

Catherine Gray

The Unexpected Joy of the Ordinary



The benefits of mediocrity and the beauty of the everyday



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By Catherine Gray

13-minute read

Synopsis

The Unexpected Joy of the Ordinary (2019) explores the surprising benefits of being an average Joe. From money to intelligence to relationships, it reveals the pleasures of being perfectly ordinary.

Who is it for?

- Anxious souls looking for reassurance
- Lovers of popular science books
- Anyone interested in evolutionary psychology

About the author

Catherine Gray is an English journalist and author. Her first book, *The Unexpected Joy of Being Sober*, was a UK best seller.

What's in it for me? Cherish the commonplace.

Do you daydream about an extraordinary life? Have you ever wished you were smarter, richer, or more attractive than everyone else? Well, be careful what you wish for because these blinks are here to show you that being extraordinary isn't always better.

You'll discover why living an ordinary life is something to celebrate, not fear. From your appearance to your home to your self-esteem, these blinks reveal the magic of mediocrity and the beauty of the everyday.

In these blinks, you'll learn

- why confidence is overrated;
- what selfies say about your relationship; and
- how craving money makes you poorer.

Your brain is always searching for bad news.

Do you often find yourself focusing on what you don't have? Imagine that you're in a performance review with your boss. She praises your hard work, social skills, and professionalism. However, she also mentions that you sometimes lack confidence. And now the end result is you come out of that meeting feeling deflated.

You spend the rest of the night focusing on your shortcomings. But what about all the good things your boss said? Well, you hardly give them a second thought.

Here's a question, then. Should you beat yourself up for focusing on the bad? Well, maybe that's not your fault. The devastating truth is that evolution has primed you to be relentlessly negative.

The key message here is: Your brain is always searching for bad news.

Neuroscientist Dr. John Cacioppo carried out a study in which he showed his subjects different sets of images and measured how their brains responded. He found that people became more engaged when they looked at negative pictures, like guns and dead animals. Positive photos – things like pizza and ice-cream – didn't create the same level of excitement.

Dr. Cacioppo concluded that negative information seems to trigger a greater mental response.

Unfortunately, our negative bias doesn't stop there. Other studies have found that we're quicker to spot an angry face in a crowd than a cheerful one. This phenomenon is called the *anger superiority effect*. Worse still, our negative bias affects our interpersonal relations, too. We tend to see people's bad characteristics as more significant than their positive traits.

But why are we so negative? The answer lies in our evolutionary past, and a region of our brain called the *amygdala*.

Your amygdala plays a key role in your emotions and decision-making. It's especially sensitive to negative information. This sensitivity evolved with our prehistoric ancestors. Their lives were incredibly difficult. They had to deal with lots of aggression from members of their own tribe, and predators were an ever-present threat. In other words, if our ancestors hadn't been wired to always look out for trouble, chances are they wouldn't have lived long enough to reproduce.

Thankfully, modern life isn't nearly so dangerous. But evolution moves slowly, and your amygdala is still scanning for threats. The author, for instance, often feels threatened when she finds herself in busy subway stations. The reason is simple: her amygdala is warning her that there are no plants or water sources around, so she might have a problem finding sustenance.

In the following blinks, we'll combat this negativity bias, and look at all the reasons to be positive instead.

A surplus of pleasure and possessions isn't the key to happiness.

Ever get the feeling you're living a mediocre existence? While other people upped sticks and moved to far-flung places, you stayed in your hometown. Your acquaintances enjoy a spacious villa, but you live in an average-sized rental apartment. People you know flaunt designer wardrobes, but you're stuck with more or less what everyone else wears.

If these lamentations sound familiar, then you need to check your negativity bias.

There's an old saying that the grass is always greener on the other side. But it's not all that simple, as the author learned for herself when she moved from rainy England to sunny Barcelona.

The key message here is: A surplus of pleasure and possessions isn't the key to happiness.

Before the move, she assumed it would be wonderful to live in a sun-drenched city. However, she soon found that perfect weather wasn't a boon at all. Whereas she'd always treasured those rare sunny days in England, now that she was faced with sun every day, the novelty wore off.

This weather revelation taught the author something that happiness experts have long known: our pleasure is more intense when it's interrupted, rather than constant. When she had endless days of sun, the author simply stopped valuing them as much.

She also used to assume that more stuff equaled more happiness. As she progressed through her twenties and lived in bigger and bigger apartments, her personal possessions seemed to expand exponentially. But her joy didn't increase at the same rate.

Why?

The truth is that acquiring things is more pleasurable than possessing things. So shopping for that cute new jumper will make you a lot happier than owning it. Excessive shopping and acquisition is actually a fairly recent phenomenon. In the 1960s, baby boomers became the first generation to experience the potent combination of mass-produced goods and widely available credit cards. Suddenly, people began to acquire more stuff than ever before.

The reason this stuff doesn't make us happy is that, yet again, evolution hasn't caught up with our modern lives. Our ancestors lived nomadic lives and moved around a lot. Personal possessions dragged them down and made this lifestyle far more difficult. This created lots of stress.

The rise of so-called 'decluttering experts' like Japanese minimalist Marie Kondo is proof that we still find it stressful to have so many things. So the next time you're craving new clothes or other material goods, remember that less truly is more.

It's perfectly normal to feel insecure, anxious, and angry.

What does a perfect person look like? If we believe the media, she takes everything in her stride, she has high self-esteem, and the clear waters of her mind are undisturbed by anger or anxiety. But before you get too carried away, ask yourself: Does this ideal person really exist?

The answer is probably no. To understand why, let's take a look at what state of mind this ideal person would have.

We're often told that it's important to have high self-esteem. Not only that, those of us who experience self-doubt feel like there's something wrong with them. But there's good reason to be grateful for only having middling levels of self-esteem. As it turns out, people with very high self-esteem tend to have some unpleasant characteristics. They're more likely to be narcissists, and even more disturbingly, prejudiced against ethnic minorities!

The key message here is: It's perfectly normal to feel insecure, anxious, and angry.

We may idolize confidence, but there's nothing wrong with anxiety. In fact, every week in England, one in six people will feel depressed or anxious.

That's not to say that you shouldn't try to reduce your anxiety levels. How can you achieve this? Well, one way is to remember the big picture. For instance, one study asked participants to speak in public. Naturally, the participants felt stressed. But the researchers found a way to lower the stress levels of their subjects. How? They simply asked participants to think about their overall life goals before speaking.

So anxiety is a perfectly natural emotion. And so is anger. And, what's more, it's also useful. Anger lets you know when your boundaries have been crossed, or when you need to make a change to your environment or your relationships. In fact, the average person experiences a rush of anger about three or four times a day.

Of course, if you find yourself perpetually yelling at people, you may want to check in with yourself. Some therapists believe that when someone is shouting, they usually want to cry instead. This explains why the first reaction of drivers who've been in a fender bender is often to shout at the other person; they cover their fear with anger.

Happy people have fewer friends and discreet romance.

Do you yearn for better relationships? Maybe you'd like more friends or more romance in your love life. If these insecurities sound familiar, have no fear: it's all perfectly natural.

These days we expect our relationships to be extraordinary. When it comes to friendships, for instance, we want the glossy extended group of bosom buddies we see on sitcoms. But not only is this unrealistic, it's also not how human beings are designed.

In fact, trying to maintain too many close friendships doesn't make us happy at all. Instead, it creates a psychological pressure known as role strain. Evolutionary psychologists believe that human beings are only really capable of having one or two best friends, and no more than five close friends.

The key message here is: Happy people have fewer friends and discreet romance.

Even just hanging out with a small crowd can be a strain. Research shows that three people are the most who can comfortably joke together in a bar, and the limit for satisfying group conversation is as low as four.

So you might wish you had ten friends to invite to dinner, but science says you'll have far more fun if there are only three or four of you at the table.

That's not to say that your friendships aren't important. Having a good friend can make your life's journey feel simpler – sometimes literally. One study asked people to walk up a hill and then estimate how steep the climb was. The result was that when you're with a friend, the climb appears much easier. So the key to friendship is quality, not quantity.

You might also feel that your romantic relationship isn't as extraordinary as the ones you see plastered all over social media.

Perhaps you feel envious of the couples who post endless pictures of themselves looking loved up. But these posts might not tell the whole story. One study,

which included over a hundred couples, found that the more people promoted their love lives on social media, the less secure they felt about their relationships. So the next time you compare your rather ordinary relationship to other people's Instagrammed romances, ask yourself why that couple on your feed needs to flaunt their love.

Having an extraordinary amount of money won't buy you joy.

You've probably heard that money can't buy happiness. But be honest: do you really believe it? The author admits that if a genie magically appeared from her water bottle and granted her one wish, she'd ask for a million pounds. But would that make her happier?

The evidence suggests not.

Genies might not exist, but lotteries do. And a famous study in 1978 found that a big lottery win actually didn't make people any happier.

The key message here is: Having an extraordinary amount of money won't buy you joy.

Even more profound, when researchers compared lottery winners to people who became paraplegic after catastrophic accidents, they found that the paraplegic group enjoyed daily activities such as talking to friends and watching television far more than lottery winners did!

So if you accept that it's the little things that count, then, amazingly, it seems to make no difference whether you're living with huge wealth or severe disability.

It's also a fact that the higher your wages, the more likely you are to get divorced and to experience all other sorts of stress. That's not to say that money can't sometimes make you happier. If you're living on a low income, for instance, and receive an earnings boost, then the extra income adds to your sense of well-being. But there's a ceiling to this effect, and it seems to be around the \$50,000 to \$75,000 a year mark. Any more than that and the psychological difference becomes negligible.

And when it comes to having a sense of purpose, being rich could make you feel worse. Psychologists have found that people with the biggest salaries find the least purpose in their lives. So in this respect, a CEO might easily be less satisfied with life than her personal assistant.

So if you think that money is your key to happiness, beware. Your frame of mind may actually be working against you. A 2014 study published by the American Psychological Society found an interesting correlation: high-earners weren't necessarily happy, but happier people did tend to earn more. So it's not that money attracts happiness into your life, it's more that happiness attracts money.

High IQ and lofty intellectual ambition aren't all that important.

What would it feel like to always be the smartest person in the room? Somebody with a very high IQ and, perhaps, a detailed knowledge of all the world's literature? Would you be happier and more successful? Perhaps not. Luckily, being an average Joe with an ordinary IQ who spends his evenings watching television might be just as joyful.

Consider this famous study from the 1920s. Psychologist Lewis Terman selected 1,500 Californian children with very high IQs and followed them throughout their lives. In many respects, the children indeed fared well. For instance, as adults, the group earned around twice the national average income. But Terman also found that despite their impressive intellects, a lot of the children ended up in ordinary jobs.

The key message here is: High IQ and lofty intellectual ambition aren't all that important.

What's more, their intelligence didn't protect them from unpleasant life events, and their rates of divorce, addiction, and suicide were no different than that of the general American population.

Over time, children with high IQs became unsatisfied with their lives. For instance, when psychologists followed up with them decades later, many reported feeling as if they hadn't lived up to what was expected of them. This just goes to show that being the smartest person in the room might not be all that great after all.

Still, surely you'd be smarter and an all-around better person if you watched fewer TV dramas, right? Well, not necessarily.

If you're anything like most people, you probably enjoy watching a good murder mystery. But you shouldn't feel guilty about your viewing habits. Neuroscientists have found that watching these kinds of shows is actually good for your brain.

This is because, when you watch a gripping murder mystery series, with all its twists and turns and red herrings, your brain gets a lot of stimulation. In order to keep up with complicated plot lines over multiple episodes, it must remain highly active. And an active brain is a healthy brain.

So next time someone tells you that your crime show habit is turning your brain to mush, pause the TV and let them know that what's happening is exactly the opposite.

Your relationship with your body is anything but joyful.

Have you ever found yourself scrolling through your Instagram feed and wishing that you, too, looked toned and muscular, like that influencer with a million

subscribers? If you have, then you're not alone. But are really good-looking people actually any happier?

Perhaps the first thing to say is that beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

Experts believe that most people underestimate their own attractiveness by around 20 percent. What's more, research has found that your partner finds you more attractive than an average stranger would. So even if society thinks you're just ordinary-looking, your significant other probably thinks you look extraordinary.

The key message here is: Your relationship with your body is anything but joyful.

Many highly attractive people report that they struggle to be taken seriously in the workplace and that their colleagues expect them to be less intelligent simply because they're good-looking.

And surprisingly, being objectively good-looking doesn't make you happy with your looks. While our late teens and twenties are the years when we tend to be at our slimmest and freshest, an average sixty-year-old woman is more satisfied with her body than most eighteen-year-olds.

In their quest for the perfect body, people turn to exercise to lose weight and tone up. But these efforts can be counterproductive. Studies have found that people who start exercising to lose weight go to the gym less frequently than those who simply want to feel better.

Even more cruelly, if you tell yourself you're doing a physical activity for exercise rather than for fun, then you might be more likely to overeat after hitting the gym.

For instance, one study asked participants to go for a walk. Some people were told that they were going out for exercise, and some, that it was just for fun.

When the participants got back from the walk, they were given unlimited chocolate to eat. And guess what. The group who thought they were back from exercising ate much more chocolate than the other group.

So while being an extraordinary gym bunny might be good, being an ordinary person who simply enjoys walking or running is even better. So – celebrate your ordinariness.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks:

The surprising but liberating truth is that all those external things you think will better your life probably won't. So don't spend your life wishing for what you can't have. We can't all be special, but we can all thrive.

Actionable advice:

Think twice before envying social media stars.

The next time you envy some glamorous influencer on social media, consider that the price of her fame and followers might be mental illness. Research shows that the longer you spend on Instagram each day, the more anxious and depressed you feel. And it's not just "the Gram" you need to watch out for; one study found that the simple act of updating your Facebook status may result in a 5 percent drop in your mental health. So that popular influencer might appear to be thriving, but under the surface, she could be deeply unhappy.

Got feedback?

We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to remember@blinkist.com with *The Unexpected Joy of the Ordinary* as the subject line and share your thoughts!

What to read next: *The Unexpected Joy of Being Sober*, by Catherine Gray

Now you've learned the value of the ordinary, why not discover the blinks to *The Unexpected Joy of Being Sober*.

Many people have struggled to accept the new lockdown ordinances in 2020, and a lot of us have struggled with our alcohol consumption, too. These blinks explain how you can enjoy being sober, and experience the hidden benefits of teetotalism. You'll explore why sober living offers a more intoxicating high than the short-lived pleasures of drinking, and unravel the culturally-ingrained stereotypes that equate sobriety with joylessness.

So to improve your health, your wealth, and your social life, head over to the blinks to *The Unexpected Joy of Being Sober*.