

Updated  
Edition

# Happiness Is a Choice

*Enhance Joy and Meaning in Your Life*

Frank Minirth, MD  
and Paul Meier, MD

**SPiRE**

Frank B. Minirth and Paul D. Meier, *Happiness is a Choice*  
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To our wives,  
**Mary Alice Minirth and Jan Meier,**  
who make happiness a much easier choice  
and to our parents who nourished  
us in love, discipline,  
and Christian principles

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# Foreword

I often recall a colleague, an eminent and very well-known psychiatrist, who entrusted his daughter to my care after she had attempted suicide. In a letter to me, my colleague wrote that he was not a believer, but his daughter was, and that he thought a believer like me was best equipped to help her resolve her difficulties.

My colleague was much more of an expert than I, who am only a simple general practitioner. In a way, then, this was a matter of an act of faith regarding faith. Thus, even an unbelieving doctor may consider faith to be a factor in recovery.

How does it happen that there are so many depressed individuals among the most fervent believers? And also, how does it happen that so often their faith, which (as my colleague thought) could be a factor in recovery, appears to further complicate their case, because they reproach themselves for their depression, as if it were a matter of lack of faith?

We see how these relationships between spiritual life and psychological health are subtle and delicate. They must be envisioned in their complexity. We must take account of the importance both of religious life and of the pathological phenomena which science studies.

## Foreword

Too often there is a tendency to place faith and science in opposition to each other instead of joining them. Some misjudge the role of faith in destiny, and others misjudge the role of maladies which strike believers as well as unbelievers and which science discloses. The sick and the healthy need to be enlightened on this double aspect of life.

It is the merit of this book by my two American colleagues that they have dealt with this double aspect of life in a manner so serious and clear that it is accessible to everyone. Here is a book which will help all depressed individuals to better understand themselves and thus to contribute to their own recovery. But this book will also help those who are healthy to better understand the depressed, who so often have the feeling of being misunderstood or misjudged by those who are healthy. This will in turn be favorable to the recovery of the depressed.

Anyone who reads this book will gain a better knowledge of the laws of life which are divine, so that he may better conform to those laws.

What is it that science studies, if not the laws of nature, the laws established by the Creator over His creation? And the first law of God is love! Like the authors of this book, I hope that every reader finds in these pages an opportunity to approach both God and good health.

Geneva, June 23, 1978

Paul Tournier

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# Inner Reflections

I would like to initiate the reader on his or her journey through this book by breaking tradition and sharing some of my personal, innermost reflections. As I write this I am sitting calmly in a waiting area at the Dallas/Fort Worth Airport. As I gaze out the windows, I see the large cumulus clouds gently floating by as the airplanes mechanically come and go. I feel an inner joy and excitement. I feel at peace with God, at peace with my wife and children, and at peace with the friends I love so dearly. And yet, as I am looking around this waiting area and analyzing (as we psychiatrists love to do) the people sitting around me, I have a somewhat different inner feeling. As I search for ways to describe it, I think of the word *angst*—a term present-day German philosophers and theologians are tossing around. *Angst* is a type of undefinable inner anxiety. As I look around right now and think about the condition of my fellow man en masse, I feel *angst*. In my practice of psychiatry I counsel many individuals from that mass of humanity; I have come to understand the repressed fears, insecurities, and anger within many of them, sometimes even hidden behind smiling faces. I understand and I empathize. In fact, I not only empathize, I hurt for them deep

within. I want them to know the things I have learned that have brought me great personal joy and inner peace. That is why Dr. Frank Minirth and I feel compelled to write this book—to share what we have learned with you, the reader, in hopes that you will in turn pass it on to others you love.

Many years ago I read a very thought-provoking statement made by Abraham Lincoln: “Most people are about as happy as they choose to be.” I couldn’t agree with him more. Lincoln should know. He went through much anguish in his life—the death of his fiancée, lost elections, the Civil War, and other major disappointments. At one period of his life he was so depressed he considered suicide. But Lincoln chose to overcome his depression. He chose to be happy and obtained inner joy and peace in those last years before he fell victim to the bullet of a hostile fellow man.

Before you decide to agree or disagree with Lincoln’s assertion that “most people are about as happy as they choose to be,” or with the authors’ assertion that “happiness is a choice,” let me explain what the title we have selected means. My associate and I have a combined post-high school education totaling over thirty years. During that time we thoroughly researched man’s psychology, physiology, anatomy, mentality, and spirituality. We have also exercised our psychotherapeutic skills on thousands of patients. Both of us can say with a deep inner conviction that a majority of human beings do *not* have the inner peace and joy about which I am thinking. We are also convinced that all human beings are capable of having this inner joy and peace if only they will choose it *and* follow the right path to obtain it. Please don’t get me wrong. Most depressed human beings wish their depression would go away but do not know the paths to happiness. Others

may actually choose depression as a lifestyle because a traumatic past has misled them to believe they deserve a life of depression. Some have a genetic depression that only lifelong medication will relieve, but choosing to take medicine when needed is a choice that can be life-changing for the better.

It is difficult for many laymen to comprehend that anyone would choose unhappiness and depression over peace and happiness, but many people do so for a variety of reasons of which they are unaware. Some choose unhappiness to punish themselves for guilt feelings. Adults who were abused as children, for example, erroneously learned that they must be “trash”—that they must deserve to be abused somehow. Their false guilt and bitterness result in lifelong depression until they learn the truth about their own value and release their unconscious areas of bitterness. Others choose unhappiness to manipulate their mates and friends by enlisting their sympathies. Other inner motivations for remaining depressed will be analyzed later in this book.

As a point of clarification, Dr. Minirth and I are convinced that many people *do* choose happiness but still do *not* obtain it. The reason for this is that even though they choose to be happy, they seek for inner peace and joy in the wrong places. They seek for happiness in materialism and do not find it. They seek for joy in sexual prowess but end up with fleeting pleasures and bitter long-term disappointments. They seek inner fulfillment by obtaining positions of power in corporations, in government, or even in their own families (by exercising excessive control), but they remain unfulfilled. I have had millionaire businessmen come to my office and tell me they have big houses, yachts, condominiums in Colorado, nice children, a beautiful mistress, an unsuspecting wife, secure

corporate positions—and suicidal tendencies. They have everything this world has to offer except one thing—inner peace and joy. They come to my office as a last resort, begging me to help them conquer the urge to kill themselves. Why? The answers are not simple. The human mind and emotions are a very complex, dynamic system. In this book we will do the best we can to summarize some of these complexities in layman’s terminology and offer guidelines, step-by-step, for obtaining lasting inner happiness—if you choose it.

Now I am floating in a large jetliner thirty-five thousand feet in the air and high above those enormous cumulus clouds I watched float by a short time ago. I am heading for Los Angeles to address a weekend retreat of physicians and their wives. I have been asked to teach them what I know about sources of emotional pain in physicians and their families. They are taking this weekend off from their busy schedules to find out how to obtain inner peace and joy. I respect them for that. Physicians and dentists have the highest suicide rates in our current American culture. They are overwhelmed with pressures, which they perceive as being external. In reality, their overwhelming pressures are primarily from within—from perfectionistic, masochistic, self-critical inner drives and insecurities. Many of them have an enormous fear of failure and a strong need to rescue the world from illness and death. That is why Schulz, in his “Peanuts” comic strip, refers to the MD degree as the “M. Deity” degree. Most physicians (including Dr. Minirth and myself) go into medicine because of their compassion for a suffering mankind. At least, that is their *conscious* motivation for entering medicine. Many physicians, unfortunately, experience a phenomenon

known as “burnout”—a loss of human compassion due to the strenuous demands and regimentation of medical school, internship, residency, and private practice. Many of my current psychiatric patients are fellow physicians from other specialties who are depressed and suffering from considerable emotional pain.

As I fly over the beautiful western states between Texas and California, I am feeling *angst* for those physicians and their wives waiting for me in Los Angeles. I am pondering not only what I am going to share with the physicians and their wives at the retreat but also what I can share with the readers of this book. In regard to the latter I see two primary tasks lying ahead of me. My larger task (though this may seem incredible) is to persuade the reader to give up his depression and choose happiness. This sounds ridiculous to many people who do not understand the complexity and depravity of human nature. But it is true, nevertheless! Depression meets many unconscious neurotic needs. When patients come to me and tell me they have been depressed for many years and that they have had enough of their depression, we sit down together and analyze what rewards they have unconsciously been getting by unwittingly choosing years of depression. The unconscious motives vary from person to person, but they invariably revolve around the emotion of anger—repressed anger—and holding grudges against self, others, or God (these concepts will be discussed later in this book). After analyzing *why* they are depressed, I attempt to persuade my patients to choose happiness.

The second task is to persuade the reader to commit his life to the *correct course* for obtaining inner love, happiness, and peace. People get very set in their ways. Even when they

have tried their ways for twenty or thirty years with no lasting results, they still cling to their childhood behavior patterns. Many alcoholics, for example, are surprised to find out that when they give up drinking and become responsible family men, their complaining (and controlling) wives divorce them and marry other alcoholics because their fathers were alcoholics, so they have become addicted to the codependent patterns of their family of origin. I see this repeatedly! Our brains are very much like complex computers, as behavioral research is demonstrating today. Most people choose to continue in the behavior patterns their parents correctly or incorrectly programmed into their computer-brains in early childhood. In an earlier book (*Christian Child-Rearing and Personality Development*, Baker, 1977), I fully demonstrated and documented my belief that approximately 85 percent of our behavior patterns and attitudes are firmly entrenched by age six. I am *not* saying that we are permanently locked into those childhood behavior patterns and there is nothing we can do about it—it is just that most humans *ignorantly choose to stay* locked into those early childhood behavior patterns and worldviews. Thank God that He created within us a human will. When He created us in His image, He gave us a will—an ability to choose. Without the power of the will, the efforts of psychotherapy or even writing this book would be worthless. I am hoping and praying that you—the reader—will exercise your God-given will in choosing some new, health-producing attitudes and behavior patterns. Your happiness is my goal. But I have no power at all to make anybody happy except myself. All I can do is to persuade the reader that he should choose happiness and to point out

what I believe to be the correct paths to obtain it. It is then up to him to choose and follow those paths.

Paul Meier, MD

1978

## Further Reflections

It is now 1994, and sixteen years have passed since Dr. Frank Minirth and I wrote this book. *Happiness Is a Choice* continues to help thousands of men and women to begin the process of developing a more productive and joyful lifestyle. The book is even used now by many missionaries throughout the world, predominantly in areas where competent psychiatric help is not available (especially from a Christian perspective).

The principles we wrote about in 1978 still work just as well today, because human nature is human nature. Trends change, but human nature and basic behavior patterns have repeated themselves for thousands of years. However, Dr. Minirth and I felt an urge to revise *Happiness Is a Choice* in 1994 in order to explain some more recent medications and some new research findings on depression, including some additional genetic factors and codependency factors.

We appreciate the thousands of letters we have received from readers of *Happiness Is a Choice*, because the letters have pointed out places that were misunderstood by some. In the revised version, we have attempted to clarify those misunderstandings.

We hope God will continue to use this book to help non-believers to find faith in Him and to help believers to become more effective servants for Him. The ultimate goal of the

Christian should not be happiness here on earth—it should be to serve God and our fellow man by becoming increasingly able to love and be loved and to serve in love. But how effective is a depressed Christian? Love and joy are “fruits” of the Holy Spirit. We want to help every human being find true happiness and meaning in life in the midst of the inevitable pains and chaos that are a part of every life in this fallen world.

Paul Meier, MD

1994

## **Inner Reflections 2007**

*Is happiness a choice?* I asked that rhetorical question in 1978 in the first printing of this book. The answer catapulted this book to perhaps the best-selling volume of all time on happiness. Why? The book was informative, pragmatic, and passionate for Christ; its topic covered a range of people—from those with no depression who just wanted more happiness to those with significant, even severe, depression. Obviously *Happiness Is a Choice* hit a nerve in Christianity.

Why are people unhappy? For a plethora of reasons—loss, hurt, failure, finances, pain, job, relationships, changes, poor choices, genetic factors, and childhood issues. Some are unhappy due to a medical condition, some have a physiological proclivity toward depression, and some have never known happiness. This book offers assistance to all of the above.

Do I still believe we can make choices in life that produce health and happiness? Absolutely. When I was growing up, my family attended a small evangelistic church that placed a tremendous emphasis on choice. In my memory I can still

see the little white church in a grove of trees in the country, and my mind still reverberates with the hymns we sang about free will. Many years later I attended a seminary that emphasized the sovereignty of God. Do our free will and God's sovereignty exist only as a paradox? The Bible teaches both. They do not negate one another.

The Bible certainly teaches the sovereignty of God, but it also teaches the concept of our freedom to choose. God's sovereignty does not preclude man's choice. The best-known verse on choice is Joshua 24:15 (NKJV): "Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve. . . . But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD." Another interesting verse on choice is found in the New Testament: "But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:42 NKJV). A third great verse on choice is found in Deuteronomy 30:19 (NKJV): "I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live."

Have you ever felt depressed? In the following pages, you'll discover choices you can make—choices that will help you overcome depression when stresses of life weigh on your shoulders. Have you ever felt beaten down by the storms of life and doubted whether you can bounce back? Many people never reach happiness because they believe they are incapable of being happy. The reality is, we can do whatever Christ wants us to do. With His help and our healthy choices, happiness is ours for the taking. Just today, a man said to me, "Eight years ago I was unhappy; I read *Happiness Is a Choice*. I made those choices and they made all the difference."

Am I a happy person? Yes. I feel happiness being around my wife, Mary Alice, and our girls. I feel happiness doing the ministry God has given Mary Alice and me. I have lived out the choices described in *Happiness Is a Choice*; they do work.

What is happiness? Socrates thought it was knowledge, and he taught Plato who taught Aristotle who taught Alexander the Great—but none seemed able to obtain this elusive concept of happiness. Freud thought it resulted from insight; Pavlov thought it could be conditioned; Piaget believed cognition held the key; James believed pragmatism produced happiness; Rogers believed understanding was important—but no one approach quite captured it. The dictionary offers a denotative meaning of happiness as “a subjective sense of well-being,” but this seems to grossly lack in a connotative sense. Perhaps happiness is best defined as a process—a process that involves a series of choices.

What were those famous choices from the 1978 printing of *Happiness Is a Choice*? Here is the quintessence of those choices:

1. Be kind—show Christlike love.
2. Focus on healthy behavior.
3. Challenge inaccurate thinking with the Word of God.
4. Share hurts.
5. Meet dependent needs through Christ and the local church.
6. Consider the medical.
7. Emphasize Christ and His teachings and example.

Yes, happiness is a choice.

The following pages elucidate those seven choices in a manner that hit a nerve in Christianity when first released. The book *Happiness Is a Choice* continues to flourish. Because of its never-ending popularity, I thought I should update the medical information because medical knowledge continues to proliferate. The original light of truth from the Scriptures remains; the same common sense found in the specific behavioral suggestions of the original volume endures in this one.

What is new in regard to depression in this book? The medical data in appendix 3 is 50 percent new and redoubtable. I recommend you carefully consider this latest information; it is instructive for all and may be lifesaving for some. Appendix 3 presents the avant-garde of knowledge regarding depression. Read it and gaze into the future.

I believe happiness is a process, a series of choices; I believe happiness is a choice, indeed, your choice for the taking.

Frank Minirth, MD

2007

## Inner Reflections 2013

Thirty-four years have now passed since *Happiness Is a Choice* came out in 1978. Dr. Minirth and I have, together or separately, written well over a hundred books that have sold more than 7 million copies in more than twenty languages. We have great joy from the knowledge that God has used *Happiness Is a Choice* and our other books to improve the quality of life in so many millions of people.

Years ago, for example, I was flying home alone from one of my trips to Israel to train counselors there. I sat by people

who could not speak English on my Tel Aviv–to–Paris flight and was lonely and bored. I like to fellowship with people, so I prayed before I got on the long flight from Paris to Chicago, “Lord, please put somebody beside me who speaks English so I won’t die of boredom!” An attractive and pleasant thirty-year-old Frenchwoman from Paris sat beside me and spoke pretty good English. I said thanks to the Lord and asked Him to keep my thoughts pure! Without sharing our names I asked her where she was going. She was going to Little Rock, Arkansas, for vacation. I told her that Little Rock is a beautiful city, but asked why someone from Paris was going to Little Rock for vacation? She said that ten years earlier, she had suffered a severe depression while in college in Paris, and a missionary from Little Rock gave her a book by Dr. Paul Meier and his partner called *Happiness Is a Choice*. Trying not to look surprised, I told her slyly that I had heard of that book, not telling her I wrote it. She said as a result of that book, she not only recovered from her depression but became a believer and was now a missionary to college students herself near Paris. She was going to Little Rock to visit the lady who gave her *Happiness Is a Choice* ten years earlier and also to hunt down Dr. Paul Meier.

Startled, I asked her why she wanted to “hunt down” Dr. Meier. She said the other missionaries in Paris had asked her to do so to get his advice on how to get more training in order to better counsel the many students they were helping. At that point I told her I was Paul Meier, and when would she like me to come to Paris to train the missionaries and other interested people there? She thought I was joking until I pulled out my passport. It was a divine appointment, and a few months later I was in Paris training not only those

missionaries but also professional therapists, pastors, and others.

I feel certain that if you read this book, it will help you to have a better quality of life and spirituality. I also believe you will be able to use what you learn in this book, like my French new friend did, to benefit those you love and communicate with the rest of your life.

Paul Meier, MD

2013