

HAPPINESS, A Mystery

& 66 attempts to solve it

Sophie Hannah



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Introduction



Why 66?

I assume you know what I'm talking about. Right? I'll give you a minute to work it out.

Welcome back. Hopefully, you just looked again at this book's cover and noticed that the title contains the word 'mystery' and the subtitle is 'and 66 attempts to solve it'. Yet in the Contents list, there's a chapter called 'The 65 Days'. And 65 is the number that comes before 66. Is this pure coincidence, or is there a mystery to be solved?

Here is my recommendation: wherever possible, treat anything you can as a mystery. Why? Because mysteries make life better. I love mysteries, including the desperately-craving-an-answer part, more than I love their solutions. Definite answers shut down possibilities, while an unsolved puzzle ignites our imagination and invites us to think, 'What if it turns

out to be something shocking and unguessable that will well and truly blow my mind?’ Then we start to imagine how exhilarated we’ll feel when we encounter that unimaginable, mind-blowing solution.

I love mysteries so much that I have a tendency to invent them where they don’t exist. I’ve done this since childhood. Age seven, on a family holiday in Lytham St Annes, I saw two cars driving along a road, one behind the other. ‘I wonder why that second car is chasing the first one,’ I said to my parents.

They explained that there was no mystery; the two cars had nothing to do with each other. I refused to accept this hypothesis. I wanted and needed a better story.

I’m not going to dwell on The Two-Cars Mystery, because I never solved it and never will – not unless I go to Lytham St Annes to investigate, and I refuse on principle ever to go there again. (It was supposed to be a seaside holiday, and guess what? The sea was not there – like, *at all* – for the whole time that we were. Where was it? I don’t know: another mystery. There was a beach, and there were slightly damp mudflats stretching as far as the eye could see, but there was no sea for me to swim in. I was too young to understand about tides, and I’m glad I didn’t. I wouldn’t have approved.)

If solved and never-to-be-solved mysteries are equally disappointing, it’s clear what the ideal is: a

puzzle that makes you want to hunt for its solution, happy in the knowledge that there's a fair chance of success.

I'm delighted to be able to present you with that very thing. I'd like to invite you to be my sidekick as I investigate the mystery of happiness. I should probably say 'mysteries', plural. What is happiness? How does one pursue and/or achieve it? Where is it to be found, and with whom?

If you noticed the 65/66 discrepancy before I drew it to your attention, well done. You are perfect sidekick material. If you didn't, do not be disheartened – there's another significant clue in this introduction and you might notice that instead. If you haven't already, don't give up. (NB: There is no limit to how often you can read a book's introduction before proceeding to Chapter 1.)

Let's do a feasibility study before we start our investigation. Is the puzzle of happiness definitely solvable? Isn't it, rather, something that people have opinions about, with no right answer? Well, if happiness is real, then it must be possible to define it and to suggest ways to increase our chances of achieving it if we want to.

All right, you might say, but that's equally true of love or any other human experience. Or pies. Some people think a pie must have pastry covering its entire surface area in order to qualify for the description,

while others believe that a stew in a dish with a pastry topping can legitimately be called a pie. (Those crazy fools! I bet they're the same people who book seaside holidays without any sea.) So, why not investigate pies, or the meaning of love? Why happiness?

I was drawn to this specific mystery by my own personal happiness-related dilemma. That's also what led me to have my first ever one-to-one session with a life coach, and I'm going to invite you to be a fly on the wall at that session in a moment, so that you can experience the beginning of the mystery in the most authentic way possible. After all, as any fan of the detective fiction genre knows, the main detective, the sidekick and the reader must all have equal access to the clues at all times. In this case, you're the sidekick *and* the reader, and I don't want to hear any complaints about that being too much work, okay?

Good. I'm glad we agree. Let's proceed to my first (but by no means last) session with a life coach, which contained a revelation so startling that it called into question my whole belief system about how the world works.

1

A Session with a Life Coach



Her name is Katherine. I find her online, and see that she offers life coaching via Skype, which is brilliant and convenient, because she lives in America, and I live in Cambridge, England. I could have found an English life coach and met her in person, and indeed this is what I've always done in the past with psychotherapists, but for life coaching I wanted a bona fide American. Life coaching sounds so much like an American invention that I wasn't even willing to Google it to check that I was right. Just as seafood is often dodgy in restaurants that are too far from the coast, I decided that American life coaching – coming straight from the source – had to be the best kind.

Katherine also has the advantage of looking exactly like my idea of an American life coach: bouncy hair,

glossy make-up, good skin, a persuasive smile full of well-proportioned white teeth. Not only does she look perfect for my purposes, her office does too: white walls, cream blinds at the windows, light wood floors. On a white-painted table, a potted plant and a framed photograph are positioned far enough apart to suggest that one or both might be claustrophobic.

This is great. A life coach's walls should be white and uncluttered, and any space inhabited by a life coach should be mainly empty. I firmly believe in the innate superiority of minimalism. My house in Cambridge is full of messy piles of stuff that I'm too busy to sort out and my every wall is covered from top to bottom with badly hung, brightly coloured paintings that probably clash with one another — but that's fine for me, because I'm a flawed human in search of help. Also, I love looking forward to the big decluttering and sprucing up of my house that I keep promising myself as a future treat, when I finally have the time.

Framed and hanging above the table in Katherine's office, between the photograph and the plant, there's an inspirational quote: 'The pain you feel today is the strength you feel tomorrow.' I agree with the sentiment, and I'm pleased that Katherine has it on display. It's precisely what I'd hope to find in the immediate vicinity of an American life coach. Fleetinglly, I think of a house I once visited in suburban England that

had motivational slogans stencilled on many of its walls. It also had, above the bath, a large tile with 'Bathe' painted on it and one saying 'Sit' directly above the loo. I remember thinking that I didn't want to be helped with my motivation by anyone who could fail to realise why putting the word 'Sit' above a toilet wasn't the best idea. Katherine would never have made that mistake.

'Let's begin,' she says. 'What do you need help with?'

It's ten o'clock at night in England; earlier in America. I'm nervous about the conversation we're going to have, in a way that I've never been when I've spoken to English psychotherapists face to face. Talking to an American life coach on Skype feels a little bit ... not exactly sinful, but almost like a secret treat – like waiting until everyone's gone to bed and then scoffing a delicious leftover scone with jam and cream.

Life coaching, I have decided before trying it, is going to be more fun than therapy, which was fascinating but not always fun. I'm a big fan of life coaching already, having become addicted to many American life coaches' podcasts. From these, I have learned the difference – in theory, at least – between coaching and psychotherapy. Therapy is focused on analysing and healing past pain. Life coaching, by contrast, seems to be much more forward-looking

and definitely more jolly. It's all about getting the results you want in the best of all possible futures. Which is ideal for my predicament, because my problem isn't a lack of happiness. It's the opposite, in fact. Here is how my conversation with Katherine goes after she asks me what I need help with.

Me: Um ... I think I might be too happy.

Her: Too happy?

Me: Yes. But in a way that could be a problem.

Her: Can you—

Me: Yeah, I'll explain. I've always had a happy temperament, just naturally. I wake up feeling extremely happy every day, unless there's a specific upsetting problem. But that's not often, so I'm basically happy most of the time. Even when there's a problem, I'm so good at deciding that it's a mild or easily solved problem and making myself happy again that ... I suppose what I'm saying is, I reckon I have some serious problems that I'm in danger of never solving because I'm happy in spite of them. So I don't suffer enough, which means I don't address the issues.

Her: Tell me about the serious problems.

Me: The main one is that I'm too busy and pressured. I mean ... *incredibly* busy and pressured. All the time.

Her: What kind of busy? Work? Family commitments?

Me: Mainly work. Everything else is manageable, or it would be if it wasn't for work.

Her: What's your job?

Me: I'm a writer. I write contemporary crime novels, psychological thrillers. And I also write ... have you heard of Agatha Christie's famous Belgian detective, Hercule Poirot?

Her: Of course.

Me: Well, for the past few years I've been writing new Hercule Poirot novels as well as my other crime novels. And recently, I agreed to a teaching gig that was too tempting and exciting to turn down, and I'm about to launch a coaching programme for writers, and I've co-written two murder mystery musicals and toured one

of them around literary festivals, and there's a lot more of that coming up ... And, I mean, I absolutely love doing all these things. That's why I do them all. I keep saying yes to new, exciting projects, and I'm really happy to be doing them. *And* I make sure I spend lots of time with my family, just hanging out, and doing the things I love doing, like swimming, seeing friends, reading, watching movies.

Her: It all sounds great to me. Are you sure there's a problem?

Me: I mean ... not entirely, but I think there is, yes.

Her: What is it, then? You say you have time for your family and for relaxing ...

Me: Yes. I've never been willing to sacrifice the rest of my life, no matter how much I love my work.

Her: I'm still not clear what the problem is.

Shit. Is it possible that I don't have a problem? Am I a fraud, wasting the time of a life coach who could be

helping someone in greater need of her services? No, no. Calm down. There's definitely a problem. I'm not on this Skype call under false pretences.

Me: It's easiest to describe if I give you specific examples. Like ... the other day, I was properly, genuinely pleased when I worked out a way of washing my face and brushing my teeth at the same time. I saved between seven and ten seconds by thinking of them as one process instead of two and washing my face *around my toothbrush*.

Her: Okay ...

Me: I thought, 'Amazing! I've saved ten seconds.' Then I opened my wardrobe to find clothes to put on – I was going to do a talk at a literary lunch that day – and all my clothes were mixed up and crammed into my wardrobe in a chaotic way. I don't have time to sort out my clothes, buy new ones, throw away old ones. Those things are neither work nor fun, so I never do them. I knew I had at least three tops and two pairs of trousers that would be ideal for the literary lunch, but I couldn't see them because of the wardrobe chaos. They were probably in the laundry room, but that's in the basement – two flights down,

too far away. You must think it sounds crazy: someone who doesn't have time to go to her own laundry room, who gets stressed even thinking about it, and so picks a totally unsuitable outfit for a literary lunch just because it's the one that happens to fall out of the cupboard.

Her: It does sound a little strange. But this was only one day, right?

Me: No! I never have enough time to go to the laundry room. At least three times a week I realise I haven't seen this or that garment for months or years, and I consider going down to the basement to look for it, but there's always a pressing deadline I'd miss if I did: for a podcast episode, an interview, an article, a conference call. Always something. Anyway, when I looked in my wardrobe and saw no clothes I could easily reach and wanted to wear, my heart started to beat faster. In situations like that – and more than half of each day is like that for me, with time marching on and all the things I need to do piling up in my brain – I go into my race-against-the-clock mentality, which would make sense if I was someone who, I don't know, worked in a counter-terrorism unit, whose job was to defuse bombs or something. But I'm a

writer! My life shouldn't be like this. I know it shouldn't. Looking into my wardrobe that morning, I could feel the frustration set in as my regained-time advantage drained away. I actually thought, 'Fuck, now I'm going to lose the ten seconds I saved by merging face-washing and teeth-brushing into one task instead of two.' I spend a lot of my life feeling like that guy from *The Bourne Identity* who has to keep running all the time or else he might die.

Her: Why would it matter if you took a few more minutes to get dressed?

Me: Because in order to stay afloat with all the things I've committed to do – all the things I really want to do – I have to do a certain number of tasks every day, and it's more tasks than I can do in a day unless I'm constantly trying to save minutes and seconds. Unless I'm in *Bourne Identity* mode. My life has been like this for so long, it's become my automatic way of being.

Her: All right. Then I agree, you have a problem.

Shit. An American life coach with bouncy hair and bright white teeth and walls thinks I have a problem.

This is terrible. I feel worse, because now my problem is official – made so by a well-being professional – and I have no time to solve it.

Still, there's always an upside: it's nice to be proved right.

Me: Thank you! After I got dressed, in clothes that were totally unsuitable and that I didn't want to wear, I went to walk downstairs and at the top of the stairs, do you know what thoughts were running through my head? 'What planning can I do on my way down the stairs that will save me time when I get to the ground floor? I'm starving, but my train leaves in fifteen minutes and the station is six minutes' walk away. Is there any way I can make scrambled eggs at the same time as putting my laptop and charger in my bag?'

Her: That sounds very stressful.

Me: It was. It *is*. My life is, and I can feel it not doing me any good. When I'm in non-work mode, watching telly with the family or swimming, I'm not like that at all. But the rest of the time is *all* like that.