

LIVE
MORE

Happy

SCIENTIFICALLY PROVEN WAYS
TO LIFT YOUR MOOD AND YOUR LIFE

Dr Darren Morton

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“Want to ramp up how much you get out of life? This engaging book can lift your mood and save your life! Based on the latest scientific evidence, the practical tips are desperately needed by all those trying to discover purpose and find happiness in this modern world.”

—Sue Radd, Advanced Accredited Practising Dietitian,
speaker and author, Food As Medicine

“When it comes to enhancing emotional wellbeing and boosting health and happiness, Live More Happy is an excellent guide into the mind of the user—and a must-read book.”

—Professor Esther Chang, Professor of Nursing, and
Professor of Aged and Palliative Care, Western Sydney University

"This book isn't just a good read; it truly has the power to lift your life. I have personally benefited from the principles presented within and have seen them make a difference in the lives of students I teach."

—Dr Jason Hinze, Education Course Convenor,
Avondale College of Higher Education

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Introduction

I want you to be happier and I am certain that this book can help you achieve it.

In 2006, I wrote a book titled *Seven Secrets for Feeling Fantastic* in which I described in simple terms how the part of our brain responsible for how we feel—our emotions—is wired and how we can put it in a better state so we can feel better, more often. As the title indicated, it had a positive spin. I intentionally wrote the book not so much for people who were clinically depressed, but for those who just wanted to be more “up” than they were.

What truly—and pleasantly—surprised me was the feedback I received in response to the book. It resonated with readers, and I received many reports from individuals who told me how it had lifted them and helped them live more. Some of the stories were incredibly encouraging. But what I wasn’t prepared for were the uplifting stories from people who were desperately “down” but were able to come back to life through the strategies I had shared in the book.

I discovered that the strategies for boosting emotional wellbeing and becoming happier, which I present again in this book, lift people regardless of how high or low they are on the emotional ladder. My research has now shown that, on average, people who put the content of this book into practice experience a 30 per cent reduction in depressive symptoms, anxiety and stress, and a 20 per cent improvement in their mental health and vitality.¹

And this includes men! Some men seem to be turned off by the topic of “feelings”, but we men have feelings too—for example, we feel hungry! Seriously, men and women, young and old, all desire to be emotionally up, so this book is for you—whoever you are.

Live More Happy builds on my first book *Seven Secrets for Feeling Fantastic* and draws together the latest discoveries from neuroscience, positive psychology and lifestyle medicine—three areas of study, research

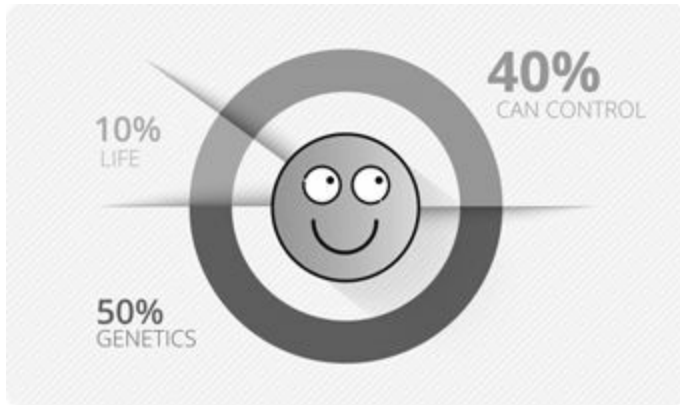
and healthcare that have exploded during the past decade.

I am incredibly passionate about sharing the messages in this book. Everyone needs to know them because feeling down is on the up. In Australia, which is rated among the top 10 “happiest” countries in the world,² antidepressant usage has doubled in the past decade, making them the most commonly used medications, taken by approximately one in 10 adults every day.³ The statistics are even more concerning in countries such as the United States.⁴ Studies show that only about 20 per cent of people report they are flourishing in life.⁵ Clearly, people everywhere are struggling, yet there are many scientifically supported things we can do to give ourselves a lift. This is what this book is about.

I am not naively suggesting that you can be a 10 out of 10 on the emotional ladder, day in, day out—no-one can. Sometimes life is tough, and we all have ups and downs. To quote the ancient wisdom of Solomon, “There is a time for everything . . . a time to weep and a time to laugh.”⁶ But encouragingly, research indicates that our life circumstances only contribute about 10 per cent to our level of enduring happiness.⁷ This offers hope. Regardless of our life circumstances, we can discover more joy.

Studies also suggest that another 50 per cent of our enduring happiness is determined by our genetics,⁸ which explains why some people are naturally cheerier than others—although another new field of science called “epigenetics” is suggesting that our environment (nurture) may have a lot bigger part to play than genetics (nature).⁹

This leaves about 40 per cent—nearly half—of our enduring happiness that we get to choose. This book can help you choose better.



For this book to work for you, you need to go beyond merely reading—you need to apply it. At the end of each chapter, I have included ways to put the learnings into practice. I can't encourage you enough to engage with these challenges. Consider them self-experiments to test and see what works for you. As with most things in life, the more you put in, the more you will get out of it.¹⁰

I sincerely hope that this book helps you to live more happy.

Cheers,
Darren

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Chapter 1

What we need to know about our Limbo

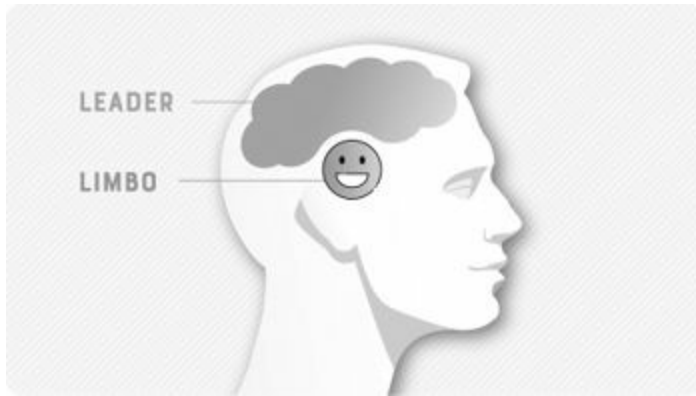
Men ought to know that from the brain, and from the brain only, arise our pleasures, joy, laughter and jests.—Hippocrates

I never came across any of my discoveries through the process of rational thinking.—Albert Einstein

In the spirit of simplicity, let me introduce you to your “Limbo,” the nickname I have given to the part of our brain referred to as the “Limbic system.” Our Limbo contains several structures—all with complicated names—but getting to know it as the “Limbo” will work for our purposes. As we are about to discover, our Limbo is an incredibly important part of us and we want to keep it in great working order.

In case you are wondering where our Limbo lives, it is located in the middle of our brain, just below the part that looks like a cauliflower, which I call the “Leader.”

Much has been learned about the Limbo through the work of inquisitive brain researchers who love to push buttons and see what happens. They began by wiring up the Limbos of cats and rats in a way that allowed them to send a tiny electrical impulse to the area when the researchers pushed a button.



The researchers noted that if they stimulated one part of a cat's Limbo, the cat would begin to purr—and dribble, of course—become playful, and basically turn into a very happy and likeable animal.¹ Intriguingly, if they continued to stimulate this part of the cat's Limbo, it would lose all interest in food. Happy and thin—having our Limbo wired up in this way might sound appealing.

Note: There is some debate among brain scientists regarding what structures are considered part of the Limbic system. I will assume the Limbic system includes the parahippocampal gyrus, cingulate gyrus, amygdala, hippocampus, septal nuclei, hypothalamus, olfactory system, sensory association cortices and portions of the thalamus.² So glad we cleared that up!

But the researchers discovered that if they moved the wires slightly and stimulated another part of the cat's Limbo, the opposite reaction occurred. The cat threw a hissy fit—hackles up, claws out, even some spitting thrown in for effect. What's more, the cat would eat anything it could get its paws on. Repetitive stimulation of the cat's Limbo in this way caused them to morph into an obese, hostile fiend that was no fun to be around.

So that the rats in the laboratory didn't feel left out, the researchers also wired up their Limbos, but added another element. They gave the rats the ability to press a button so they could stimulate their own Limbo. To the amazement of the researchers, the rats repeatedly pressed the button, even in preference to eating and drinking.³ If left unchecked, the rats would

eventually die from exhaustion, their tiny paws still poised on the button attempting one more buzz.

Home of Happy—the Limbo’s main role

The researchers had discovered that the Limbo is the region of the brain responsible for emotions—feeling is its core business and mood its main role. If stimulated in the right way, it made the cats and rats feel good; if stimulated in the wrong way, it made them feel bad.

Note: Over the past few decades, scientists have made incredible advances in understanding the human brain, thanks largely to sophisticated scanning technologies such as MRIs. While these studies show that the human brain is amazingly more complex than ever imagined, both in its design and connections, the Limbo is consistently implicated in mood.⁴

Our brains are a little larger and more complex but not unlike that of rats and cats. We too have a Limbo. And like cats and rats, our Limbo is the part of our brain that determines how we feel—scientists even refer to it as the “emotional brain.”⁵ Put simply, it is our “home of happy,” if we stimulate it in the right way. This is what this book is dedicated to doing—helping us discover how to stimulate our Limbo in the right way, so we can feel better and “happier” more often—more “up” and less “down”! And there are some really good reasons why we should do this.

- **Happy people have a better quality of life.**

Think about this statement for a moment: *The quality of your emotions determines the quality of your life.*

I am sure you will agree this is true. If you spend most of your time “up” and feeling good, life is good. If, on the other hand, you spend most of your time feeling “down” and low in mood, life is lousy.

Note that the things in our life—relationships, circumstances,

possessions and so on—are merely vehicles to emotions. If they lead to positive emotions, they contribute to our quality of life; but if they breed negative emotions, they detract from our quality of life. As much as we are able, it is good to surround ourselves with “wings” rather than “weights.”

In short, the first good reason we should endeavour to give ourselves an emotional boost is that our quality of life is better. And—as upbeat people are more fun to be around—the quality of life of those we associate with will be better as well!

- **Happy people live longer.**

In 2001, researchers from the University of Kentucky published a fascinating study on the longevity of nuns.⁶ The researchers uncovered the autobiographies of 180 nuns that had been penned when the nuns first entered the convent in the 1930s. They analysed the tone of these writings—whether they were upbeat and optimistic or forlorn and pessimistic—to see if it influenced how long they lived. It is worth noting that nuns are ideal for a study like this because their lifestyle habits are similar—similar diet and physical activity levels—and they are unlikely to do drugs or participate in other risky activities. The researchers found that fewer than one in five of the least happy nuns were still alive at the age of 93, whereas more than half of the happiest nuns were.

Similar findings have been replicated by other studies.⁷ Analysing the writings of well-known deceased psychologists, researchers from the University of Kansas found that those who used more positive emotional words lived about three years longer.⁸ Another study found that older individuals with a more positive outlook toward ageing lived 7.5 years longer than those who did not share the same optimistic outlook.⁹

To take it one step further, researchers from Wayne State University asked the question, “Can longevity be predicted by something as simple as how much someone smiles in a photograph?” To test it, they took 230 major league baseball cards from 1952, rated the player’s “smile intensity” on the card, and mapped it against how long they lived. Remarkably, the players who pulled the cheesiest grins—described as a *Duchene* smile—

lived on average seven years longer than those who didn't smile at all.¹⁰

A smile adding seven years of extra life is incredible, especially when we consider that eating a healthy diet, being physically active and not smoking only add about two years each to one's life expectancy.¹¹ Obviously, it wasn't just one smile—the smiley players in the baseball study were probably smilier most of the time. (Although, it might be worth smiling more in photos just in case.)

A little later, we will examine *why* being happy increases our life span, particularly in relation to the functioning of our immune system, but one thing is clear: Happy people tend to live longer. After reviewing many studies examining the relationship between longevity and happiness, renowned researcher Dr Ed Diener estimated that a very happy person is likely to live between four to 10 years longer than their unhappy neighbour.¹²

It seems that the ancient proverb is correct: “Being cheerful keeps you healthy; it is a slow death to be gloomy all the time.”¹³

- **Happy people are more successful.**

To continue the theme of “smiling studies,” one study found that the extent to which women smiled in their college yearbook photo significantly predicted their levels of wellbeing and marital satisfaction 30 years later—even after taking into consideration how physically attractive or socially desirable the women were deemed to be.¹⁴

The productivity benefits of happiness have been repeatedly demonstrated in the workplace.¹⁵ Happier employees are more creative, display superior performance, are more inclined to “go the extra mile” and perform more helpful acts that translate to better customer service.¹⁶

Happier people also tend to be more present—in more ways than one. First, they exhibit less absenteeism by taking fewer days off. But perhaps even more importantly, they demonstrate lower levels of “presenteeism.” Do you know the feeling of “being there but not really being there”? Happy people tend to experience it less—when they are there, they are actually there! So it is hardly surprising that happy people tend to earn more—one

study found as much as 30 per cent.¹⁷ It pays to be happy!

It's obviously important to treat our Limbo well. It can affect our quality of life, our length of life and how successful we might be. But there is still more we need to know about our Limbo. While the Limbo's primary function is feeling, it also has three other important functions. As we consider them, note that these other functions are always linked to its main function, which is feeling.

Memory

Do you need help with your memory at times? Do you find yourself forgetting things you should remember but remembering things you probably should forget? It is our Limbo that decides what gets filed and what gets forgotten, and it makes that decision on the basis of how it *feels*.

To illustrate, have you ever had the embarrassing experience of meeting someone for the first time only to have their name vanish from your mind moments after they have told it to you? What makes it more embarrassing is when they have clearly made a mental note of your name and insert it into every sentence at least three times: "So Darren, tell me Darren, how is your day going, Darren?"

It is awkward to ask their name again because it suggests a low care factor when we heard it the first time. In other words, if there is not strong *feeling* attached to something, we tend to forget it. This is why Dale Carnegie, author of *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, states that the sweetest sound to anyone is the sound of their own name. It communicates that we care.

On the flip side, we have no problem remembering the name of a certain someone who makes our heart flutter. I don't recall much about Grade 3—I don't remember the classroom or the teacher—but I do remember the name of the girl I had a crush on. When I got to sit next to her in story time, my heart pounded in my chest. Strong feelings promote strong memories and I remember her name to this day.

While we are on the topic of school, which teachers feature most prominently in your memory? I have two. The first had a mandatory

policy to strap at least half the class each time we met, so I lived in fear of him. The second took an interest in me and nurtured me, which made me feel good about myself. I remember little of what they taught me, but I will always remember them because of the way they made me feel.

This is worth reflecting on. The thing we remember most about people is the way they make us feel. So how do we make others feel? We will be remembered—or not—for it.

The takeaway message is that our Limbo, primarily responsible for our feelings, is also in charge of our memories. If we don't feel strongly, we will likely forget; if we do feel strongly, we will likely remember. If the feelings are intense enough—such as when a terrifying event triggers a phobia—we can remember for a lifetime.

In this book, we will discover many more uncanny things about the Limbo's involvement in memory, but we are beginning to see how important this part of our brain is!

Motivation

Most of what we do, we do for a feeling, either to avoid pain or achieve pleasure. Aristotle came up with this notion thousands of years ago. The reason for this is that our Limbo—our emotional hub—is responsible for our drives. It is for this reason that feelings move us. In fact, the word “emotion” literally means “to move.”

This is why fear and love—the two strongest feelings experienced by humans—are tremendous motivating forces that inspire our best efforts. Even someone who avoids exercise at all costs will find it easy to find the motivation to push themselves to levels of exhaustion they didn't know existed if they are chased by something that terrifies them! Strong feelings like love and fear can also motivate us to perform all manner of strange and sometimes embarrassing behaviours. In his book *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman points out that smart people can do really dumb things when feelings gets involved—or, in other words, when the Limbo takes over.

For many years, I have been involved in helping people adopt healthier lifestyles and I can tell you that to achieve long-term behaviour change

requires more than knowledge. The world is full of people who know what to do, but who don't do what they know. Why? Ask someone why he or she is eating a pizza the size of their head, even though they said they were going on a diet, and they will tell you, "I *feel* like it!"

Ask a couch potato why they don't get up and do something active and they will tell you, "I don't *feel* like it." They couldn't be more explicit; their Limbo isn't in the mood, so their motivation levels are low. The behaviour-change experts who wrote the book *Change Anything* advise that in order to adopt a new behaviour for good, you need to discover a way to *feel* positively about it.¹⁸

Clearly, mood and motivation go hand in hand, so if we are interested in discovering greater levels of motivation, we need to leverage our Limbo. As we implement the Limbo-lifting strategies in this book, don't be surprised when we discover more motivation!

Many automatic bodily processes

I know *you* are not the kind of person who exceeds the speed limit when driving a car, but we might know someone who does. Hypothetically, if *that person* were to speed down the road and then suddenly hear a siren and notice in their rearview mirror a police car with flashing lights indicating for them to pull over, they would likely experience several automatic changes within their body. Their heart would pound in their chest. Their palms would sweat. Butterflies would come alive in their stomach.

There is a strong relationship between our emotional state and many automatic bodily processes. I say "automatic bodily processes" because they occur without us having to *think* about it. In fact, *thinking* can't make our heart rate increase, palms sweat and stomach lurch, unless of course we think about something that makes us *feel*, in which case our Limbo does its work. We will learn more about this in Chapter 6.

As the Limbo has such an impact on our heart, it is not surprising that people with higher anger scores are two-and-a-half times more likely to experience a heart attack than more placid folk.¹⁹ Similarly, the emotional stress of being exposed to heavy traffic increases the risk of a heart attack

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