Happiness by Design by Paul Dolan

Book Summary

- This book explores how we can find pleasure and purpose in everyday life. An underlying assumption is that the pursuit of happiness is both a noble and a very serious objective for us all. Dolan defines happiness as the experience of pleasure and purpose over time. He describes this as the Pleasure-Purpose Principle (PPP) and it is a central theme of the book. It states that we require each – pleasure and purpose – to different degrees at different times in order to be happy.

- The production process for happiness is how we allocate our attention and a fundamental reason as to why most of us aren't as happy as we could be is that we simply allocate our attention in ways that are often at odds with experiencing as much pleasure and purpose as we could. We tend to focus more on what we think should make us happy as opposed to what actually does make us happy.

- Dolan is clear in that he is more interested in the "meaning of moments", than with constructions of the meaning of life. He describes how it is our perceptions of duration that govern our experiences, and how our memories of the past are important experiences of the present. Our experience is guided by what we pay attention to, and our attention is easily interrupted due our tendency to seek out uncertainty for mere pleasure. Though we know that this behaviour is harmful and contradictory to our "homo-economicus" model of human nature, we continue to diverge from "rational behaviour" in favour of short-term novelty and gratification. It is one thing to know and quite another to do.

- In order to achieve a greater and deeper level of happiness in our lives, we need to pay attention to direct feedback about what brings us pleasure and/or purpose and what does not. Monitoring the effects of any event beyond its initial impact will serve to show us what we get used to and what we do not. Actions do speak louder than words and we can trust our experience more than we can our beliefs.

- A well designed environment is critical to being happier. Making salient the current impact of our happiness of any behaviour is important. It's the pleasure-purpose feedback we get while we are engaged in an activity that matters most.

- Context matters – we can most certainly be "happier by design". If we want to make people act in a particular way, we should make it easier for them (for example, the MINDSPACE mnemonic created by the UK's Behavioural Insights Team offers such a methodology to help policy makers to develop happier and more beneficial policy programmes "by design").

- If we can't change what we do, then we should change what we pay attention to in the experience (attention is critical). It is also useful to frame commitments in terms of pleasure and purpose (for example, going to the gym before work each morning could be described as a highly purposeful activity for our general health and well-being, even though having to get up earlier in the morning might be unpleasant).

- Multi-tasking makes us less productive and unhappy. We should design a cleat schedule that enables us to focus on one task and avoid the "switching costs" associated with trying to do multiple things at the same time.

- Dolan concludes on a crucially important yet beautifully simple point: It is much easier to design our way out of distraction than by relying on willpower to counter distractions. By actively designing our own environment, we can prevent distractions from entering our lives in the first place. This gives us much more control over the situations we place ourselves in, placing much less weight on our predisposition to act in a particular way when we are in those situations.

- For me the core tenet of this book is that future happiness cannot really compensate for misery now; lost happiness is lost forever, and this is why the way in which I live my life broadly by Dolan's "Design. Decide. Do." mantra.