

7 hacks for happiness, contentment and a meaningful life

By Stuart Sorensen

About the author

Stuart Sorensen grew up in North West England. In 1981 he went straight from school to the dole in one of the UK's worst unemployment 'blackspots'. As a young man he left home to find work and became a homeless busker before training as a mental health nurse from 1992 to 1995. Stuart qualified in nursing at the age of 30 and has never looked back.



During his nursing career, Stuart has worked on acute admission wards, residential units, specialist assessment and personality disorder units. He has ran services designed to work with dual diagnosis patients (drug/alcohol addiction AND serious mental disorder) and helped instigate and provide clinical management for a unit specialising in 'recovery from schizophrenia'. He gained his Post Graduate Diploma (PGDip) in 'Psychosocial Interventions' in 2002.

Stuart rose to the position of national mental health quality development lead for a well-known and very highly respected nationwide social care provider where he was responsible for the quality of care provided in around 50 mental health units across the country. He was a full time trainer and speaker in mental health and social care from 2004 - 2011. Stuart still maintains his nursing registration by taking temporary locum posts in community mental health teams across UK alongside training and speaking engagements.

Introduction

Do you work with people? Do you interact with others on a daily basis? Are you sometimes frustrated by the people you meet, their moods, their tantrums, their irrationality? Are you a manager or executive dealing daily with unpredictable colleagues, clients or customers? Do you work with people who are vulnerable or distressed? Are you a hostel worker, a teacher or youth leader? Perhaps you work in care, you have to deal with an obnoxious or disruptive family member or maybe you're just not a hermit. If your world is full of people then this little book is for you.

I've kept the book short for a reason. It's more convenient and easier to digest this way. Few people have the time to sit and read overly wordy volumes as they try to find the occasional kernel of truth amongst the maze of anecdotes and flowery language. This book is punchy, to the point and above all, lean. In writing it I've very deliberately left out the baggage. Think of this as a short, printed version of a few months' worth of counselling or coaching. It's true that it's just the basics but for many people that's enough. Of course if you did want more, I'd be more than happy to hear from you.

In my work as a practising mental health nurse and also as a trainer and coach I regularly come up against the same repeated problems. It doesn't matter whether the person or group I'm working with have diagnosed mental disorders or are just trying to find their way through the world without becoming too emotionally bruised. The same problems turn up time and time again.

The techniques and strategies here won't cure serious and enduring mental disorders like schizophrenia or bipolar affective disorder but they can help prevent anxiety, depression and a host of less formal ways that people distress themselves and each other.

Do simple things repeatedly and well

Mental health workers like me have an annoying habit of pretending that our work is “Oh so complicated and mysterious”. We just love to regale people with our heroism and skill. And of course, to an extent we’re right.

Differential diagnosis and the finer points of psychopharmacology can be as complicated as you like to make it but that’s not the bulk of what we do. Most of our work is straightforward communication and practical intervention. And that’s where most of the ‘magic’ happens.

We do simple things repeatedly and well!

Most of our work is so low-tech that Greek and Roman philosophers identified the basics well over two and a half thousand years ago. These are the simple things, often just the simple awareness of reality, that make the difference between mental health and illness, between recovery and disability, between happiness and misery. And they’re the same for everyone, mentally ill or not. Everyone’s life gets better when they use these 7 life hacks.

No surprises

“Begin the morning by saying to thyself, I shall meet with the busy-body, the ungrateful, arrogant, deceitful, devious, unsocial. All these things happen to them by reason of their ignorance of what is good and evil.”

Meditations (Marcus Aurelius) Book 2

‘No surprises’ doesn’t mean ‘No changes’. That would be really dull. Nor does it mean control everything so you know what’s coming – that would be impossible. But we can understand the nature of people and the world. People are fickle, misfortune is a very regular occurrence. We don’t need to be surprised by the things we expect.

We may not know precisely who will treat us poorly today but we know someone will – and that’s enough.

There are groups of issues that are similar and we can prepare ourselves to deal with them in advance. Things like...

Insult

Loss

Abuse

Being let down

Being lied to and lied about

Being hampered in our work

Being assaulted

Being dismissed as a fool

We also know that some of the things we might perceive as mistreatment or injury really are nothing of the sort. Disagreement between people is no injury. The other person hasn’t injured you by holding their view any more than you have injured them by holding yours. And yet disagreement is one of the most common causes of anger and even resentment.

Other ‘innocent’ misfortunes include:

Being ill

Being injured or physically hurt in some way

Bad weather

Other people making mistakes

Making mistakes ourselves

Being delayed (think of the long tailbacks that can accompany motorway collisions, for example)

Natural disasters

Bereavement

Of course, some of the things that appear on both lists might be easier to deal with than others. It's easier to bear the loss of a relationship after only a couple of dates than it is to bear the death of a loving parent. But the principles of coping are the same even though the intensity of the loss may differ.

It doesn't matter if the type of loss we suffer is great or small if we have done the work in advance to cope with loss in general. It doesn't matter if the other person disagrees with us once we realise that they have as much right to dismiss our opinion as we have to dismiss theirs. That's how the world works and indeed how it should work.

We can prepare for the unexpected without becoming upset by events. Remember that our thoughts, values and understanding control our emotions – not the external world of events. We may well feel distress because of external events, bereavement for example, but it is the work we do on the inside that determines how long we will grieve and how well we bear that grief while it lasts.

If these ideas are new to you please take some time to consider just what they might mean for your life. Look at the lists of potential misfortunes and think about the notion that there really are no surprises – at least not in general terms. All of these things are predictable and many of them are extremely common in everyday life.

Life hack 1:

What's the difference between a problem and a fact?

Few people take the time to ask themselves this fundamental question and that's a shame. If they did they'd realise the answer is obvious and stop wasting so much time trying to solve the impossible.

Problems can be solved... facts just 'are'.

That's not terribly complicated, is it? And yet so many people confuse the two. They treat facts as though they were problems, they try to solve the unsolvable and end up depressed, angry or anxious as a result.

If it rains when you'd planned to have a picnic – accept it – it's a fact.

It's not a problem because you can't solve it – the weather is beyond your control. Have your picnic indoors or rearrange it for another day and do something else in the meantime.

When we focus our attention on frustrating facts we not only waste time, we upset ourselves emotionally too. Let it go. Facts are just that – facts. Let's face it, those big old storm clouds aren't the slightest bit interested in our wants and needs.

When we spend time worrying about facts we neglect the problem we might have been able to solve. After all, the problem isn't the weather – the problem is to work out how you can have an enjoyable afternoon with the family. Work on that instead. That way you can keep your positive frame of mind and avoid frustration and anger along the way. As Longfellow wrote...

"Into each life a little rain must fall"

It's a fact that tragedies happen, people die or get injured, jobs are lost and relationships end. These are facts. Don't spend your life regretting your divorce when you could apply yourself to finding happiness with a new partner in the future. Don't waste years bemoaning that failed business when you could be solving the problem of making a decent living doing something else.

We can't change the past, we can't solve facts but we might be able to lessen their impact upon the future with the right attitude.

That's the first life hack and it's as simple and obvious as can be...

1. Understand the difference between a problem and a fact.

Life hack 2: Know what you can and can't control

There are things we can control and things we can't. There's no point trying to control the things that aren't ours to manage. That's not only an exercise in futility, it's frustrating too.

Epictetus was a Greek slave in ancient Rome. He was disabled and in permanent pain. He was also a philosopher.

You might think that, as a slave, Epictetus had very little control over anything but he was insistent that he had as much control as anyone else. For Epictetus we all have the same degree of control, slave or freeman, Emperor or beggar. We all have control of the same four things, and only these things. We can control...

- 1 Our thoughts
2. Our emotions (with practice)
3. Our bodies (to a limited extent)
4. Our behaviours

In short we can develop the discipline needed to control ourselves but that's all. We can't control the world we live in and we can't control other people either. We can influence others by our behaviours but that's it.

If I took a gun, pointed it at your head and demanded you give me all your money there's a pretty good chance that you'd comply. It is a strong influencer, after all. But there's no guarantee. You might choose to die. In fact, depending upon the circumstances and how important the stakes are many people throughout history have done just that.

What's important here is to understand that what influence we may have over other people depends entirely upon our ability to control our own behaviours and that depends upon our ability to control our own thoughts and feelings.

All 'I can control is me. All you can control is you. By controlling our behaviour we can influence others but there are still no guarantees. And that's not a problem – it's a fact.

- 1 Understand the difference between a problem and a fact.
- 2 Control your own thoughts, feelings, body and behaviour.

Life hack 3: Happiness is a by-product

It's no surprise that I meet and work with an awful lot of unhappy people. Happy, contented people tend not to need my services. So I like to think I'm something of an expert in the subject of unhappiness. I'm pretty well-versed in how to be happy too.

Time after time people tell me all about the things they do to make themselves happy from expensive holidays and extravagant shopping trips to video games, evenings out with friends or intimate dinners with their partners. And none of it really works.

The holidays are forgotten soon after they return, the expensive purchases only keep them going for a few days or even hours and the nice meal is over with as soon as they pay the bill. None of these things provide happiness, only short-lived distraction from misery. Happiness comes from what we do, not from what we have. Albert Ellis, founder of Rational Emotive Therapy (RET) put it this way...

“Humans are happiest when they are involved in some project or activity that they define as more important than themselves”

Entertainment, by definition, is less important than the person being entertained. It's a service provided for them. It has no meaning. Without something important to be involved in people become bored and listless. The things that used to make them happy become mundane and uninteresting. Life becomes meaningless and dull to the point of depression.

The happiest people I know, without exception are involved in some sort of cause. They're working toward something positive, something that isn't just for them – it's for others too. I have friends who volunteer to work with disadvantaged teenagers, with refugees and asylum-seekers, one is a volunteer on a support helpline for adult survivors of childhood abuse while another organises fund-raising and placement support for a rescue service for abandoned dogs. All are involved in something they consider to be important and outside of themselves.

So far we've learned...

- 1 Understand the difference between a problem and a fact.
- 2 Control your own thoughts, feelings, body and behaviour.
- 3 Happiness is a by-product – develop a purpose.

Life hack 4: Be calm and wait for others to join you

Few things are more damaging to the feeling of contentment and inner peace than being surrounded by other people who lack it. People who are anxious, angry or chaotic. Entitled people who demand that the world owes them favours and who shout, scream and stamp their feet until they get what they think is due to them.

Ancient stoic philosopher (and Roman Emperor), Marcus Aurelius had a simple strategy for dealing with such situations.

He would imagine himself to be a rocky outcrop in the middle of a stormy sea. Solid, immovable and safe. The chaotic waves might wash over him but they did no harm because Marcus wasn't part of the sea, or of the storm. So he would sit quietly, calmly and wait, like a rock, for the storm to pass, as it always does.

Only then would he try to offer solutions, to solve problems or even fix broken friendships.

He knew that overly-emotional people aren't able to just stop and think things through. Anger and anxiety are like temporary forms of insanity. People become irrational and they won't listen to reason. In fact attempts at reason are just as likely to make things worse as they are to help fix things. So he'd just wait.

So far we've learned...

- 1 Understand the difference between a problem and a fact.
- 2 Control your own thoughts, feelings, body and behaviour.
- 3 Happiness is a by-product – develop a purpose.
- 4 Be calm and wait for others to join you.

Life hack 5: Be the best that you can be

I keep myself updated and current in practice by working as a locum mental health nurse around UK. It's my way both of maintaining my nursing registration and also my knowledge of current trends in practice. That's how I ensure my work stays relevant.

A few years ago I was working in Oxfordshire and rented a little room in a nearby farmhouse. It should have been an idyllic and relaxing place to spend my free time but, unfortunately it wasn't. The other tenants, at one point there were 6 of us dotted around the farm weren't the problem, it was the landlord. He was bullish, demanding, rude and generally offensive, despite the fact we were all paying rent and I'm pretty sure actually kept the farm afloat.

In the room next to mine lived a man called Dan. Like me Dan was a Northerner, a Mancunian who had moved to Oxfordshire to find work some time earlier. He was a nice bloke, an artist who genuinely wouldn't hurt a fly. He's also rather too sensitive for this world, at least in my view.

Dan asked me why I never got upset at the way our landlord behaved. Things that would upset Dan for days never seemed to bother me and he wanted to know how I did it. So I told him about our old friend Marcus Aurelius.

For Marcus unpleasant or abusive people reveal much more about themselves than they ever did about him. They showed themselves to be fundamentally unhappy – why else would they need to put others down? They also made it clear that they aren't very skilled in making their way in the world – not in terms of relationships. These people are generally unpopular and their reputations often precede them, making it difficult for them to develop rewarding and supportive relationships. They just haven't worked out that you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.

So Marcus used a two pronged approach to dealing with them.

First, he'd give himself a task – to be the best version of Marcus Aurelius that he could be. That gave him something to concentrate on rather than worry about the behaviour of the other person.

Secondly, because he understood how little they understood about how to live a contented life he would remind himself how grateful he was not to be them. For Marcus that gratitude went to the Gods but in the

modern world we can be grateful to whatever makes most sense. For my part, I'm grateful for my awareness of these philosophies. For you it may be something religious or another thing entirely. Whatever you choose find a way to be grateful that you know better than the mean-spirited, unpopular person who stands in front of you.

By focusing upon your task – to be the best version of you that you can, and then reminding yourself of the eternal now (see the bonus hack at the end of the book) you can, with a little practice, deal with the situation as it's happening and then move on and forget it within seconds.

So that's life hack number 5: Be the best that you can be.

So far we have...

- 1 Understand the difference between a problem and a fact.
- 2 control our thoughts feelings bodies and behaviour.
- 3 Happiness is a by-product - develop a purpose.
- 4 Be calm and wait for others to join you.
- 5 Be the best that you can be.

Life hack 6: Manage expectations

Seneca was another ancient Roman. He was a senator and popular speaker who often attended banquets as a sort of first century after dinner speaker, if you will.

On one occasion Seneca attended a banquet where the fabulously wealthy host had really pushed the boat out. He had to, Emperor Nero was in attendance. There were slaves and servants milling around with expensive crockery laden with delicacies when disaster struck. A slave stumbled and dropped a large platter which promptly smashed into tiny pieces on the marble floor.

Outraged, the host had the unfortunate man thrown into a pool of lampreys which lost no time in ensuring that this poor man would never see another sunrise.

Seneca realised that the host had believed his great wealth would protect him from misfortune and so, when it did come, he was surprised and unsettled by it. This created a mismatch between his expectations and the real world and it was that mismatch that caused his anger.

If you want to maintain a calm state of mind then manage your expectations. It's not always possible to know exactly what might go wrong in your life but it is inevitable that from time to time some things will. So expect misfortune, whenever it comes and accept that this is nothing you weren't aware of already. The specifics of the situation don't matter so much as the general expectation.

If you expect reality, reality will not upset you. You'll also be able to prepare.

That's our sixth life hack: Manage expectations.

So now we have...

- 1 Understand the difference between a problem and a fact.
- 2 control our thoughts feelings bodies and behaviour.
- 3 Happiness is a by-product - develop a purpose.
- 4 Be calm and wait for others to join you.
- 5 Be the best that you can be.
- 6 Manage expectations.

Life hack 7: Don't blame

As we have seen, we only become upset, angry, resentful or whatever when the world doesn't meet our expectations. We blame ourselves, other people or 'the world' in general for not behaving as we think right. Practise eliminating blame and you can eliminate most unpleasant emotions too.

People tend to apportion blame in three ways: The self, other people and 'the world' or 'the universe'. Let's look at each in turn...

The self

We've all done it. We fail to meet a deadline, forget an important task or just generally screw up somehow and berate ourselves for our imperfect performance. It's as though we expect ourselves to be infallible which, of course, many people do. But however much you want that to be true, the fact is we're all fallible. We all make mistakes and we all screw up.

Welcome to the human condition.

When we blame ourselves for making mistakes we're actually blaming ourselves for being human. Give yourself permission to be less than perfect and instead of dwelling upon your mistakes work to solve whatever problems those mistakes have caused in good spirits. That's the business of everyday life. We get stuff wrong and we put stuff right.

If we resent that, we resent life itself.

Making mistakes is also how we grow. You may not like making mistakes but how do you feel about experience and personal growth?

There's a well-known children's animation in which, every time the child hero of the piece makes a mistake his parents applaud him for giving himself yet another opportunity to learn something useful. Isn't that a better attitude to adopt than self blame when the inevitable happens?

Other people

Just as we can accept that we make mistakes the same is true for other people. They're fallible too. The only difference is that you have no control over what they do and there are no guarantees that they will do what it takes to fix the ensuing problems.

Remember our first two life hacks

- 1 Understand the difference between a problem and a fact.
- 2 control our thoughts feelings bodies and behaviour.

The mistake was in the past – it's a fact.

All you can control is you. So don't waste your time bothering about the fact that someone else made a mistake and isn't going to fix it. You need to sort it out just as you would if it was your own error and there's no benefit at all from doing so in a bad mood. That will ruin your day, or at least part of it, for absolutely no good reason.

Just accept that what's done is done, learn something about the reliability or otherwise of the other person and get on with the business of putting things right or adjusting to make sure that any damage is managed and limited if you can't.

The world/the universe

The wider world really is way beyond our control. And what we can't control or influence shouldn't take up our time and effort. There's no point trying to move an immovable object, trying to change the weather or persuading the airport staff to end their strike because you want to go on holiday. These things are completely beyond your control so don't waste your time in apportioning blame and getting upset.

I know of absolutely no situations which were improved by my getting angry. Admittedly there have been times when I have acted angrily to influence others into taking action but that's not the same as actually being angry. Nothing good happens to you when you're angry, overly anxious, upset, resentful or any of a host of unpleasant emotions. We become uncomfortable at those times. Neurotransmitters flood our brains and central nervous system causing digestive and heart problems, we lose the ability to think clearly and to solve problems – the very thing we are most likely to need to do.

Forget blame and, as always, focus in the task at hand.

So there's our sixth life hack: Don't blame

So far we have...

- 1 Understand the difference between a problem and a fact.
- 2 control our thoughts feelings bodies and behaviour.
- 3 Happiness is a by-product - develop a purpose.
- 4 Be calm and wait for others to join you.
- 5 Be the best that you can be.
- 6 Manage expectations.
- 7 Don't blame.

Bonus hack: The eternal now

Remember what we now know about the difference between problems and facts. Remember that the past is always a fact that cannot be solved.

Accepting that, accepting the fact that the past is no longer ours to change means that we can also begin to see it as no longer our concern. It's true that there may be issues arising from past events or mistakes that we need to deal with but any actions we need to take will be taken in the present or the future – not the past. We can learn from the past but we need never be concerned about it because it's gone.

That brings us to the present – the only thing we ever really have to call our own. And it's fleeting. In fact, by the time you notice the present moment it's already gone into the past and is no longer your concern. Yes – I know that sounds a bit weird but please, give it some thought – it's important, especially when dealing with long-term hardship. Understand the concept now and you'll find it much easier to bear life's misfortunes later. You'll be much more effective as you work to change and overcome them too.

Life is a series of moments, most of which are actually pretty neutral. It's anxiety and anticipation that spoils our days, not the enduring event because most events don't actually endure all that long. People endure hours of misery when they don't need to because they're forever focussing upon either the past (which is no longer their affair) or the future (which may be theirs to plan for but is not yet theirs to experience).

Even in times of hardship the eternal now is relevant. How bad is your situation at this very instant? Why let your mind focus on experiencing hardship before it needs to? Why experience the thing you dread before it happens?

It's far more constructive to plan for the future than to imagine it negatively and suffer all the emotional distress that such imaginings bring. Make it a habit never to allow yourself to experience misfortune in your mind before it actually happens but to plan to deal with potential future problems instead. And understand that if you expect pain or hardship to come, there's no need to be distressed by it until you actually feel it.

Remember 'the eternal now'. Do you have physical comfort and freedom from abuse right now, at this precise moment? Then you have all that you could possibly need. This moment in life is a success. Use the current success to plan with a clear head how to solve the problems of the future. Don't squander it trying to solve the past (which is a fact, not a problem). Be glad of your immediate situation. The only alternative is to cancel out all those moments of contentment and comfort with futile focus upon the past which you can never change or the future which you have not yet reached.

The life well-lived involves taking time to appreciate the good moments (which generally far outweigh the bad). Make this your mantra...

In this moment I am contented. I am comfortable and well fed. I am warm and free from pain. I do not suffer in this moment.

I have known suffering in the past but that cannot affect me now. I will surely know suffering in the future but for now, in this moment I am without misfortune.

In this moment I am free from pain, free from hardship, free to enjoy this part of my life, to plan for the future without distress and to work to make life better for myself and for those around me.

In this moment I am contented.

So far we have...

- 1 Understand the difference between a problem and a fact.
- 2 control our thoughts feelings bodies and behaviour.
- 3 Happiness is a by-product - develop a purpose.
- 4 Be calm and wait for others to join you.
- 5 Be the best that you can be.
- 6 Manage expectations.
- 7 Don't blame.

8 Bonus life hack: The eternal now.

Epilogue

Thankyou for taking the time to read this little book of mine. The principles contained in it aren't just philosophical theory, they're practical strategies for life that really are of benefit to anyone who seriously tries to apply them. I've made a habit of using all these techniques, and more, for many years and can attest to their usefulness.

But they take practice. Emotional management is a skill and just like any other skill set, if you don't use these techniques you won't retain them.

My suggestion is to start one thing at a time. That's why they're presented in the order that they are in the book. Just start with the first life hack and practise that until you're confident with it and then move on to the next and so on through the whole book.

It will take time, several months at least really to integrate these principles into your life but I promise you, it's worth it. Applied methodically and seriously these hacks really will change your life.