

The 14 Habits of Highly Miserable People
How to succeed at self-sabotage
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Most of us claim we want to be happy—to have meaningful lives, enjoy ourselves, experience fulfillment, and share love and friendship with other people and maybe other species, like dogs, cats, birds, and whatnot. Strangely enough, however, some people act as if they just want to be miserable, and they succeed remarkably at inviting misery into their lives, even though they get little apparent benefit from it, since being miserable doesn't help them find lovers and friends, get better jobs, make more money, or go on more interesting vacations. Why do they do this? After perusing the output of some of the finest brains in the therapy profession, I've come to the conclusion that misery is an art form, and the satisfaction people seem to find in it reflects the creative effort required to cultivate it. In other words, when your living conditions are stable, peaceful, and prosperous—no civil wars raging in your streets, no mass hunger, no epidemic disease, no vexation from poverty—making yourself miserable is a craft all its own, requiring imagination, vision, and ingenuity. It can even give life a distinctive meaning.

So if you aspire to make yourself miserable, what are the best, most proven techniques for doing it? Let's exclude some obvious ways, like doing drugs, committing crimes, gambling, and beating up your spouse or neighbor. Subtler strategies, ones that won't lead anyone to suspect that you're acting deliberately, can be highly effective. But you need to pretend that you want to be happy, like everybody else, or people won't take your misery seriously. The real art is to behave in ways that'll bring on misery while allowing you to claim that you're an innocent victim, ideally of the very people from whom you're forcibly extracting compassion and pity.

Here, I cover most areas of life, such as family, work, friends, and romantic partners. These areas will overlap nicely, since you can't ruin your life without ruining your marriage and maybe your relationships with your children and friends. It's inevitable that as you make yourself miserable, you'll be making those around you miserable also, at least until they leave you—which will give you another reason to feel miserable. So it's important to keep in mind the benefits you're accruing in your misery.

- When you're miserable, people feel sorry for you. Not only that, they often feel obscurely guilty, as if your misery might somehow be their fault. This is good! There's power in making other people feel guilty. The people who love you and those who depend on you will walk on eggshells to make sure that they don't say or do anything that will increase your misery.
- When you're miserable, since you have no hopes and expect nothing good to happen, you can't be disappointed or disillusioned.
- Being miserable can give the impression that you're a wise and worldly person, especially if you're miserable not just about your life, but about society in general. You can project an aura of someone burdened by a form of profound, tragic, existential knowledge that happy, shallow people can't possibly appreciate.

Honing Your Misery Skills

Let's get right to it and take a look at some effective strategies to become miserable. This list is by no means exhaustive, but engaging in four or five of these practices will help refine your talent.

1. Be afraid, be very afraid, of economic loss. In hard economic times, many people are afraid of losing their jobs or savings. The art of messing up your life consists of indulging these fears, even when there's little risk that you'll actually suffer such losses. Concentrate on this fear, make it a priority in your life, moan continuously that you could go broke any day now, and complain about how much everything costs, particularly if someone else is buying. Try to initiate quarrels about other people's feckless, spendthrift ways, and suggest that the recession has resulted from irresponsible fiscal behavior like theirs.

Fearing economic loss has several advantages. First, it'll keep you working forever at a job you hate. Second, it balances nicely with greed, an obsession with money, and a selfishness that even Ebenezer Scrooge would envy. Third, not only will you alienate your friends and family, but you'll likely become even more anxious, depressed, and possibly even ill from your money worries. Good job!

Exercise: Sit in a comfortable chair, close your eyes, and, for 15 minutes, meditate on all the things you could lose: your job, your house, your savings, and so forth. Then brood about living in a homeless shelter.

2. Practice sustained boredom. Cultivate the feeling that everything is predictable, that life holds no excitement, no possibility for adventure, that an inherently fascinating person like yourself has been deposited into a completely tedious and pointless life through no fault of your own. Complain a lot about how bored you are. Make it the main subject of conversation with everyone you know so they'll get the distinct feeling that you think they're boring. Consider provoking a crisis to relieve your boredom. Have an affair (this works best if you're already married and even better if you have an affair with someone else who's married); go on repeated shopping sprees for clothes, cars, fancy appliances, sporting equipment (take several credit cards, in case one maxes out); start pointless fights with your spouse, boss, children, friends, neighbors; have another child; quit your job, clean out your savings account, and move to a state you know nothing about.

A side benefit of being bored is that you inevitably become boring. Friends and relatives will avoid you. You won't be invited anywhere; nobody will want to call you, much less actually see you. As this happens, you'll feel lonely and even more bored and miserable.

Exercise: Force yourself to watch hours of mindless reality TV programs every day, and read only nonstimulating tabloids that leave you feeling soulless. Avoid literature, art, and keeping up with current affairs.

3. Give yourself a negative identity. Allow a perceived emotional problem to absorb all other aspects of your self-identification. If you feel depressed, become a Depressed Person; if you suffer from social anxiety or a phobia, assume the identity of a Phobic Person or a Person with Anxiety Disorder. Make your condition the focus of your life. Talk about it to everybody, and make sure to read up on the symptoms so you can speak about them knowledgeably and endlessly. Practice the behaviors most associated with that condition, particularly when it'll interfere with regular activities and relationships. Focus on how depressed you are and become weepy, if that's your identity of choice. Refuse to go places or try new things because they make you too anxious. Work yourself into panic attacks in places it'll cause the most commotion. It's important to show that you don't enjoy these states or behaviors, but that there's nothing you can do to prevent them.

Practice putting yourself in the physiological state that represents your negative identity. For example, if your negative identity is Depressed Person, hunch your shoulders, look at the floor, breathe shallowly. It's important to condition your body to help you reach your negative peak as quickly as possible.

Exercise: Write down 10 situations that make you anxious, depressed, or distracted. Once a week, pick a single anxiety-provoking situation, and use it to work yourself into a panic for at least 15 minutes.

4. Pick fights. This is an excellent way of ruining a relationship with a romantic partner. Once in a while, unpredictably, pick a fight or have a crying spell over something trivial and make unwarranted accusations. The interaction should last for at least 15 minutes and ideally occur in public. During the tantrum, expect your partner to be kind and sympathetic, but should he or she mention it later, insist that you never did such a thing and that he or she must have misunderstood what you were trying to say. Act injured and hurt that your partner somehow implied you weren't behaving well.

Another way of doing this is to say unexpectedly, "We need to talk," and then to barrage your partner with statements about how disappointed you are with the relationship. Make sure to begin this barrage just as your partner is about to leave for some engagement or activity, and refuse to end it for at least an hour. Another variation is to text or phone your partner at work to express your issues and disappointments. Do the same if your partner is out with friends.

Exercise: Write down 20 annoying text messages you could send to a romantic partner. Keep a grudge list going, and add to it daily.

5. Attribute bad intentions. Whenever you can, attribute the worst possible intentions to your partner, friends, and coworkers. Take any innocent remark and turn it into an insult or attempt to humiliate you. For example, if someone asks, "How did you like such and such movie?" you should immediately think, He's trying to humiliate me by proving that I didn't understand the movie, or He's preparing to tell me that I have poor taste in movies. The idea is to always expect the worst from people. If someone is late to meet you for dinner, while you wait for them, remind yourself of all the other times the person was late, and tell yourself that he or she is doing this deliberately to slight you. Make sure that by the time the person arrives, you're either seething or so despondent that the evening is ruined. If the person asks what's wrong, don't say a word: let him or her suffer.

Exercise: List the names of five relatives or friends. For each, write down something they did or said in the recent past that proves they're as invested in adding to your misery as you are.

6. Whatever you do, do it only for personal gain. Sometimes you'll be tempted to help someone, contribute to a charity, or participate in a community activity. Don't do it, unless there's something in it for you, like the opportunity to seem like a good person or to get to know somebody you can borrow money from some day. Never fall into the trap of doing something purely because you want to help people. Remember that your primary goal is to take care of Numero Uno, even though you hate yourself.

Exercise: Think of all the things you've done for others in the past that haven't been reciprocated. Think about how everyone around you is trying to take from you. Now list three things you could do that would make you appear altruistic while bringing you personal, social, or professional gain.

7. Avoid gratitude. Research shows that people who express gratitude are happier than those who don't, so never express gratitude. Counting your blessings is for idiots. What blessings? Life is suffering, and then you die. What's there to be thankful for?

Well-meaning friends and relatives will try to sabotage your efforts to be thankless. For example, while you're in the middle of complaining about the project you procrastinated on at work to your spouse during an unhealthy dinner, he or she might try to remind you of how grateful you should be to have a job or food at all. Such attempts to encourage gratitude and cheerfulness are common and easily deflected. Simply point out that the things you should be grateful for aren't perfect—which frees you to find as much fault with them as you like.

Exercise: Make a list of all the things you could be grateful for. Next to each item, write down why you aren't. Imagine the worst. When you think of the future, imagine the worst possible scenario. It's important to be prepared for and preemptively miserable about any possible disaster or tragedy. Think of the possibilities: terrorist attacks, natural disasters, fatal disease, horrible accidents, massive crop failures, your child not getting picked for the varsity softball team.

8. Always be alert and in a state of anxiety. Optimism about the future leads only to disappointment. Therefore, you have to do your best to believe that your marriage will flounder, your children won't love you, your business will fail, and nothing good will ever work out for you.

Exercise: Do some research on what natural or manmade disasters could occur in your area, such as earthquakes, floods, nuclear plant leaks, rabies outbreaks. Focus on these things for at least an hour a day.

9. Blame your parents. Blaming your parents for your defects, shortcomings, and failures is among the most important steps you can take. After all, your parents made you who you are today; you had nothing to do with it. If you happen to have any good qualities or successes, don't give your parents credit. Those are flukes.

Extend the blame to other people from your past: the second-grade teacher who yelled at you in the cafeteria, the boy who bullied you when you were 9, the college professor who gave you a D on your paper, your first boyfriend, even the hick town you grew up in—the possibilities are limitless. Blame is essential in the art of being miserable.

Exercise: Call one of your parents and tell her or him that you just remembered something horrible they did when you were a child, and make sure he or she understands how terrible it made you feel and that you're still suffering from it.

10. Don't enjoy life's pleasures. Taking pleasure in things like food, wine, music, and beauty is for flighty, shallow people. Tell yourself that. If you inadvertently find yourself enjoying some flavor, song, or work of art, remind yourself immediately that these are transitory pleasures, which can't compensate for the miserable state of the world. The same applies to nature. If you accidentally find yourself enjoying a beautiful view, a walk on the beach, or a stroll through a forest, stop! Remind yourself that the world is full of poverty, illness, and devastation. The beauty of nature is a deception.

Exercise: Once a week, engage in an activity that's supposed to be enjoyable, but do so while thinking about how pointless it is. In other words, concentrate on removing all sense of pleasure from the pleasurable activity.

11. Ruminates. Spend a great deal of time focused on yourself. Worry constantly about the causes of your behavior, analyze your defects, and chew on your problems. This will help you foster a pessimistic view of your life. Don't allow yourself to become distracted by any positive experience or influence. The point is to ensure that even minor upsets and difficulties appear huge and portentous.

You can ruminate on the problems of others or the world, but make them about you. Your child is sick? Ruminates on what a burden it is for you to take time off from work to care for her. Your spouse is hurt by your behavior? Focus on how terrible it makes you feel when he points out how you make him feel. By ruminating not only on your own problems but also those of others, you'll come across as a deep, sensitive thinker who holds the weight of the world on your shoulders.

Exercise: Sit in a comfortable chair and seek out negative feelings, like anger, depression, anxiety, boredom, whatever. Concentrate on these feelings for 15 minutes. During the rest of the day, keep them in the back of your mind, no matter what you're doing.

12. Glorify or vilify the past. Glorifying the past is telling yourself how good, happy, fortunate, and worthwhile life was when you were a child, a young person, or a newly married person—and regretting how it's all been downhill ever since. When you were young, for example, you were glamorous and danced the samba with handsome men on the beach at twilight; and now you're in a so-so marriage to an insurance adjuster in Topeka. You should've married tall, dark Antonio. You should've invested in Microsoft when you had the chance. In short, focus on what you could've and should've done, instead of what you did. This will surely make you miserable.

Vilifying the past is easy, too. You were born in the wrong place at the wrong time, you never got what you needed, you felt you were discriminated against, you never got to go to summer camp. How can you possibly be happy when you had such a lousy background? It's important to think that bad memories, serious mistakes, and traumatic events were much more influential in forming you and your future than good memories, successes, and happy events. Focus on bad times. Obsess about them. Treasure them. This will ensure that, no matter what's happening in the present, you won't be happy.

Exercise: Make a list of your most important bad memories and keep it where you can review it frequently. Once a week, tell someone about your horrible childhood or how much better your life was 20 years ago.

13. Find a romantic partner to reform. Make sure that you fall in love with someone with a major defect (cat hoarder, gambler, alcoholic, womanizer, sociopath), and set out to reform him or her, regardless of whether he or she wants to be reformed. Believe firmly that you can reform this person, and ignore all evidence to the contrary.

Exercise: Go to online dating sites and see how many bad choices you can find in one afternoon. Make efforts to meet these people. It's good if the dating site charges a lot of money, since this means you'll be emotionally starved and poor.

14. Be critical. Make sure to have an endless list of dislikes and voice them often, whether or not

your opinion is solicited. For example, don't hesitate to say, "That's what you chose to wear this morning?" or "Why is your voice so shrill?" If someone is eating eggs, tell them you don't like eggs. Your negativity can be applied to almost anything.

It helps if the things you criticize are well liked by most people so that your dislike of them sets you apart. Disliking traffic and mosquitos isn't creative enough: everyone knows what it's like to find these things annoying, and they won't pay much attention if you find them annoying, too. But disliking the new movie that all your friends are praising? You'll find plenty of opportunities to counter your friends' glowing reviews with your contrarian opinion.

Exercise: Make a list of 20 things you dislike and see how many times you can insert them into a conversation over the course of the day. For best results, dislike things you've never given yourself a chance to like.

I've just listed 14 ways to make yourself miserable. You don't have to nail every one of them, but even if you succeed with just four or five, make sure to berate yourself regularly for not enacting the entire list. If you find yourself in a therapist's office—because someone who's still clinging to their love for you has tricked you into going—make sure your misery seems organic. If the therapist enlightens you in any way or teaches you mind-body techniques to quiet your anxious mind, make sure to co-opt the conversation and talk about your misery-filled dreams from the night before. If the therapist is skilled in dream analysis, quickly start complaining about the cost of therapy itself. If the therapist uses your complaints as a launching pad to discuss transference issues, accuse him or her of having countertransference issues. Ultimately, the therapist is your enemy when trying to cultivate misery in your life. So get out as soon as possible. And if you happen upon a therapist who'll sit quietly while you bring all 14 items on this list to life each week, call me. I'll want to make an appointment, too.

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