Book Summary: The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck, by Mark Manson

Learn the key points in minutes.

Book Rating by Shortform Readers: 4.5 (30 reviews)

This is a preview of the Shortform book summary of The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck by Mark Manson. Read the full comprehensive summary at Shortform.

1-Page Summary of The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck...Or Not
In *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck*, author Mark Manson argues that our consumer culture and social media have us chasing the wrong things in pursuit of happiness and a meaningful life. We are giving a f*ck or caring about too many things that don't matter and don't make us happy in the long run.

We are urged by social media and society to **give a f*ck about everything**.

We are told to always be striving for more — more happiness, money, experiences, friends, possessions. The self-help movement urges us to focus on being positive and feeling good. But all the focus on positivity actually emphasizes what we lack — and so we keep striving.

As a result we become addicted to phoniness, and constantly pursue superficial things. This creates temporary highs rather than true happiness. We end up frustrated and feel that we are falling short in comparison to what we see in social media, which celebrates only the most extraordinary. Or, we develop the belief that we are entitled to always feel good.

But success, fame, and fleeting self-improvement don't lead to satisfaction. The key to a happy, meaningful life is to **give a f*ck about less**, and **focus only on what is most valuable and important** to us.

This book is intended to help you:

- Clarify what is important and unimportant to you.
- Realize that giving a f*ck about fewer and different things changes your direction in life.
- Understand that it's OK to feel bad, or for things to go badly in life.
- Accept that pain is inevitable, and you can use it as a catalyst for improvement.
- Learn how to care about fewer things (give fewer f*cks).

**Hurdles to Giving Fewer F*cks**

There are challenges to choosing to give fewer f*cks (that is, to reprioritize what we care about and what we don't), which include:

A misunderstanding of happiness:

- **What it's not**: Contrary to what society tells us, happiness isn't an equation to be solved or an achievement attained when we do the right things. Being unhappy and dissatisfied are part of life, and also a necessary counterweight to happiness, so happiness isn't the avoidance of unhappiness.
- **What it is**: Happiness comes from solving problems and challenges. It's an action or ongoing activity because there are constant problems to solve; each problem you solve plants the seed of another problem.
- When you misunderstand how to be happy, you give too many f*cks about the wrong things.

Overemphasizing emotions:

- **The purpose of emotions is simply to give us feedback**, telling us that something is good or bad for us. But **many people over-identify with how they feel**, and that becomes a justification for what they do (like "I broke your windshield, but I was really mad and couldn't help it"). Emotions are part of life, not its entirety.
- You need to make decisions on what to care about based on your chosen values, not on your emotions. Making decisions based on emotions alone, without applying reason, is what kids do, and doesn't work.

Believing that everyone is special:

- Many people's problems in coping with life stem from the self-esteem/exceptionalism philosophy that began spreading through schools, churches and business development seminars in the 1960s and 1970s. The priority became feeling good about yourself rather than trying, failing, learning, and accomplishing things. It has produced delusional people who can't handle challenges or adversity.
- **You are not special**: Your experiences and problems are shared by millions of others. When you believe you're special, you feel entitled to feel good and have a problem-free life, which gets in the way of choosing constructive values.

Trying to avoid pain:

- Happiness involves struggling to solve problems. The question is **what are you willing to fight for**, what pain are you willing to take on to get what you want? The answer to this question determines how our lives turn out.
Pain tells us what to pay attention to. From it we learn what to do differently in the future. When we strive for a life free of problems and pain, we don't get to learn from our suffering. You can't have a painless life. **You must choose what kind of pain or struggle is meaningful to you.**

Adopting destructive values. These values are pushed by our culture and media, but they crowd out good values and lead to dissatisfaction.

- **Pleasure:** It's a part of life but not sufficient for happiness in and of itself. You'll run into problems (for instance addiction or obesity) if you make superficial pleasure your priority. It's also a value that gets in the way of relationships with others.
- **Material success:** People often base their self-esteem on what they own or how much money they make. But acquiring more wealth provides less and less satisfaction, once our basic needs are met. Also, when we prioritize wealth/success over deeper values, we can become shallow.
- **Always being right:** Research shows that we're often wrong about things. If you feel you must be right all the time, you'll be frustrated. Also, if you don't admit mistakes you can't learn from them.
- **Staying positive:** Staying positive has benefits, but it's unhealthy to deny reality when it's bad, or to repress negative emotions. Sometimes life stinks. Constantly being positive is a way of avoiding problems rather than solving them.

---

### How to Give the Right F*cks

The antidote to a life spent pursuing superficial things rather than making choices about what to give a f*ck about is to...

**Want to learn the rest of The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck in 21 minutes?**

Unlock the full book summary of The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck by signing up for Shortform.

Shortform summaries help you learn 10x faster by:

- Being 100% comprehensive: you learn the most important points in the book
- Cutting out the fluff: you don't spend your time wondering what the author's point is.
- Interactive exercises: apply the book's ideas to your own life with our educators' guidance.

**READ FULL SUMMARY OF THE SUBTLE ART OF NOT GIVING A F*CK**

Here's a preview of the rest of Shortform's The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck summary:

**The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck Summary Chapter 1: Striving Won't Make You Happy**

*The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck* argues that our culture and social media encourage us to pursue superficial things in order to be happy. But we end up feeling miserable because we fail to prioritize — we give a f*ck about too many things rather than choosing and focusing on just a few important things that give our lives meaning. This book is a guide for sorting out what's important and what's not, and redirecting our lives to achieve true satisfaction.

Social media, entertainment, and advertising messages urge us to give a f*ck about everything incessantly. **We "must" always strive for more** — more happiness, more money and success, more experiences, more friends, more possessions, greater attractiveness, and a better body. In addition, self-help "experts" unrealistically urge us to be positive and happy all the time.

But we feel unhappy instead because **these messages emphasize what we lack.** By constantly wishing/striving for something, you reinforce to yourself that you don't have it. Then the self-help experts give you superficial, short-term fixes: Stand in front of a mirror and repeat affirmations, or follow 10 easy steps to become rich. The advice further emphasizes what you're lacking while failing to offer lasting solutions.

As a result:

- **We become addicted to the unreal and fake,** and constantly pursue superficial things because we believe more is better. While this is good for business, it's not good for our well-being.
We get addicted to temporary highs.

We become frustrated when we fall short of society's expectations, and overwhelmed with all we are urged to be and do.

We feel entitled to always feel good, and we go out of our way to avoid dealing with pain, failure and challenges.

We go through life giving too many f*cks. We need to choose constructive values and standards, then use them to decide what things we care most about — and reject the rest.

Even when you achieve success, fame, and self-improvement, as defined by society, they don't necessarily lead to a more satisfying life if they aren’t...

**Shortform Exercise: Giving Less of a F*ck about Small Things**

You probably spend too much time pursuing and caring (giving a f*ck) about superficial things. This uses up energy that could be devoted to things you value more.

Think of a time recently when something small got under your skin and you obsessed about it. What was it?

**The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck Summary Chapter 2: Happiness is Misunderstood**

Our culture treats happiness as a formula that can be solved. For instance, we may think: If I get a certain thing or do a certain thing, such as marry the right person or live in the right community, I'll be happy. Or, we treat happiness as something we can earn or acquire.

However, **happiness isn't something you get in return for an achievement** (such as a new job) or something to be found in a “top 10 steps” article from a self-help guru. It's not something that's given or that you passively receive, or that is waiting for you somewhere.

**Happiness grows from solving problems or overcoming challenges** — an activity that improves our lives, creates satisfaction, and is ongoing (creating yet more satisfaction).

Being unhappy or dissatisfied is a necessary component. As the Buddha taught, pain and loss are integral to life and we shouldn't resist them, but rather allow them to lead us to something better.

**Suffering and dissatisfaction are actually part of our biology.** Dissatisfaction and insecurity spurred our ancestors to search out, build, and fight for better living conditions. They are a survival mechanism for advancing our species that is still useful in motivating us to improve our lives.

As a result, we will always live with a certain amount of dissatisfaction — **we're designed to always be dissatisfied with what we have and wanting what we don't have.**

Dissatisfaction in the form of physical or emotional pain tells us what to pay attention to and tells us our limits. It can be healthy or necessary — from it we learn what to do differently in the future. For instance, when we get burned, we learn not to touch a hot stove again.

Pain also indicates something is out of whack, and spurs us to fix it.

**Problems are Good for You**

We tend to think of problems as something we need to get rid of once and for all in order to be happy. But problems or challenges
are never-ending. This is actually a good thing because solving problems leads to satisfaction and improved circumstances.

**You should welcome problems, because without them, you...**

---

**What Our Readers Say**

This is the best summary of The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck I've ever read. I learned all the main points in just 20 minutes.

Learn more about our summaries →

---

**Shortform Exercise: Listening to Your Emotions**

The purpose of emotions is to give us feedback, telling us that something is good or bad for us.

Think of a recent situation that aroused a strong emotion. What happened? What emotion did you feel?

---

**Shortform Exercise: No Pain, No Gain**

Don't aim for a pain-free life. When you strive for something that is important to you, you accept the pain necessary to get there.

What's a goal that is very important to you?

---

**The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck Summary Chapter 3: The Entitlement Trap**

A feeling of entitlement is rampant today because many people have bought into cultural and social media messages about what it takes to be happy — which actually makes them more miserable and unable to cope with challenges in life.

Entitlement can take one of two forms:

- **You believe you're entitled to feel good all the time.**
- **You believe you're exceptional or different**. Rules don't apply to you, or you deserve special attention or treatment. You can feel different in a self-aggrandizing way — for instance, I'm always the smartest person in the room. Or you can feel different in a negative way, as a response to trauma — I've suffered more than anyone else has and deserve pity, or I'm damaged beyond repair.

---

**How Entitlement Started**

Our entitlement epidemic is rooted in a trend that began in the 1960s, when the self-esteem/exceptionalism philosophy spread through schools, churches and business development seminars. The focus became feeling good about yourself rather than trying, failing, learning, and accomplishing things.

In the sixties, researchers concluded that people who felt good about themselves tended to perform better and caused fewer
problems for society. Psychologists and policymakers began promoting self-esteem in the hope it would lead to such things as better academic performance, less crime, greater employment and job performance.

In the next decade self-esteem approaches were adopted by teachers, parents, policymakers, and therapists, and were integrated by schools.

The results included such ills as grade inflation and participation awards. Business and motivational speakers taught that everyone could be successful. Church leaders taught that their members were special in God’s eyes and destined for greatness.

This has led to a lot of entitled behavior and has produced delusional people like a guy that the author calls Jimmy. Jimmy had myriad business ventures, which he bragged about nonstop. But he lacked results to back up his talk. In reality, he was a screw-up — but he felt good about himself. He discounted...

Shortform Exercise: Do You Feel Entitled?

A feeling of entitlement can stand in the way of improving yourself and succeeding in your work and relationships.

Have you ever thought in an entitled way? (This might mean you feel your problems are unique; that the rules don’t apply to you; that you deserve special treatment; that you consider yourself a victim.)

The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck Summary Chapter 4: Defining Your Values

Self-awareness helps you understand what values are driving you to feel and act in certain ways, so you can choose better values.

Self-awareness has multiple layers, like an onion. To uncover your deepest motives, you need to peel back the layers and examine each one by questioning yourself.

- **Layer one: Identify your emotions.** When something is bothering you, identify what you are feeling — for instance, this makes me feel sad.
  - Identifying your feelings can be difficult because we’re unaccustomed to it, and it takes practice. Many people were taught they should repress emotions, or that certain emotions were inappropriate. So they have emotional blind spots, and have to learn to identify and express the forbidden emotions constructively.

- **Layer two: Determine why you feel certain emotions.** Ask yourself why you feel the way you do. Once you understand the cause, you can change.
  - It often requires the help of a therapist to understand why you feel certain emotions. It’s difficult because the reasons often involve your definitions of success and failure. For instance, the reason you feel angry in a certain situation could be that you feel you’ve failed at something.
  - It can help to keep asking yourself “why” multiple times until you can’t answer it anymore.

- **Layer three: Identify the personal values underlying your emotions.** How do I define success and failure; what yardstick am I measuring myself against?
  - Our values are the basis for what we do. The kinds of problems we have are a result of our values, and affect how happy and satisfied we are.
  - Since our emotions and thoughts are based on our values, a nonconstructive value can throw them off balance.
  - Most people have trouble answering “why” questions about their values. For instance, if they ask themselves why they feel lonely, the answer may be to blame someone else for how they feel. But without closer self-examination, they won’t identify the true reasons for their feelings, and can’t address them.
To understand our feelings and...

**Why are Shortform Summaries the Best?**

We’re the most efficient way to learn the most useful ideas from a book.

**Cuts Out the Fluff**

Ever feel a book rambles on, giving anecdotes that aren’t useful? Often get frustrated by an author who doesn’t get to the point?

We cut out the fluff, keeping only the most useful examples and ideas. We also re-organize books for clarity, putting the most important principles first, so you can learn faster.

**Always Comprehensive**

Other summaries give you just a highlight of some of the ideas in a book. We find these too vague to be satisfying.

At Shortform, we want to cover **every point worth knowing in the book**. Learn nuances, key examples, and critical details on how to apply the ideas.

**3 Different Levels of Detail**

You want different levels of detail at different times. That’s why every book is summarized in three lengths:

1) Paragraph to get the gist
2) 1-page summary, to get the main takeaways
3) Full comprehensive summary and analysis, containing every useful point and example

**Shortform Exercise: Be Self-Aware About Your Values**

Question how you feel and why to uncover your deepest values.

Think of something that’s currently bothering you. What is it? What emotion are you feeling?

**The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck Summary Chapter 5: Taking Responsibility**

*When you don’t feel in control of a situation you become unhappy.* You might not feel like you have any choice in the matter, or you might feel incapable of solving your problem.

It’s often a matter of perspective. A problem can make you miserable, or it can give you a sense of accomplishment when you solve it. Often the difference is in the degree to which you are responsible or feel you have a choice.

For example, if someone forced you to run 26 miles, it would be painful and you would feel miserable. But if you planned and trained for running a marathon, you’d feel pain but also a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction in completing it.

*We feel in control and empowered when we choose our problems or challenges.* When forced to deal with problems not of our making we feel helpless and victimized. But here’s the solution — **no matter what situation you’re in, no matter your circumstances, you always have a choice.** You can choose how you feel about something, and you can choose how to behave...
in every situation.

We'll discuss multiple applications of this idea below.

Once you accept your responsibility and ability to make choices, you'll feel empowered in any situation, and this will make you happier.

**You're Always Making Choices**

We don't always control what happens to us, but we're responsible for how we respond to it.

William James, the brother of author Henry James, came to this realization in his own life, and further developed it when he became a leading thinker in American psychology.

He had many health issues as a child and young adult, and fell short of his wealthy family's expectations for success. He was depressed and struggled in early adulthood to find something meaningful. After dropping out of Harvard Medical School and spending time studying philosophy, he decided to spend a year accepting responsibility for everything that happened to him, good or bad.

If nothing improved within a year, it would mean he was truly powerless and he would commit suicide. As he assumed responsibility for changing his circumstances he...

---

**Shortform Exercise: Taking Responsibility**

Things may happen to us that aren't our fault. But we are still responsible for how we choose to respond to them.

Think of something that happened to you that wasn't your fault but that you feel resentful about. What was it?

---

**The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck Summary Chapter 6: You’re Probably Wrong**

In order to grow we need to entertain doubt about our beliefs, feelings, and rightness. Instead of trying to prove we're right, we should look for ways we're wrong so we see where we can grow.

In fact, much of what we believe or think we know is wrong. That's been the case throughout human history. Astronomers once believed the sun revolved around the earth. People also once believed in useless and dangerous health remedies, like leeches and lobotomies.

As children, we believe crazy things that seem logical to us but turn out to be wrong. As adults we believe wrong things about ourselves, other people, and society. Years from now people will shake their heads at what we thought were certainties, like we do over discredited beliefs from years ago.

**Willingness to learn and change our beliefs is a lifelong growth process.** For example, Michael Jordan noted that he failed over and over and over — and that's why he succeeded.

We never reach perfection in terms of knowledge or certainty. Learning is a gradual process, where we build on what we learned before. When we learn, we go from being wrong to being less wrong (rather than jumping from wrong to right), and then less wrong again.

Rather than striving for the “right” answer, we should improve what we know little by little, so that tomorrow we're less wrong than we are today.
You can think of personal growth as a trial-and-error process similar to the scientific method. Values = our hypotheses; actions = the experiment; the resulting feelings and thoughts = data. But no one's experiment is replicable. We all arrive at unique answers for ourselves. What we determine to be right for us should change with growth.

Don't get fixated on being right — if you're afraid to discard certainties and values that aren't serving you, you'll stay stuck and won't improve your life.

For example, suppose a woman is lonely and wants a partner, but doesn't do anything to make that happen because she'd have to face her beliefs about her attractiveness. So she avoids that discomfort in the short term but at the...

**Shortform Exercise: Embrace Being Wrong**

Much of what we think we know is wrong. Being willing to learn and change our beliefs is how we grow.

Think of a disagreement you had recently, when you thought you were right and everyone else was wrong and dumb. What was the situation?

---

**The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck Summary Chapter 7: Success Starts With Failure**

Most people are reluctant to fail or to admit failure. But to succeed at something you first have to fail, usually multiple times, so you can learn.

Improvement at anything is a result of many small failures. The more you've failed, the greater the scope of your success will be. Someone who is better at something than you are probably failed at it more times.

Children fall repeatedly when they are learning to walk, but they don't give up on walking after failing a few times — they keep trying until they succeed.

We don't start trying to avoid failure until later in life, when we internalize messages that failure is bad, from the education system and overly critical parents. A focus by the media on extraordinary success, but not on the challenges leading up to it, also distorts our beliefs about success. **If you want to be successful at something you have to be willing to fail at it.**

Besides offering a chance to learn, failure is an opportunity to rethink our values and standards.

- When author Mark Manson graduated from college during the Great Recession, job prospects were slim, and he lost his apartment. He started adult life as a failure by the usual standards of finding a job and a place to live, and paying your bills. But this put him in a position to rethink his values and standards.
- His value became autonomy instead of making money. Freed from the fear of failure because he was starting at rock bottom and couldn't go lower, he started his own internet-based business, which eventually succeeded.

Much of our fear of failure stems from having warped values. For example, if your value is to make everyone like you, you'll feel insecure and fear failing because others will determine whether you succeed. A more constructive value would be to build good relations with others, which isn't dependent on the actions of others.

Growth makes us happier than checking off a list of accomplishments, such as graduating from college, getting a promotion, or buying a house. These kinds of short-term achievements generate a limited amount of...
Shortform Exercise: Success from Failure

Improving at anything requires failing many times and building on those failures.

Think of a goal that's important for you, but that you're not making as much progress on as you'd like. What is it?

The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck Summary Chapter 8: Rejection Is Healthy

Our culture tells us to always be positive and accepting of everything — to say yes. But you have no values if you view everything as equally valuable. Values give your life meaning and purpose.

Choosing certain values automatically precludes others. For example, if you choose the value of having a good marriage, you have to reject values that would undermine that, like indiscriminate sex. We're defined by the values we reject as well as by those we choose. We have to do both.

It comes back to giving a f*ck about some things, and rejecting or choosing to not give a f*ck about others.

The idea of narrowing our options to be happy is counterintuitive — we typically think the path to happiness is having unlimited options and freedom. But meaning comes from caring a lot about select things. Freedom gives you too many options and you end up caring about nothing in particular.

We actually tend to be happier with less. The more options we have, the less satisfied we are with the options we choose, because we keep thinking of the ones we didn't choose. You keep wondering if you'd be happier with a different choice. Psychologists call this the paradox of choice.

- When faced with an overabundance of options, some people delay making a choice in order to keep their options open as long as possible, or they avoid commitment.

When you continually chase new experiences, there are diminishing returns — you gain less satisfaction from each additional experience.

- Traveling is an example. The first country you visit outside your home country makes a lasting impression on you because of your narrower experience. But the dozens of countries you visit after that have less and less impact on you. The same principle applies to acquiring possessions, hobbies, partners, jobs, and friends.

- The older and more experienced you get, the less significantly each additional experience affects you. You focus more on choosing the people and experiences that bring you the most satisfaction, and reject those that don't make the cut.

Rather than following the cultural...

Shortform Exercise: Giving a F*ck About the Important Things

A fulfilling life requires making choices — accepting the important things, and rejecting others.

What is one important thing in life that you want to commit to?
The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck Summary Part 9: Death Enhances Life

We prefer not to think or talk about death because we fear it. But it is the yardstick we use to measure our life and its meaning. Without death providing perspective, our life and values wouldn't mean anything.

When Manson was a young adult, a friend died at age 19 from diving off a cliff during a party. After struggling with the impact of this loss for a long time, Manson concluded that, given the inevitability of death, most of the things he spent time worrying about — fear, shame, embarrassment, and even pain — weren't significant in the scheme of things. The experience changed his life, as he began to discard his insecurities, and focus on more important things.

Various religions and philosophies encourage connecting with mortality. Stoics advised keeping death in mind to appreciate life and put problems into perspective. Some types of Buddhism teach meditation as a way of preparing to die.

Mark Twain wrote: “Fear of death follows from the fear of life. A man who lives fully is prepared to die at any time.”

Accepting your mortality means getting rid of superficial values and considering what impact your life has made.

- When we feel entitled, we put ourselves ourselves at the center and view everything and everyone from the perspective of how it affects us. This is our current social/cultural dynamic. We feel society should serve us, we try to impose our views on others, and feel we deserve benefits without earning them.
- Instead, you should choose your values and make decisions with the reality of death in mind. For instance, being part of something greater than yourself, caring about something beyond yourself, believing in something greater. These kinds of values are the ones that bring happiness.

Instead of feeling a need to be extraordinary because society celebrates only the extraordinary, you need to realize that fulfillment comes in questioning yourself, and choosing your own values — choosing what to give a f*ck about.

**Confronting the reality of death teaches you to prioritize what's important, and stop chasing or...**

Shortform Exercise: Giving a F*ck...Or Not

The key to a happy, meaningful life is to give a f*ck about less, and focus only on what is most valuable and important to us.

Make a list of things you give a f*ck about.