

WHAT MAKES YOU HAPPY

ARE YOU READY TO LIVE YOUR BEST LIFE RIGHT NOW? CASSANDRA DUNN TELLS ERIN FISHER WHY LOOKING GOOD AND PLEASING OTHERS IS NOT GOING TO MAKE YOUR LIFE PERFECT

Keeping up with the demands of modern life can feel like mission impossible. To stay on top of work and finances, social media, be in touch with friends, look after family and keep your health in check is no easy feat, and happiness often takes a backseat. If life feels a little sub-par, you don't necessarily need to overhaul everything with a career change, body transformation or a one-way ticket overseas to find joy again. Often, all that is required is making some subtle tweaks to the way you experience the wonderful life you already have.

This is the message of psychologist and author of the new book *Crappy to Happy: Simple Steps to Live Your Best Life* Cassandra Dunn. Prior to her current career, Cass found herself in a job managing an international student program. Regularly jet-setting overseas, it was a role that seemed to tick all the right boxes, but deep down Cass knew she felt pulled in a different direction. She had an undergraduate degree in psychology, an area of work that felt

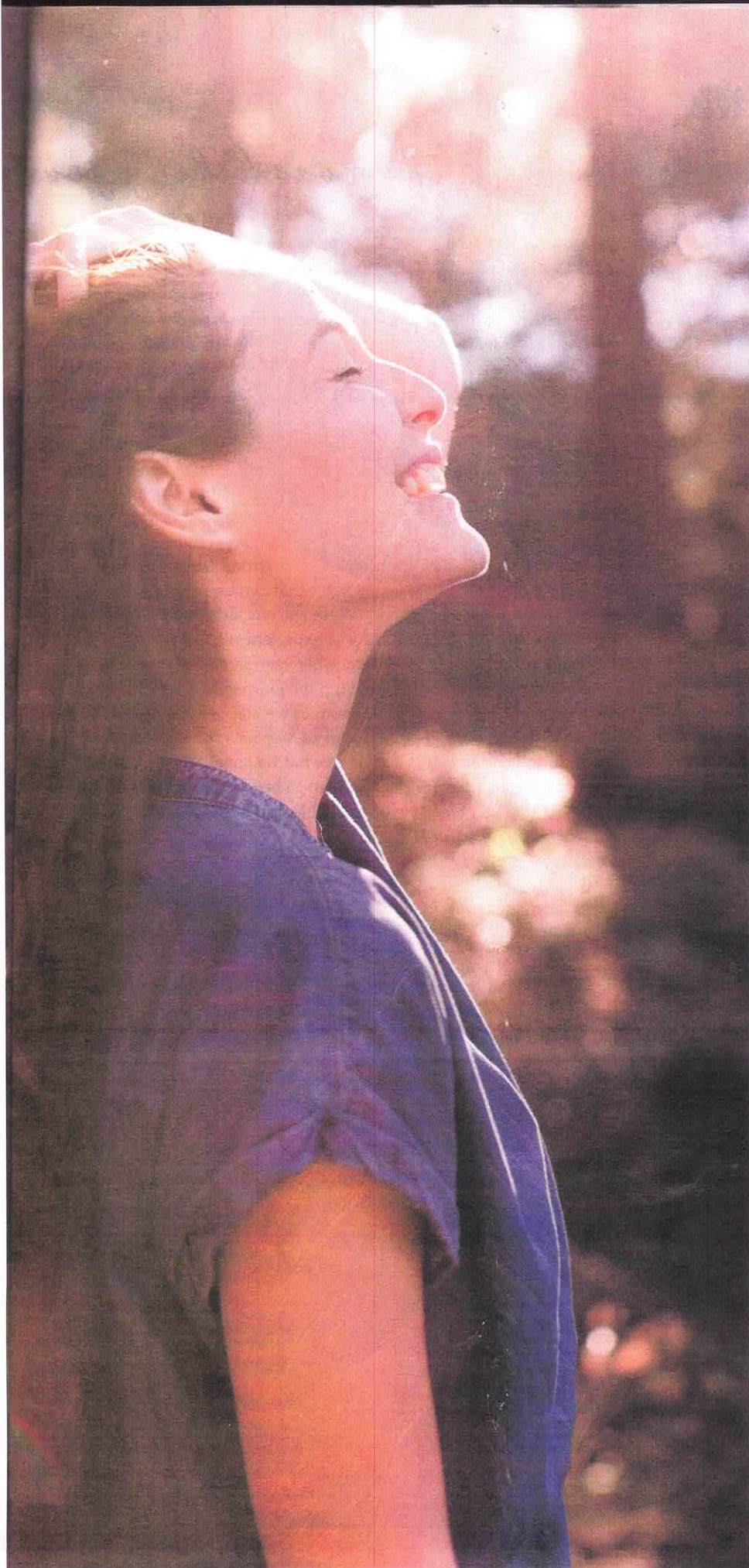
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truly meaningful to her, so she decided to take the plunge and complete her postgraduate qualifications too. She is now the voice behind the hugely popular podcast, also called *Crappy to Happy*. Featured by Apple Podcasts on their Best of 2018 list, the episodes delve into topics such as perfectionism, self-criticism, diet and exercise, and deliver practical and meaningful ways to increase your confidence, happiness and energy.



ABOUT CASS

Clinical psychologist and mindfulness meditation teacher Cass hosts the *Crappy to Happy* podcast, which helps people who may be feeling low in energy, mood or motivation but don't know why.



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Cass is also a mindfulness meditation teacher, keynote speaker and life coach.

Practical approach

Anyone can decide to write a book, start a podcast or call themselves a life coach, and this was something that concerned Cass, and still does. Depression, anxiety, eating disorders and relationship problems often require professional qualified guidance. Alongside her masters in coaching psychology and training in mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, it was important to Cass that she be registered as a clinical psychologist too, making her well-equipped to tackle these topics and give advice.

The more she helped her clients, the more she realised that what she was teaching was actually helpful for people from all walks of life. "I thought if I could help to get these tools and strategies into the hands of the everyday population who struggle with this stuff, and we all do, then it may help somebody to not necessarily go down that dark path into full-blown depression or anxiety."

For Cass, offering something practical has always been the focus of her work. "It's not just theory, it's not just fluff and it's not just an inspirational quote. It's actually something useful."

Ten-step plan

Cass' new book works through 10 short steps to help foster more meaning and joy in your life right now, or in other words, to feel less crappy, and more happy. Although her book is ultimately about increasing your wellbeing and »

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happiness, Cass is firm on her position that life isn't always blissful, and it shouldn't be either. "It's completely unrealistic and it sets people up to be depressed," she says. "In fact, there's research that shows that the more you pursue happiness, the more likely you are to be depressed. Constantly chasing this unattainable state of lasting bliss is ridiculous. To be human is to experience the full range of human emotions."

What is far more helpful, Cass says, is setting ourselves meaningful goals and living in alignment with our values. This is about working towards things that are intrinsically driven rather than trying to achieve things that will look good or please others – it's a shift that also makes any hardships or setbacks far more worthwhile. "Always come back to the goals that are personally meaningful for you. We can get hooked on aspiring to achieve things that the world tells us would make us happy, but often they're not the things at all."

What do you like?

Good places to start can be thinking about what areas of a bookshop you are drawn to, or what you did for fun when you were younger. "Questions like that can give you little clues about the things you really like. Then just

follow the clues. We can get too attached and put too much pressure on needing to find our joy, passion or calling. Drop all of the pressure and get curious," Cass suggests.

Sometimes the self-improvement movement cops a bit of flak for promoting narcissism and self-absorption, yet the bubbly psychologist doesn't think this is the case. "There's enough research that the more we focus on our inner wellbeing, the better it is for everybody around us. It's not a selfish thing necessarily," explains Cass.

The only thing to be mindful of when trying to implement positive changes is falling victim to the belief that you are



broken or not good enough and need to be fixed, something she refers to as the subtle aggression of self-improvement. "Absolutely, strive to achieve your fullest potential, but when it comes from that place of thinking there's something constantly wrong with you, I think that can be very damaging."

What she has also learned from years of experience is that there's a fine balance between pursuing goals and enjoying the journey as it unfolds. "Sometimes we just need to make little changes to help us appreciate and enjoy more of what we have. There's plenty of happiness to be found right now if we are just able to find it."



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In a culture that encourages goal-setting, achievement and a strong forward focus, Cass sees a lot of people attaching all of their happiness to what will happen in the future. "Yes, achieving goals can help, but if you think you're suddenly going to be happy once you achieve something and that you can't be happy right now, then something is wrong," she explains. The chapters on being kind to yourself, learning to let go and getting out of your own way all offer practical advice to help you identify and navigate these pitfalls.

Real face time

In the book, Cass also takes a look at the impact relationships have on our wellbeing. Digital communication and having thousands of online friends has become the new norm, but this does not necessarily result in meaningful connections.

"The quality of our relationships is the single biggest predictor of our happiness," says Cass.

Networking and meeting new people can feel like a good way to get ahead, but it isn't the way to fast-track our happiness. "You don't have to have a lot of friends, you just need a small group of people who you know will have your back. When we have all of these extended social circles, we're sometimes in danger of losing the intimacy. Spending time face-to-face is important, getting off our devices and investing time. That's the factor that deepens and strengthens relationships."

Cass admits she's also guilty of thinking that because she has seen someone's pictures on social media she knows what is going on in their life. Upon seeing a friend in person after several years, Cass discovered she was in an abusive relationship, struggling with depression, and had money

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troubles, none of which had been disclosed online.

"Intellectually we're aware that we don't know all the intimate details by seeing somebody's Facebook or Instagram, but we can fall into the trap of assuming that

we do. Because we're really busy, we take these little shortcuts. We've got to be really mindful of that and keep it in our awareness that social media is pretty impersonal." She has dedicated an entire chapter to strengthening meaningful connections, ditching the toxic ones and finding a balance with technology.

Need to be present

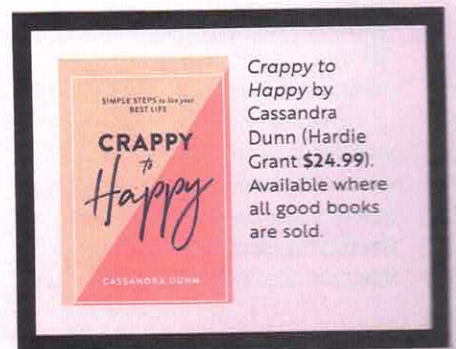
Although it doesn't have an explicit focus on mindfulness or meditation – and Cass laughs that she could write a whole book about that – a lot of her advice comes back to being present – something she believes is the bedrock of all positive change. "It's about being fully present to what's going on in your outside world, but also your inside world – your patterns of thinking, behaving, your default reactions, what's driving



you. You have to be able to slow down and tune in, in a way that's non-judgemental," she says.

Developing this awareness helps us to make more conscious choices about how we want to be thinking, responding or acting in each moment. "For me, learning how to be mindful and how to apply it in our daily life is the foundation of everything."

Cass can't wait to see her book in the hands of readers. "What I don't want is for the book to end up on people's shelves. I want people to have something they can draw on, or a new skill or tool they can use to help improve the quality of their life. Take this stuff, read it, then go and apply it."



Crappy to Happy by Cassandra Dunn (Hardie Grant \$24.99). Available where all good books are sold.