47 percent of study participants had a wandering mind, which directly related to their unhappiness. The good news is that all of us are born with the ability to refocus using mindfulness and use this superpower to transform any experience, day to day, moment to moment.

### **4. Practice Gratitude**

In our haste to accumulate more, be more, and do more, we lose track of all the good that we already have and what truly matters to us. By consciously developing a gratitude practice, you will redirect your energies toward more “being” and less “doing,” and break free from the golden shackles that bind you to goals and belongings that no longer nourish you. In the words of Willie Nelson, “When I started counting my blessings, my whole life turned around.”

### **5. Master Your Moods and Emotions**

We are blessed with a rich memory and a vivid imagination, but these gifts can also cause suffering and high levels of anxiety. Too often we remain stuck in the past, reliving negative events, or obsess over

controlling our future, imagining all that can go wrong. At its worst, those experiences can become rooted in our bodies and harden our hearts, closing us off from growth and joy. This practice introduces radical acceptance to open your heart and create lightness and new possibilities in your future life.

### **6. Fuel Up with Compassion and Kindness**

Practicing self-compassion is of utmost importance, especially at the beginning of your journey of self-discovery. You must give yourself permission to make mistakes. This practice begins with you, introducing simple techniques that allow you to stoke the flame of love and compassion that is universal in us all, from the moment you wake up to the very end of your day. Only through compassion for yourself are you able to offer kindness and generosity to others, which in turn fills your life with satisfaction, trust, and optimism. As the Dalai Lama said, “Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries. Without them humanity cannot survive.”

### **7. Invest in Your Wellbeing**

In this practice you will learn to invest in your physical, mental, and spiritual wellbeing to thrive and perform at your very best. You’ll consider how much daily movement your body needs, what and how you eat, and minimize the effects of aging. You will refocus and break your dopamine addictions, recharging your brain every night through better quality and quantity of sleep, and make learning a lifelong habit. You will integrate play into your daily life, create space to spend time with loved ones, and deepen your personal connection to the universe.

### **8. Strengthen Your Community**

We are social beings biologically wired for connection. When we are young, we depend on our family relationships and thrive on friendships and joy that come from play. As we grow up, there just does not seem to be enough time to keep up with those social

**“We see the world  
not as it is, but  
as we are.”**

**ANAÏS NIN**

connections, and in the blink of an eye, decades pass by and our relationships atrophy. This practice will help you build and strengthen a vibrant group of friends and connections, whether it's three or 300, who will share in your successes and support you when you need to get back on your feet.

#### 9. *Live with Intention*

In the hustle and bustle of our daily lives, we lose track of what truly matters to us. We make an unconscious over-investment in our careers and the pursuit of “more,” and we get used to making regular withdrawals from the areas that offer tangible returns in the short term. Keeping what truly matters to us front and center and allocating our time and energy accordingly to live in coherence and harmony with our dreams is critical. Learning to live intentionally allows you to practice setting intentions and to form new habits that will enable you to live into those commitments, in service of making the shift you want to make.

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Overcoming our deeply rooted fears of not having enough, doing enough, or being enough is a lifelong journey, with many challenges along the way. It is common to feel anger, anxiety, uncertainty, lethargy, shame, guilt, and frustration as you bump up against each hurdle. As you start to stretch into new possibilities, it's human nature to pull back to the comfort zone you know (even if it doesn't actually bring you much “comfort”).

However, if you are willing to commit to taking the journey inward, the benefits and rewards are life changing. The fear and anxiety melt away, and you begin flowing smoothly like water through any obstacle or resistance. Professionally, you will achieve

higher successes with lower levels of effort, as you tap into the power of your teams by creating a higher level of psychological safety. When you are not leading from a place of fear but have a deeper inner compass guiding you toward what matters, you will be able to help others in a similar journey. In turn, together you will be able to harness the collective wisdom of your team to truly drive a step change in performance. You will be able to become joyful and happy regardless of the external environment around you.

A life free of fear is hard won, but all the richer for it. ■



**ASHISH KOTHARI** is an executive coach, author and consultant. After twenty-five years in consulting with the last seventeen at McKinsey & Company, in September 2022 Ashish became CEO of Happiness Squad, the organization he founded. Happiness Squad seeks to catalyze human flourishing and help unlock full potential at individual, team, organization, and community levels.

The company will be based on the framework in his book, excerpted here in the Mobius Strip.