HOW TO MAKE GOOD THINGS HAPPEN

Know Your Brain, Enhance Your Life

MARIAN ROJAS ESTAPÉ, MD

Translated from the Spanish by Sofia Smith-Laing

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THE START OF A JOURNEY

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

—Laozi

Planes, trains, and other modes of transportation are generally excellent places for surprising things to happen. You just have to let yourself be carried along, observing and intervening if a good opportunity arises. My best stories have come out of such situations.

A few years ago, on a flight from New York to London, I was traveling in the window seat. I always choose this seat because I like watching the sky, the clouds, and the sea; above all, I like to remind myself of the insignificance of human beings in the face of nature's immensity, so as to gain some perspective about what happens to us on Earth.

I always pay attention to the traveler seated next to me. Over the long hours in flight, one develops a certain connection to one's neighbor. Analyzing what they're reading and what they watch on their screen, observing whether they eat or sleep—speculating about their circumstances and the reasons for their trip is unavoidable. Do they have a family? Are they traveling for work? At one moment or another, one of you gets up, and good manners require that you exchange a few simple words. Generally, at the end of the flight, you wish each other a friendly goodbye.

I've always believed that if you pay close enough attention to anyone, they become interesting. One usually has a conversation at some point during the flight. Thanks to these interactions, I've met truly fascinating people, and things have happened to me that have made an impact on many aspects of my life.

On this particular flight, taking off from New York, I sat next to an older gentleman. He was reading the newspaper, and I got some course notes out of my bag. They were on anatomy; the drawings I'd done in class weren't very good—I've always been bad at drawing—and while I was trying to memorize the hundreds of names, I noticed the man's gaze directed at my papers. I smiled at him.

"I study medicine."

He answered, "My father is a doctor."

I did a quick analysis of the man—I've loved doing this since I was young—but he maintained, despite our cordiality, a cold, unapproachable look. I grew curious, and asked, "Have you followed in your father's footsteps, professionally?"

"No. I've always preferred investigation."

"What kind?"

"I investigate terrorism."

I closed my notes. A conversation had fallen in my lap that promised to be very interesting. My collection of muscles and strange little bones would still be there when I got to Madrid. My interlocutor revealed to me that he had just retired after more than thirty years with the CIA. For a while now, he had been allowed to speak more freely of his work, and during the rest of the flight he explained the war in Iraq and geopolitical tensions in the area, conflicts over oil and pipelines, the interests of different Western countries . . . all of it on an improvised map of the Middle East with arrows pointing in every direction.

I'm a politics and history buff, and I have to confess that I didn't stop taking notes the whole time. At one point in the conversation, I told him I was studying to be a psychiatrist. He

scrutinized me and was silent for a few moments before beginning to ask me the strangest questions about my tastes and personality. I'm not used to being asked about myself with so much intensity, as it's usually me who's posing the questions, but I tried to respond as sincerely as possible.

After a pause, he proposed that I do a stint at the CIA when I had finished my specialized studies and undertake some kind of work as a forensic or investigative psychiatrist. In that moment my eyes lit up. The world suddenly seemed so exciting. I smiled and said, "As long as I don't have to do field work—I tend to be a little nervous."

He left me his contact details and we said goodbye. I wrote to him several times and we maintained an email correspondence for a few years.

Unfortunately, reader, I never did go and work at the CIA. My life took another course, but I keep that card from my "analyst friend" in my wallet, to remind myself that opportunities are close by—you just have to go look for them.

In my opinion, few notions have done more damage than the idea that "it will arrive when you least expect it." No one is going to come looking for us at home to offer us our life's work. We have to go out and find it.

One of the things in life that causes us the most anguish is the inability to know what we should devote ourselves to or what path we should choose. Making a decision becomes an impossible challenge. We live in a world full of opportunities—we have never had so much available for so little effort. We find ourselves living at the most overstimulated point in history; today, any seven-year-old has absorbed more information and stimuli—music, sound, food, flavors, images, videos—than any human being who previously walked the Earth.

This overstimulation makes decisions hard. Today's younger generations—the so-called "millennial" generation, where I have one foot planted, and "Gen Z"—find themselves bewildered, unsure what to choose or where to go. Professionally, they have to decide

between innumerable fields of study, and, once their studies are complete, between innumerable job opportunities; both of these choices seem impossible. Multiple possibilities crowd in, and they don't know where to direct their lives. Ours is a society of confusion and commitment phobia. I see more and more young people who are "blocked" without knowing it, because to decide, one needs to know what one feels.

Millennials and members of Gen Z are saturated with emotions and feelings that make them reliant on constant gratification to move forward. We'll speak more about this later, and we will try to understand better what is happening in the minds of many young people. There is a clear breach between two generations who are living in the same world: those born before 1980 and those born after 1990. Those of us born between 1980 and 1990 have lived through an important period of transition.

Those born before 1980 have generally struggled quite a bit: many were born to the children of twentieth-century wars and have given their families a good start; most important of all, the digital world of the internet and social networks has caught up to them after adolescence. This is key. Their personal relationships, their ways of working and confronting life, as well as their beliefs, are all based on other concepts—I don't mean specific ideologies, I mean the way that they're formed.

After 1990, something decisive happens: the birth of the internet. In this book, we'll examine the impact of the constant assault of stimuli that the youngest members of our society are subjected to as soon as they're born, as well as the effect of social networks on the gratification system of the brain, which is the reason that we find ourselves dealing with a profoundly unsatisfied generation. To motivate them—in educational, emotional, affective, professional, and economic terms—more and more frequent and intense stimuli are often required.

How to Make Good Things Happen draws on many different tools. Life contains very difficult moments, when the most important thing is to survive and find some support to sustain oneself. The

rest of the time, we need to fight to bring out our BPS—Best Possible Selves.* We'll talk about attitude and optimism; the way that we confront life has a big impact on what happens to us. Predisposition—the attitude we already have in place—determines how we respond to any situation.

Years of experiments have shown that the way you decide to respond to problems and questions encountered on a daily basis can influence the outcome. The brain, physiological markers, genes, cells, feelings, emotions, and thoughts function as a whole. Physical ailments, in many cases, have a direct relationship to the emotions, and we can always try to channel the effect that a physical ailment has on our state of mind. To help you understand the brain, I will attempt to simplify what is fundamentally complex. By understanding our brains and managing our emotions, we can enhance our lives. Nowadays, neuroscience, specifically neurobiology, taken together with what we call the unconscious—from surface emotions to the depths of the psyche—can explain a large part of our behavior.

This book talks about happiness, because we all long to find it, and about success. But success can be a great liar. In my therapeutic practice, I often find myself admiring people who, faced with suffering, pain, and failure, have been capable of overcoming them. Failure reveals what success conceals, says the great teacher of my life, my father.

In this book I want to try to explain not only the troubles of the mind, heart, and body, but, much more than that, the good and healthy aspects of life. I want to show what can help the reader to enjoy better health in soul and body, and in this way, perhaps, to get closer to that longed-for happiness.

This is the start of an exciting path toward understanding and reinventing ourselves. Everyone has a second chance to find their passion and to choose a better way through life.

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* We'll look at this formula, BPS, in Chapter 9.

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DESTINATION: HAPPINESS

Happiness can't be defined; it can only be experienced. You have to feel it to recognize it, and once you do, words seem to fall short of expressing it. All the same, we're going to try to explain it, approaching it from different angles.

The first idea I want to get across is this: there are no cheat sheets or shortcuts that guarantee happiness. There's already a lot of criticism out there of self-help books that promise a simple recipe to happiness, but what's true is that we now have a multitude of studies and scientific data that give us a fairly specific sense of the level of physical and psychological well-being indispensable to happiness.

Psychiatrists study mental illness—or rather, we study people who suffer from mental or emotional disturbances. Frequent professional conferences are held on the most varied issues in the field: the brain or some specific region of it, neuronal markers and the physiology behind them, internal or external factors that make psychiatric illness more likely; or how to improve the reliability of diagnostics, and the latest experimental treatments. In general, we look at mental afflictions through every possible scientific lens.

Since I was young, my vocation has been to treat and help people suffering from sadness and anguish. This has led me to investigate happiness, pleasure, love, compassion, and joy and to pose myself a series of difficult questions. Why are there people with a tendency to suffer and complain, no matter their situation? Does good luck exist or is it not as random as it seems? What

importance do genes carry in forming people's minds and their characters? Which factors predispose me to be—or prevent me from being—happier? Investigating these issues has pushed me down lots of different paths, in search of the most thought-provoking reading.

Our society is, at present, richer than ever in comparative terms. We have never had as much as we do now. Generally, our primary needs are taken care of and we have almost any item at our disposal, in most cases only a click away. As a consequence, though it isn't desirable and should be avoided, overabundance is becoming normal.

Sometimes we believe that we deserve everything, an attitude encouraged by our reigning materialism, which makes us think that it's good to have access to everything that we desire. However, no accumulation of things on its own can grant access to happiness, to an *interior* state of plenitude.

Happiness consists in having a fully realized life, in which we try to get the best out of our values and aptitudes. Happiness is making a little work of art out of life, striving every day to bring out our best selves.

Happiness is intimately related to the meaning we give our lives and our existence.

As we will see, the first step toward trying to be happy is recognizing what we are asking for from life. In a world that has lost its meaning and its sense of direction, we tend to substitute "sensations" for that "sense." Society is suffering from a huge spiritual vacuum that it tries to fill with a frantic search for sensations: bodily satisfaction, sex, food, alcohol, etc. There is a widespread and insatiable need to experience new and ever more intense emotions and sensations. There is nothing bad *per se* about sex, gourmet cooking, or the pleasure of a glass of good wine—I'm talking about when the search for these sensations is substituted for true meaning in life. In these cases, where the sense of

direction has been lost, the accumulation of sensations produces a momentary gratification; meanwhile, our interior void grows like a black hole, slowly engulfing our lives, inevitably leading to psychological ruptures or destructive behaviors.

Only then, when the damage is done, does the affected person, or someone close to them, realize that recovery is beyond their own strength and seek external help. This is when someone in the role of a psychiatrist or psychologist becomes necessary to help rebuild a person's life.

Human beings seek to possess, and we connect happiness with possession. We spend our lives seeking economic, social, professional, and affective stability. We seek security, prestige, material things, friends. But true happiness is not in *having*, it is in *being*. Our way of being is the foundation of true happiness.

Careful! Take care not to confuse happiness with happiness lite, which is sold to us as though it were only a click away. You know there's something wrong with this materialist concept when 20 percent of the population is seeking treatment for emotional problems.

If amassing material things isn't the solution to happiness, what is? In my opinion, in this constantly changing and rapidly evolving world, happiness must necessarily involve a return to values. And what are values? Values help us to be better people, to perfect ourselves. It's a very basic definition, but it serves as a guide in moments of chaos and uncertainty.

When someone loses themself and doesn't know where to go, having values and a few guiding principles helps stop the boat from running aground. Aristotle said it long ago, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*: "Shall we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what is right?" Today there are no marks to aim at, the archers have died out, and arrows are flying randomly in all directions.

To understand the world we're facing, I find this acronym from the US Army War College helpful: VUCA. It's a phrase that really nails our sociological context: volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. This notion was formed to describe the state of the world in the aftermath of the Cold War. Now it's used in leadership strategy, sociological analysis, and education to describe sociocultural, psychological, and political conditions.

Volatility refers to rapidity of change. Nothing seems stable: online news portals update every few seconds to suck in readers, trends in what to wear and where to be seen can change in a matter of days, and the economy and stock exchanges fluctuate hour by hour.

Uncertainty: few things are predictable. Events follow one after the other, and we feel flattened by a whirlwind of fresh occurrences. There are algorithms that try to foresee the future, but reality ends up surpassing fiction.

Complexity refers to the interconnectedness of our world, where all areas of human knowledge have reached an infinitesimal level of precision. Even the smallest details influence outcomes in our lives—the famous "Butterfly Theory" of chaos.

Ambiguity—which, for me, has a connection to relativism—leaves no room for clarity in our ideas. Everything might or might not be. There are no clear ideas left about almost any aspect of existence.

I've always thought that psychiatry is a marvelous profession. It is the science of the soul. We help people who come to us asking for help in understanding how their minds, their information-processing systems, their emotions, and their behaviors work. We try to heal past wounds or teach them to manage situations that are difficult or impossible to control. There are plenty of books out there now to teach you to find your focus in life or deal with different aspects of it. Like everything, you need to know how to filter through these, and above all, how to find the way of dealing with things that suits you best. We psychiatrists and psychologists must adapt ourselves to our patients, understanding their silences,

their difficult moments, their fears, and their worries, all while providing order and calm without judgment and knowing how to communicate serenity and optimism.

I find it fascinating to look into how we think, why we react the way we do, what emotions are, and how they're reflected in the mind. Ultimately, happiness has a lot to do with the way in which I observe, analyze, and judge myself, and with my expectations for myself and my life. Put simply, happiness is to be found in balancing my personal, relational, and professional aspirations with what I have actually achieved, piece by piece. Finding this balance has results: adequate self-esteem and a fair evaluation of my worth.

CASE STUDY: MAMEN

Mamen is a 33-year-old patient. She works as an administrator in a large company. She lives with her parents, with whom she has a good relationship. She has a boyfriend, a shy and withdrawn guy who cares for her very attentively. There's a good atmosphere at her work and sometimes she meets up with people from the office.

One day she comes to my practice. She says her self-esteem is through the floor. She can't explain why, and adds: "My parents love me, I like my job, I have friends, but I feel like a waste of space."

After giving me a summary of her life, she stops short and tells me, "I'm ashamed to be here, telling my problems to a stranger when I have nothing to complain about." She gets up, heads for the door, and leaves. I go after her and tell her to come back, that we had better finish the session because, if she is sad or upset, it's because something isn't working internally. In the end she calms down and agrees to come back.

She's been in therapy for eight months. She is much better, but I know that every day in the middle of consultation she'll have what I call "one of her moments." She gets overwhelmed and confesses, "I'm ashamed to be here, I'm telling my life to a stranger."

And she tries to leave. It's a struggle for her to accept that she is sharing her life with another person. Little by little she's understanding and articulating the reasons she needs to resolve those internal conflicts that are preventing her from growing.

I could always say to a person acting like this, "No need to come back, when you feel comfortable call and make an appointment."

But I accept her experience in the moment and continue the counseling session without judgment, as though she hasn't said anything.

SELF-ESTEEM AND HAPPINESS

Self-esteem and happiness are intimately related. A person at peace with themselves, who maintains a certain internal equilibrium and takes pleasure in the little things in life, will normally have an adequate level of self-esteem.

NO SELF-ESTEEM PROBLEMS HERE

Miguel de Unamuno was one of the best authors of the great Spanish "generation of 98." He was well known for his earthy, familiar personality. On one occasion he was honored with the Grand Cross of Alfonso X the Wise, given to him by King Alfonso XIII himself.

Unamuno, known for being a militant republican and a member of the Socialist Party, at the moment the award was being conferred, remarked, "I am honored, majesty, to receive this cross that I so richly deserve."

The king, surprised but familiar with the writer's reputation, replied, "How curious! In general, most of those honored insist that they don't deserve the cross."

Unamuno, with his habitual familiarity, responded with a smile, "Sir, in those cases it was true—*they* did not deserve it."

HAPPINESS AND SUFFERING

They say you don't know what happiness is until you've lost it. When confronted with pain, suffering, grief, or financial problems, an inner voice says, "I'm not happy! This is hell! Why do I have such bad luck?" At those times we find it difficult to look back at happy moments we have had or to appreciate the glimmers of joy that filled us at other times.

Life is a constant beginning again, a path where we walk through joyful occurrences or moments of happiness, but also hard times. To be happy we must be capable of rebuilding ourselves as much as possible in the face of trauma and hardship. The reason is simple: there is no life story without its wounds. Failures, and how one frames them, are the most decisive aspect of anyone's trajectory in life. We as human beings, over the whole course of our lives, pass through very demanding and difficult moments, which mean that we will not be able to be happy if we do not learn to get over them, or at least try.

As a psychiatrist, in consultation, I've treated every kind of trauma, and I am conscious in writing these lines that very difficult life stories exist, some much more than others. There are things beyond our control that we cannot change. We cannot choose a lot of what will happen to us in life, but we are absolutely free, each and every one of us, to choose the attitude with which we confront it. We are dealt some cards, good or bad, but they're the ones we have and we must play them as well as we can.

Man needs tools to overcome the wounds and traumas of the past. The periods that demolish us physically and psychologically leave important traces on our life stories. The ways in which we as individuals overcome and start again mark many aspects of our personalities. This talent is born from an inner strength that we all have, though it may be developed to a greater or lesser degree: resilience.

The concept of resilience was made fashionable by the French doctor Boris Cyrulnik. This psychiatrist, the son of Jewish

immigrants from the Ukraine, was born in Bordeaux in 1937. Under the Nazi occupation, when he was only five years old, his parents were arrested and deported to concentration camps, but he fled, hid in a series of locations, and finally was taken in at a farm, living under the false identity of a non-Jewish boy called Jean Laborde. The war over, his foster family encouraged him to study medicine and become a psychiatrist.

Young Boris soon realized that, through his own life story, he could understand the causes of trauma and try to help others—for the most part, children—to rebuild themselves after a trauma or an emotional rupture.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines resilience as "the ability of a substance to return to its original shape after it has been bent, stretched or pressed." Cyrulnik expanded the meaning of the concept to include "the capacity of a human being to recover from a trauma and, without being marked for life, to be happy."

Resilience sends us a message of hope. It used to be thought that traumas suffered in infancy were impossible to erase, and endured, leaving a decisive mark on the trajectory of the affected child's life. How can we overcome such deep and painful wounds? The key lies in solidarity, love, and contact with others; in essence, the key is warmth.

Cyrulnik, over the course of his long experience, shows many examples of this. At the University of Toulon, where he is a professor, he works with Alzheimer's sufferers. Many of them have forgotten words, but not attachments, music, gestures, or demonstrations of affection. Cyrulnik insists on the flexibility of the psyche. Before, it was thought that a person was permanently marked by pain and suffering. If a person overcomes their trauma, their wound, they become someone resilient.

In helping them to overcome, it is key not to blame someone

for their past errors, and to give them support and affection. There are multiple therapies for this. A few years ago I worked in Cambodia freeing girls from child prostitution. It was unequivocally one of the periods of my life that has most marked me.

I devoted myself to visiting the brothels of Cambodia and rescuing girls in deplorable conditions. I remember with crystal clarity one girl, aged 13 and recently rescued from a prostitution network, who asked me with a hopeless look, "Will I ever be able to have a normal life—to enjoy anything?"

The message of hope is there, science explains it, and my experience has taught it to me. There are methods for curing the deepest wounds. Over the course of these pages, I'll tell you how I ended up collaborating on this passion project in Cambodia and some of the other stories that have marked my life. Every step on the path I've traveled has helped me to understand the human brain better. Along with it, I have understood suffering better too, and, ultimately, the road to happiness.

TRAUMA

A traumatic event destroys one's identity and one's convictions, about others and about the world. This rupture is the beginning of what we know as trauma. Cyrulnik has established that in order for us to suffer a trauma, we must undergo what is known as a double blow. The first blow is the perturbing event itself, the traumatic occurrence proper; but for this to take root in a person's life, a second blow must occur, dependent on the behavior of those around them. In broad strokes, the second blow is an implication of rejection or abandonment, stigmatization, disgust, contempt, or humiliation, with incomprehension being a quality common to all of these.

According to Boris Cyrulnik, these are the three pillars of resilience:

- Personal. Having internal tools to rely on from birth; secure attachment. This is one of the strongest means there is overcome a trauma.
- Social and familial context. The kind of support delivered by carers, parents, and other close figures. These are key for pulling through after a painful trauma (this is where the second blow really comes into play).
- Societal context. That is to say, being able to rely on social and legal support at such times—the support of the community—mitigates the trauma and strengthens the victim.

Cyrulnik: "Imagine a child has had a problem, that he has received a blow, and when he tells his parents about the problem, they let slip a movement of disgust, a reproach. In that moment, they have transformed his suffering into trauma."

CASE STUDY: LUCÍA

Lucía is a six-year-old girl. She lives with her parents and her two brothers, who are seven and two. She goes to the school in her neighborhood and is a very happy, creative girl with a huge imaginative capacity.

One day, at a birthday party at the house of one of her school friends, she goes into the bathroom. When she goes in, she sees that the father of a boy in her class is already in there. She steps back out and politely apologizes. The man in question—he doesn't deserve a name—tells her in a friendly way to come in. He drops his trousers and asks Lucía to touch him.

The little girl, frightened, obeys. The next thing he does is take off her underwear and put his hand under her dress.* Paralyzed, Lucía can't speak or cry out.

The man threatens the little girl, telling her she mustn't tell

anyone anything, or he'll hurt her and her brothers. Lucía leaves the bathroom and hides in a corner to cry. Her parents aren't at the party, but she hopes they get there as soon as possible.

Half an hour later, she sees them come into the house. She observes the man from the bathroom approach them and greet them amicably, saying that their daughter has behaved very well and is very polite. Lucía starts to sweat and wants to cry. The man approaches her, takes her by the hand, and says: "Your parents are here, and I've already told them that you behaved very well. Give your brothers a kiss when you see them."

Lucía is sure of herself, and, once they get in the car, the first thing she does is tell her parents what happened. They don't believe it, but they listen to her with absolute attention. After a couple of days, they come to my practice to ask advice and see how to deal with it. They're not sure that it's true, but whatever the case, they don't want to hurt their daughter any further.

I treated Lucía for half a year. She had nightmares, she was afraid of dealing with older men, she felt sad, and she didn't want to go to school.

From the first moment, her parents showed her their support. The matter was brought to court; Lucía learned to develop her inner strength; today she is a healthy and happy girl of 13. A few months ago, she came to see me at my practice to tell me that she's going to Ireland for a term to learn English. Her words of farewell were: "I'm not afraid anymore, I've overcome it. I want to thank you for supporting me, for believing me, and for strengthening my relationship with my parents. I know they doubted me for a little while; the fact that they supported me to the end and that you treated me from the start has freed me from a huge trauma for good."

Being happy means being capable of overcoming setbacks and getting up again after.

The present moment can at times become a nightmare. Sometimes one longs to flee into the future. At other times one gets blocked and remains paralyzed inside a particular memory or a past traumatic event. Getting stuck in the past turns us into bitter, rancorous people, incapable of forgetting the damage done or emotional suffering.

We have all passed through stages when we realize we need a pause or a break in order to regather our strength after a physically or psychologically demanding period, or simply in order to get ready to try again for a goal that we have yet to achieve. During such a lull, above all at the start of a holiday, exhaustion and tension tend to crop up. We feel more vulnerable than ever. This vulnerability is more than just psychic; relaxing the body after a period of exertion produces a general lowering of our defenses, which makes it likelier we will contract colds, flu, or other sicknesses.

It is precisely those post-tension moments that are the most important to our psychological trajectory, given that the way we confront them dictates whether we can overcome major mental upsets. We must be vigilant in these seasons because frequently it is only when we slow our activity and have more time, when we stop to think, that we can tell whether our psychological health is at risk from anything that has happened. In any case, battles are won by tired soldiers, wars by the masters of inner strength. This inner strength will help us to overcome our problems. We cultivate it by learning to dominate the inner "I," those thoughts of the past or worries for the future that torment us and stop us from living in a balanced way in the present.

Time does not heal all wounds, but it does shift what is most painful away from the direct gaze. Suffering is therefore the school where we learn strength. When the torrent that rushes out of suffering is accepted in a "healthy" way, one gains an important form of self-control fundamental to life.

Balance means learning to maintain a certain inner

peace, equanimity, and harmony despite the thousands of challenges life throws at us.

After the blow, one must take back the reins of one's own life in order to achieve the life purpose that one has decided on. We must be masters of our own destinies. The simplest thing is to think short-term, to live according to our reactions to the anarchic external impulses that affect us, letting ourselves be carried along; what is better, although more difficult to achieve, is to design one's life with long-term objectives, so that, even if something turns us out of our path, we can reorient ourselves toward our goals. A person without a project, who doesn't know what they want to become, and who doesn't find meaning in their life, cannot be happy.

The solution does not lie in pills. Medication is key for moments of blockage when the organism itself is incapable of recuperating on its own, or when circumstances are so adverse that we require an extra support in order not to collapse. Medication regulates elevated or depleted chemicals in the brain. It does not replace cerebral or mental functions, but it allows you to feel or accomplish these functions when they aren't working.

Medication can offer solutions, but there is another effective and helpful therapy: the doctor's bedside manner. A few encouraging words and true, engaged listening can have a significant healing effect.

BEDSIDE MANNER IS THE BEST PAINKILLER

An article published in *The Journal of Pain* in May 2017 discussed the importance of the doctor's attitude in consultation. It has been demonstrated that, if a patient has confidence in their doctor, their sensation of pain diminishes. The doctor herself acts as a placebo. For example, what happens if the doctor vacations in the same place as a patient, or has similar tastes? Elizabeth Losin, a researcher working on the University of Miami study, observed

that a feeling of social, educational, cultural, or religious connection helped lower patients' pain levels. If someone visiting a doctor feels sure that their pain is going to be lessened, this feeling of confidence has a positive effect. The brain, presented with the mere hope of relief, releases chemical substances from the endorphin family that assuage pain.

It very often happens that when someone visits a trusted doctor, a long-standing therapist, or a specialist in their particular ailment, after explaining what's bothering them, they notice an automatic improvement in their symptoms.

A doctor should be a "human vitamin" for their patients. In a world like today's, with its overextended health service, this is not easy. There isn't the time. It is often simpler, more practical, and more efficient to cure symptoms with pills. But sometimes a smile, a positive remark, or a hopeful phrase is enough to halt the development of a disease.

SUFFERING HAS MEANING

Contemporary society flees from suffering, and when we come across it certain questions arise: Do I deserve it? Is this happening because of my past mistakes? Why has God allowed this to happen? Let's consider some potentially helpful aspects of suffering.

Pain Possesses a Human and Spiritual Value

It can lift us to a higher plane and make us better people. How many people have you met who have been capable, after a blow, of getting back up and finding new ways forward in their lives, even expressing gratitude after the fact? It isn't rare to meet people who, after carrying on a superficial and conformist existence, have been transformed by suffering a difficult setback.

Suffering Helps Us to Reflect

It takes us to the heart of many questions that we might otherwise

never have asked ourselves. Pain, when it arises, pushes us to clarify the meanings of our lives and of our deepest convictions. Masks and appearances fall away, and our real selves emerge.

Pain Helps Us to Accept Our Own Limitations

We become more vulnerable beings and come down from the pedestal that we or others have set ourselves on. At such times we must lower our gazes and recognize that we need help and the affection and support of others. On our own, we are not enough. Sharing our limitations with others can be the first step toward simplicity and overcoming the calamities we've suffered. The consciousness of our limitations reinforces our solidarity with others, our empathy with their pain, and, ultimately, our love for them.

Suffering Transforms the Heart

After a difficult period in which pain plays a leading role, one gets closer to other people's souls. We become capable of empathizing and of better understanding those around us. When someone feels loved, their life changes—they become illuminated and transmit that light in their turn. Authentic love is strengthened by pain when it is accepted in a healthy way that frees us from egotism. Anyone who expands their capacity for empathy is more lovable—they let themselves be loved—and turns their environment into a more welcoming place to live.

Suffering Can Be the Pathway to Happiness

We all have the will to achieve happiness and possess the tools to do so. Pain leads to a true maturing of the personality, more care for others, and a better knowledge of oneself.

There is only one antidote to suffering, pain, and sickness: love.

Let's turn now to look underneath the surfaces of ourselves as human beings to understand the thoughts and emotions that hinder us and how our brains respond to stress or conflict. Simplicity takes a long time to achieve. Let us begin.

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* I will refrain from giving further details that might trigger the reader's sensitivities.

Names and potentially identifying characteristics of the patients described in this book have been changed or omitted, and most patients are composites.

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