

Thriving in Uncertainty

*How to Make Good Decisions, Adapt Quickly
and Navigate Forwards in Uncertain Times*

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and Alex Jamieson

Introduction



“Uncertainty has been defined as a lack of information about an event and as an aversive state that people are motivated to reduce.”

Daniel Gilbert

Most people think of uncertainty primarily as a problem for decision making. When we don't know what's going to happen, it's harder for us to make good decisions, which in turn makes it harder to navigate forwards and find direction.

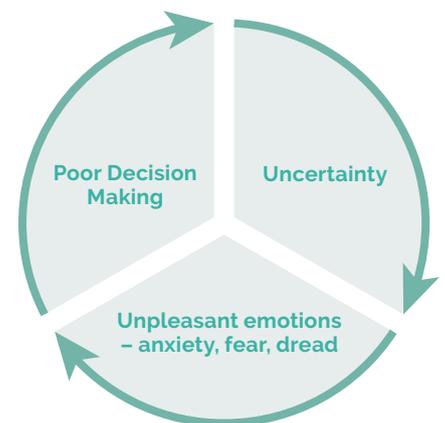
However, the quote also suggests that uncertainty is an aversive state - something that generates anxiety and stress. These feelings make sense when we understand the principal function of our brain is to keep us safe by predicting and planning for future threats. When our brain can't do this, it triggers a stress response to incentivise us to gather more information to reduce the uncertainty.

Without some degree of certainty, we don't know how to react or what to do, which is why our greatest fear is famously that of the unknown. As Tim Ferriss notes, *“people will choose unhappiness over uncertainty”*. For example, most people would prefer to know a medical diagnosis, even if the outcome was negative, than not know what was causing their condition.

Uncertainty therefore affects us in two ways:

- **Decision making:** uncertainty increases the likelihood of mistakes on the one hand, and can lead to fatigue or decision paralysis on the other.
- **Stress and anxiety:** uncertainty causes strong negative emotions which we often want to escape or avoid.

What's worse is that as we try to avoid stress and anxiety our decision making gets worse, which can cause a dangerous feedback loop, generating further uncertainty.



Moving forwards in conditions of uncertainty

To help us cope with uncertainty effectively, we therefore need to break this feedback loop. The rest of this handbook contains tools and techniques that address these two components:

- **Part 1 - Decision making.** Practical tools that we can use to improve our decision making in conditions of uncertainty.
- **Part 2 - Managing emotions.** Proven psychological techniques we can use to manage our emotions skilfully, so that we can still move forwards purposefully even when we feel stressed and anxious.

Rob Archer and Alex Jamieson

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Part one:

Decision making



Decision making: overview



To understand how we operate under uncertainty, it is helpful to think of our brain as having four distinct components:

- The **Chimp brain** is there to ensure our survival. The Chimp makes fast, emotion-based and reactive decisions.
- The **Autopilot brain** acts based on what has been pre-programmed from our experience. This enables us to carry out routine tasks quickly and without conscious thought, however it is essentially backward looking and prioritises ways of thinking that have worked before.
- The **Pilot brain** represents a more conscious and deliberate style of thinking. The Pilot is able to think ahead and make plans to avert potential risks, however just like a real pilot, it can get tired quickly.
- The **Observer** brain is the part of us that can notice our thoughts and emotions.

When we don't know how to respond to uncertainty, our Chimp brain initiates our stress response. In most cases, this is exactly what's needed: it heightens our alertness and we start actively seeking out information to reduce the uncertainty. However, when we are under stress:

- We can make more **emotion-based, impulsive** and **reactive** decisions
- Our increased alertness can evolve into a state of **hypervigilance**, as we become overly focused on risks and threats
- We can fall into oversimplified, **all-or-nothing style thinking**.

On top of this, uncertain situations require more of our attention, effort and energy to make sense of events. This can cause further problems as our Pilot brain can start to overthink, which in turn can lead to exhaustion and overwhelm.

When this happens we often find it harder to regulate our own emotions and our coping strategies tend to suffer.

The consequence of this is that we tend to rely more and more on the Autopilot brain to make decisions and default to acting based on what has worked for us in the past. This is often effective, however in conditions of uncertainty we leave ourselves open to being **caught out by risks we had not anticipated**.

Fortunately, there are a number of practical tools we can use to help mitigate the impact of uncertainty on our decision making. The rest of this section provides short summaries and templates which you can use to improve your decision making.

Decision making trap	Decision making tool	Page
Impulsive, all-or-nothing thinking	Thinking in bets	6
Hypervigilance and focusing on negatives	Control the controllables	7
Not seeing hidden risks	Premortem	8
Not thinking clearly and fatigue	Take 5	9
Lack of effective decision making processes	9 brief decision making heuristics	10

Thinking in bets

"The more we recognise that we are betting on our beliefs (with our happiness, attention, health, money, or time), the more we are likely to temper our statements, getting closer to the truth as we acknowledge the risk inherent in what we believe" Annie Duke

When to use Thinking in Bets

Thinking in bets is a highly effective strategy for conditions of high uncertainty and when you or others are falling into oversimplified, black and white thinking.

Why it is useful

This technique is useful for countering the tendency to think in all-or-nothing categories. For example, by saying "I am 80% confident about X" as opposed to "I'm certain that this is right," we openly acknowledge the presence of uncertainty and it moves us to being more open-minded and objective.

How to use

Whenever you express a belief, qualify it with your level of confidence - for example, you could say, "I'm 70% certain that this decision will lead to this outcome." To help establish your confidence level, consider the source, quality and relevance of the information you are using to make your decision.

0% = complete uncertainty

50% certainty

100% = complete certainty

Once you have established your confidence level, answer the following questions:

1. What information may change my level of certainty in my decision by 5%? by 10%? by 20%? 1.
2. Are there things I can do to reduce the risk of unknown factors affecting the outcome of my decision? 2.
3. What small bet or experiment could I make to test some of my assumptions? 3.

If working as a team:

4. What knowledge do others have about this decision that we do not? 4.
5. Can we weight other people's knowledge by their level of expertise in the subject? 5.
6. Have other team members reached a different confidence level based on similar information? If so, why? 6.

Control the controllables



“Man is not free from his conditions, but he is free to take a stand towards his conditions” Viktor Frankl

When to use Control the Controllables

When confronted with a decision that makes you feel stressed, anxious or overwhelmed.

Why it is useful

It allows time and energy to be focused on aspects of the situation we can control ensuring a proactive approach and often, a reduction in anxiety.

How to use this tool

Step 1 Pick a subject you're concerned about.

Step 2 Identify the aspects of the situation which are beyond your control.

Step 3 Identify aspects you can influence. Tip: score each aspect on a scale of 1-10 and any scoring lower than 5, move to 'Factors outside of my control.'

Step 4 Identify aspects directly within your control.

Step 5 Once categorised, spend 70% of your time and energy on factors in your control and 30% on factors you can influence.

STEP 1. Subject I'm concerned about:

STEP 2. Factors outside of my control:

STEP 3. Factors I can influence:

STEP 4. Factors I can control:

If I can't control or influence it,
how do I learn to **accept** it?

*spread of virus, actions of others and
impact on the economy*

If it's not in my control,
can I exert **influence**?

*my home environment, my finances,
my family, my friends and colleagues*

Is it in my **control**?

*my behaviours, actions,
attitudes, outlook
and decisions*

Example: Responding to the Coronavirus Pandemic

The Premortem

"The premortem is a way to get people to play devil's advocate without encountering resistance. If a project goes poorly there will be a lessons-learned session that looks at why the project failed. Why don't we do that up front?" Gary Klein

When to use the Premortem

Use in the planning stage of a decision making process, or when a group instinctively agrees on a decision or course of action.

Why it is useful

Premortems rapidly help uncover **hidden risks** as well as puncturing **groupthink** and **confirmation bias**.

How to use

Ask all team members to work individually for 15 minutes to generate possible reasons for why the decision you are contemplating has ended in failure.

STEP 1. Imagine the decision you are contemplating has ended up a spectacular failure. What happened and why did it happen?

STEP 2. Discuss as a team and collectively prioritise the top 3-5 risks:

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

STEP 3. Generate ideas that will help defend the decision against these top 3-5 risks:

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

STEP 4. Create an action plan for each risk

Reason for failure	Action plan	Timeframe and responsibility
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		

Take 5

“Almost everything will work again if you unplug it for a few minutes... including you” Anne Lamott

When to use Take 5

Use this technique before every important personal or professional decision, especially if you feel fatigued or can't think clearly.

Why it is useful

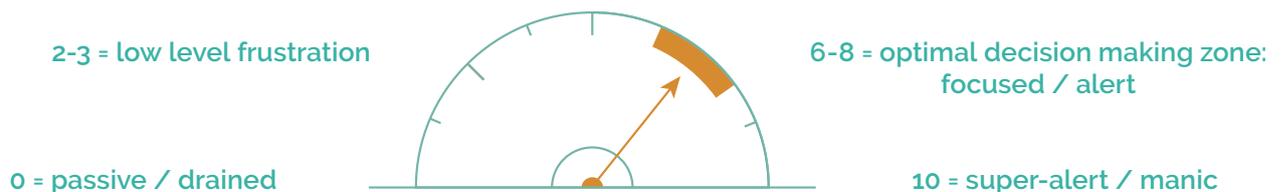
Decision making is mentally exhausting, therefore we need to:

- **Take 5.** As we crave certainty, it's tempting to try and plan for all eventualities, but in most cases we don't need to make a decision immediately and would be better off focusing on the immediate set of issues. This is even more the case in times of great uncertainty where we often don't have the information we need to make a good decision.
- **Recover energy.** As we get tired, we lose access to our executive function, which means we increasingly have difficulty regulating our emotions and we tend to think short term and become more reactive – all of which impede our decision making ability. In addition, when we are resting, the default mode network in our brains becomes more active, helping us to make sense of the information we have absorbed, make connections and to start seeing the wood from the trees. Therefore without recovery, the risk is we are overwhelmed by information and fail to notice the signal from the noise.

How to use

For every important decision, ask yourself: *do I need to make this decision now?* If you are put on the spot, ask if you can come back with a more considered view later, and give a specific time.

Take a temperature check. Think of your arousal level as an internal thermostat that needs regulating. Ask yourself: Am I too hot emotionally, or too cool? Rate yourself on a scale from 0 to 10:



This is a great tool for team settings: start meetings by asking “what's your number today?” or just use when communicating with each other “I'm at the low end of the scale today.” Just sharing your number can instigate the support you or your colleagues need to start moving up the scale again.

Other ideas include:

- **Take 5.** See pausing as part of the decision making process: Take 5 seconds / 5 minutes to pause, reflect and think about your options before making a decision. Take a longer cooling off period (24 hours) if needed.
- **Pay attention to how you're feeling.** Use the HALT acronym to create a rule for yourself: do not make decisions if you are Hungry, Angry, Lonely or Tired. Instead change the context, go for a walk, talk to someone else.
- **Write down your initial decision and then take a break.** Re-read what you have written later on and see if you still agree.
- **If in doubt, sleep on it.** Studies have shown that without sufficient sleep, we are more susceptible to distractions, we lack innovation in our decision making, we struggle to keep track of recent events and have less awareness of our own behaviour.

Decision making heuristics

In the grid below, we have outlined some brief techniques that can rapidly improve decision making.

10-10-10 method

What are the consequences of this decision in 10 minutes, 10 months, and 10 years?



Outsider's perspective

What advice would you give a family member or friend who is facing the same decision?



Batch decisions

Group similar decisions to one point in time to reduce decision fatigue e.g. create a weekly meal plan.



Satisfice don't maximise

Choose the first option that meets your criteria. Seek 'good enough' and not perfection.

PERFECT

GOOD ENOUGH

NOT ENOUGH

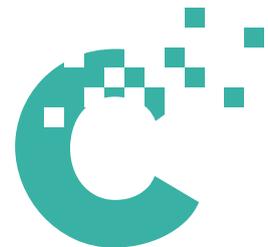
Eliminate bad options

Score your options against each of your decision criteria and disregard the low-scoring options.



'Chunk' the decision

Break down a decision into a series of smaller decisions to create momentum and progress.



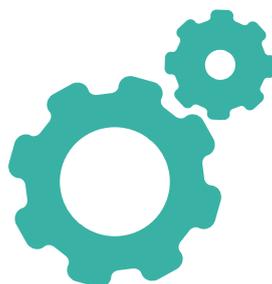
Growth over happiness

Instead of asking "will this decision make me happy?", ask yourself: "will this decision lead me to grow as a person?"



Create default choices for simple decisions

Life is easier when we have default options in place e.g. what to wear for work.



Default to 'No'

If you say no to almost everything, you are free to say yes to the things that are really important to you.



Understanding hard choices

“Hard choices are precious opportunities to become the distinctive people we are” Ruth Chang

No matter what decision making tools or heuristics we use, decision making during times of great uncertainty can be extremely difficult.

In her 2005 TED talk, Ruth Chang talks about the issue of 'hard choices', where there is no right or wrong course of action. For example you might agonise whether to stay in the City or uproot to the country because one option is better in some ways but the other is better in other ways.

The default in these situations is either to revert to the least risky option, or to drift into decisions without really choosing them.

How did you choose your career, for example? Many people drifted into what they do, without really choosing that direction. That's not a problem necessarily, but it is different from actually making a conscious decision .

Chang's insight is to say imagine a world of easy choices. Easy choices are where there is a logical path to choose. If there's a best alternative, then that's the one you should logically choose. However if there were only easy choices we would be enslaved to logic - there would be no real agency for us as individuals.

Conversely with hard choices – where there is no right answer – there is opportunity to put our selves into the decision. 'Here's where I stand'. 'This is who I am'. We become authors of our own lives. Instead of looking 'out there' we should be looking for reasons 'in here'. Who am I to be in this situation?

In her book *Uncharted*, Margaret Heffernan adds that even the best forecasters struggle to forecast beyond one year. Yet she argues that this is actually a positive. The fact that the future has not been determined means that it is fundamentally up to us to design and define what we want it to be.

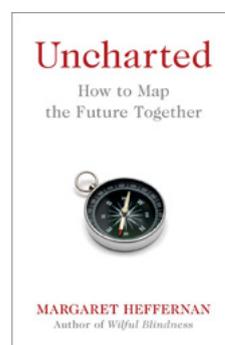
People who don't understand this tend to assume the future is already written and drift into decisions. Drifters allow the world to write the story of their lives.

Conversely when life presents us with hard choices, we have the opportunity to write something for ourselves.

'How to Make Hard Choices' by Ruth Chang



Key text:



Part two:

Managing emotions



Managing emotions: overview



“People will choose unhappiness over uncertainty” Tim Ferriss

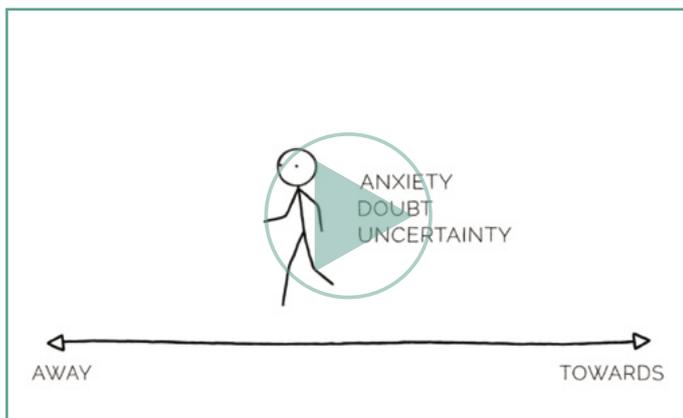
Human beings really don't like uncertainty – and for good reason.

Emotions evolved to help us take action to rectify a problem. But with uncertainty (and especially prolonged uncertainty, as is the case today), we often don't know what the problem is, and this leads to feelings of nagging unease and anxiety.

The impact of uncertainty on mental health

Negative thoughts and emotions are normal responses to uncertain times. However, because they are also uncomfortable, many of us try to reduce or avoid them. This can lead to **experiential avoidance**, which is when our desire to avoid difficult thoughts and emotions starts to dominate the direction of our lives.

What is Experiential Avoidance?



Examples of experiential avoidance might include putting off preparing for an important presentation because we feel anxious, or avoiding a difficult conversation with the boss because it makes us feel nervous.

As a one-off this may not be a huge issue. But if experiential avoidance becomes a pattern, we can end up organising our lives around feelings of safety and comfort, as opposed to moving in the direction of things we really care about.

The human dilemma

When asked what they most want from life, people talk about loving relationships, meaningful work and the chance to contribute. The problem is that doing these things often brings us into contact with difficult thoughts and emotions, especially in times of uncertainty.

So the choice we have is either to accept our thoughts and feelings as part of the human experience in return for moving towards the things we value; or to try and avoid mental discomfort but then to risk being separated from the things that matter most. Lasting mental health depends on mainly picking the former.

Psychological flexibility

Fortunately, there are techniques that can help us overcome experiential avoidance and manage our emotions more effectively.

By building **psychological flexibility**, we can learn to build our lives around what is most meaningful to us, notice when we are being hooked away from this direction and to 'course correct' if necessary.

In the sections that follow, we group the skills of psychological flexibility into two sections:

- **Finding 'True North'** – involves sharpening and broadening our idea of what 'good' looks like, particularly through clarifying important goals and values, and committing to action in pursuit of these.
- **Course correcting** This involves developing mindfulness skills to notice when our thoughts and emotions can hook us away from our meaningful direction.

At the end of this section we introduce a practical tool called the **Life compass** which is a . practical tool to help you to develop the skills of psychological flexibility in different life areas.

Finding True North

“He who has a why to live can bear almost any how”

Friedrich Nietzsche

Finding 'True North' means finding a meaningful direction in terms of our personal goals, values and purpose.

The power of such a direction is not about sparing us the pain of difficult thoughts and feelings. Rather, it is about ensuring that we have a 'why' to live, so that when we experience difficulty we do so *in the service* of things we really care about.

For example, it is one thing to experience stress and anxiety in your job. It is quite another to experience this as part of a job you love and which you find meaningful. By understanding *why* we are doing something we can also add *extraordinary power* to our actions.

So what is meaningful to you?

Considering your purpose and values

Here are some resources that might help you consider what 'True North' looks like for you:

- **The obituary exercise.** *Imagine your own funeral*: what you would like to hear people say about you after you are gone?
- **Questionnaires.** Try one of the following questionnaires to help explore your values:
 - Valued Living Questionnaire by Russ Harris
 - Your Values by Franklin Covey
 - Value Sort Tool by the Good Project

Identifying Towards Moves

Once you have established a clear direction and sense of purpose, your 'towards moves' are the actions you take to move you in that direction.

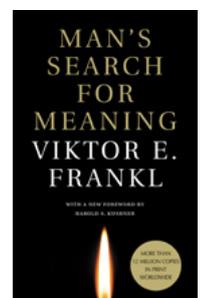
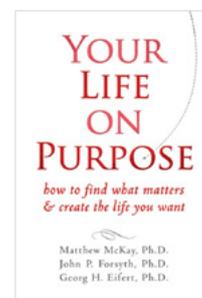
The following questions can help to identify your towards moves:

- What actions would other people see you taking if you were moving in the direction of your values and purpose?
- Think of yourself as starring in a film – what behaviours would the audience see you taking when you are living your values?
- Share your values and purpose with a friend or family member. Ask them what behaviours they see you taking when you act in accordance with your values.

'How Great Leaders Inspire Action' by Simon Sinek



Key texts:



'Course correcting'

We stare at our computer screens unaware that every important decision has been taken by one goal: the avoidance of pain. How did we get here?

It's because we don't see the consequences of one bad decision – I'll eat this, I won't go for a run tonight, I'll take this job to pay off my loans. But each decision makes it less likely we'll do the ideal, and the effect mounts.

Noticing Hooks

Hooks are thoughts and emotions that can 'hook' us away from our intentions, often without noticing.

Let's say I am working on an important new presentation, but feelings of anxiety show up as I think about talking to a room full of people. If I try to avoid my anxiety, I might distract myself by turning to social media. The 'hook' in this case would be the feelings of anxiety which I am trying to avoid.

By seeking to relieve my anxiety, I also get hooked away from the direction I have set for myself. What's worse is that these hooks can become automatic responses, so for example *any* feeling of anxiety means I *automatically* reach for my phone.

Whilst we can't control the thoughts and emotions that arise within us, we can learn to notice them and increase our awareness of the effect they have on the direction of our lives, allowing us to 'course correct'. Over time this gives us a great sense of control. Below are some exercises to help:

- **Meditation apps** are helpful for increasing our awareness of our thoughts and emotions – try [Headspace](#), [Calm](#) or [Insight Timer](#).
- **Practice being present during daily activities.** For example, practice being present when you brush your teeth, drink a cup of tea, or unlocking the screen of your phone.
- **Name your emotions.** Try naming your emotions 'there's anxiety' and thoughts 'I'm having a thought that says this is all going to go wrong'.

Noticing away moves

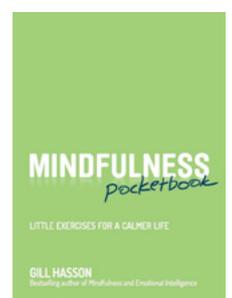
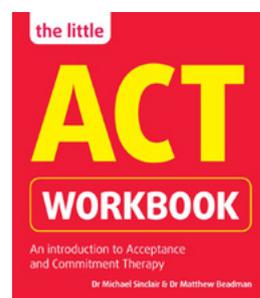
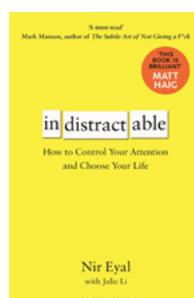
Away moves are the actions we take once we have been hooked away by our thoughts and emotions. For example, if you see me try and avoid my anxiety or boredom, you might see me scrolling through social media. If you see me hooked away from being present with my children, you might see my looking at my work emails.

In the next section (The Life Compass), you can practice identifying away moves in several different areas of your life. By understanding these better, you will find it easier to course correct – and increase the control you have over your life.

'The Gift and Power of Emotional Courage' by Susan David



Key texts:



Life compass



When to use the Life compass

The Life Compass is a practical tool which can help you develop psychological flexibility and apply it to your daily life.

Why it is useful

The Life Compass is a brilliant tool to build awareness of our own thoughts, emotions and behaviour, and to help us navigate forwards in a meaningful direction, even in conditions of uncertainty.

How to use

Pick one area of your life - it can be a broad topic such as leadership, wellbeing, parenting or your career. Complete each of the four quadrants in turn. Start with the top right quadrant (1. Values & purpose) and then work your way round the matrix to number 4. Print it out and use it as a guide or compass for this area of your life.

Life area:



Further resources on uncertainty



Leadership in uncertainty

- Ed Batista on managing 'open loops'
- 'How to Build Long-term Resilience' by McKinsey
- 'Act Like a Leader, Think Like a Leader' by Herminia Ibarra

Decision making in uncertainty

- Clearerthinking.org - decision making tools and templates
- 'Thinking in Bets' by Annie Duke
- 'Decision Making Framework for Uncertainty' by Emily Oster
- 'How to Handle Anxiety Over Back-to-School Decisions' by Pooja Lakshmin

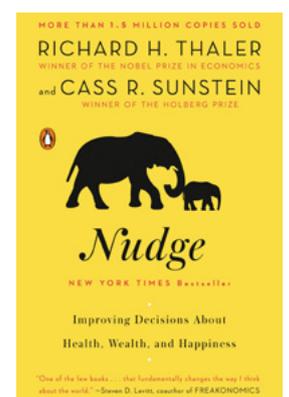
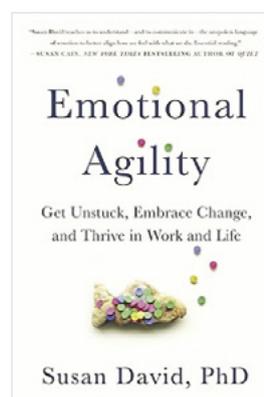
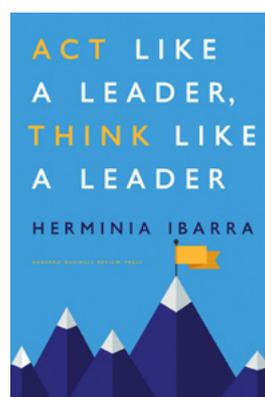
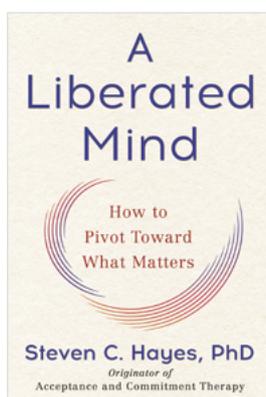
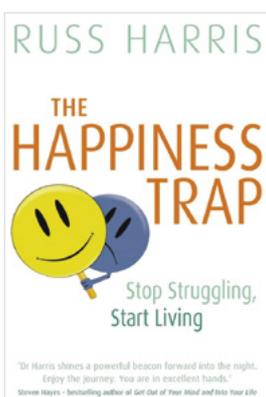
Psychological flexibility

- 'The Happiness Trap' by Russ Harris
- 'A Liberated Mind: The Essential Guide to ACT' by Stephen Hayes
- 'Emotional Agility' by Susan David
- 'Indistractable' by Nir Eyal

Behaviour change

- 'Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth and Happiness' by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein
- BJ Fogg's behavioural change formula
- 36 questions to deepen relationships from Greater Good Science Center

Key texts



Key videos / podcasts

- Psychologists Off the Clock Podcast: Indistractable with Nir Eyal



- 'Are we in control of our decisions?' by Dan Ariely

