Chapter 13: Why Do We Change How We Feel?

One of the most common things we do is try to change how we feel. We don't think about it that way when we have a cup of coffee, go for a run, or look at our phones for a few minutes. But underneath these actions is an attempt to alter our internal state.

We want to feel more awake, less anxious, more relaxed, less bored, or in some cases, we want to feel nothing at all.

Human beings have been doing this as far back as we can tell. Long before anyone could explain dopamine, serotonin or the nervous system, we knew that certain plants changed our perception, fermented fruit made us feel frisky and physical exertion made us feel like we could conquer the world.

You cannot remove the human impulse to change how you feel, and I'm not going to use this chapter to convince you otherwise. There is nothing particularly noble about refusing to take a walk because improving your mood would somehow be cheating.

What is interesting is how differently we judge the methods people use.

Coffee is a stimulant, but nobody pulls you aside at work and says, "Listen, we've noticed you've been using again." Instead, the office installs a beautiful machine in the kitchen and your colleagues ask whether you want a double shot before a meeting.

Wine is a psychoactive substance, but place it in an expensive bottle, serve it at dinner and suddenly we are discussing culture, craftsmanship and the subtle presence of blackberries.

In fact, alcohol is the only drug you need an excuse not to use. Imagine declining any other drug and then being asked, "Do you have a problem? It's just a little bit of crack."

For most of my life, I could get into serious trouble for possessing marijuana while alcohol was available at almost every restaurant and family gathering. I've tried smoking weed a handful of times and it's never been my thing, so I'm not trying to convince you to spend the rest of this chapter high while eating Doritos on your couch.

All I'm saying is that the one you can buy without a prescription contributes to violence, reckless driving and the destruction of families, but it remains the socially acceptable option.

Of course, I am not suggesting that marijuana is harmless. My point is that society has created a strange hierarchy of acceptable ways to change how we feel, and they don't always line up neatly with the harm each method can cause.

Alcohol is especially interesting because pop culture has spent decades making it look cool. James Bond drinks his martini shaken, not stirred. Beer adverts give you beautiful friends, perfect weather and a spontaneous life nobody in the advert has to recover from. Wine is sold as sophistication, whisky as status.

If you have never consciously decided what role alcohol is allowed to play in your life, there is no shortage of people willing to decide for you. Your culture will do it. Your family traditions will do it. Your friends will do it. And brands that make money each time you pour another glass will definitely do it.

This doesn't just apply to alcohol. If you don't decide what relationship you want with food, phones, work, medication, shopping or any other method of changing your internal state, you will inherit one from the environment around you.

We often hear that happiness comes from within, but things outside of us clearly affect how we feel. The problem begins when we expect any external thing to do a permanent internal job.

If happiness simply meant feeling good for the next 10 minutes, the fairly obvious formula would be to keep reaching for whatever gets you there fastest. The opposite extreme doesn't solve the problem either. You can remove every substance, pleasure and indulgence from your life and still be fucking miserable.

This is why I keep returning to the definition of happiness I offered earlier in the book. For me, happiness is not about feeling good all the time. It is much more about being able to deal with the complexity of life without constantly needing to escape how you feel. Your relationship with the things you use to change how you feel forms part of that equation.

I've personally found that a useful place to begin is with a simple question: what are you using it for?

For most of my 20s, I used alcohol to make social situations easier and quieten some of the noise in my head. It also gave me somewhere to go when life wasn't working.

I could have a terrible week and know that Friday night offered an escape. The boys and I would play poker, laugh at dirty jokes and get up to all sorts of mischief. I felt deeply connected to those fuckers and we made memories that I still value.

This is what makes this topic difficult to discuss honestly. Alcohol gave me something, including a version of myself that other people enjoyed. If I arrived somewhere and said I wasn't drinking, I would often hear, "Ah, come on. Where's Fun Sham?"

Alcohol also led to me falling asleep in nightclubs, losing large sections of my memory and driving home when I had absolutely no business being behind the wheel. There were mornings when I woke up and looked outside to see whether my car was there because I couldn't remember driving home. Somehow, both the car and I had made it back, and at the time I treated this as evidence that everything had worked out.

It hadn't. I was just extraordinarily lucky.

In 2011, after dislocating my shoulder while blind drunk and high, I took six months off drinking. That break showed me how much of my life had been organised around alcohol. It was also long enough to experience what it felt like to wake up fresh every weekend. That sounds completely unremarkable until you realise how many days of my life I had made unavailable in advance.

Not being hungover started to feel better than being drunk.

The time away taught me which people, places and events I genuinely enjoyed. In the past, I would go to certain things and use alcohol to make myself comfortable. Once drinking was off the table, I had to ask a more difficult question: do I actually enjoy being here?

Sometimes alcohol helped me tolerate environments that were not right for me. I had never created enough distance to evaluate the relationship properly. Drinking had become so normal that when Friday arrived, everyone drank and Fun Sham came out to play.

I wish more adults would take a long enough break from alcohol for ordinary life to reveal itself. Then decide how much alcohol you want to bring back into your life, if any. The break isn't the answer. It just gives you information.

My friend John Sanei often talks about whether we are running towards the light or running away from the darkness. Are you doing something because it moves you towards an experience you value, or because it helps you avoid a feeling you don't want to face?

Can you have the coffee, or do you need it before the world is allowed to speak to you? Can you enjoy the wine, or have you spent the afternoon waiting for it? Can you use your phone, or does your hand reach for it every time three seconds of emptiness appear?

I've had to ask myself the same questions. These days, I love waking up clear-headed on a Sunday morning to spend quality time with Nicole and Norah. I still have plenty of problems, but the more I love the life I'm building, the more I want to be conscious for it.

Chapter 14: Who Do You Become Here?

You know what only struck me as crazy when I got older? Before you're old enough to make any meaningful decisions about your life, you already have a family, a culture, a neighbourhood, and a country. Soon, somebody chooses your school. You have almost no say in any of it.

That isn't the crazy part.

Because you have no point of comparison when you're younger, you don't experience these things as one possible version of life. You experience them as reality.

Up until this point, we've spent a lot of time examining how you show up in the world, but what about the impact the outside world has on you?

Contrary to popular belief, happiness isn't only an inside job. It is shaped by everything that surrounds you. I don't just mean your city or your office desk. I mean the people you spend time with, the conversations you sit in, and the rooms you repeatedly enter.

These environments do not create you from scratch, but they do influence which parts of you keep showing up. Around some people, you speak freely and lose track of time. Around others, you measure every sentence and leave feeling exhausted. One workplace can make you feel capable, while another makes you question everything you thought you knew about yourself.

Spend enough time in any environment and it changes you. Eventually, your surroundings become what you know and what feels natural.

I'm not saying one environment is good and another bad. An environment can be perfectly good and still be wrong for you. I spent much of my early life feeling as though I didn't quite fit. At school, I asked a lot of hard questions, which often got me labelled as rebellious. As much as the south of Johannesburg was home, I always had this feeling that there was a much bigger world out there for me.

Travel only amplified that feeling. When I was 13, I spent three months in California, and it blew my world wide open. When I came back, I couldn't stop talking about everything I had seen. I was probably annoying, but suddenly the place I grew up in felt very small.

For years, I assumed I was the problem. Maybe I needed to learn to accept things as they were. It took me a long time to realise that sometimes I was also just in an environment that didn't suit who I was.

As I got older, I started meeting people who made me realise that some of the things I thought were strange about me weren't that strange at all. I found entrepreneurs who also drove past buildings and immediately started imagining what they would do differently. They saw problems and felt an almost unreasonable conviction to build something, long before they had figured out exactly how.

For a long time, I thought belonging meant finding an existing place that felt right for me. I eventually learned that you can also create a smaller environment inside a larger one. When I started Suits & Sneakers in 2015, I began bringing more of these kinds of people into the same rooms. The more time I spent around people like this, the more normal it all started to feel.

Most of us can't simply emigrate, resign from a job, or move houses whenever an environment stops working. Change doesn't always require detonating your entire life. You can find a different community inside the same city, spend less time around people

who continually diminish you and more time with people who bring out a different side of you.

Sometimes an environment that once worked for you stops working, simply because you have changed. A friendship that made complete sense at 20 may feel different at 40. That does not mean the friendship was false or that one person became superior to the other. It may simply mean the common ground has shifted. You don't have to turn someone into a villain just because you no longer fit in the same conversational box.

The same is true of cities. Johannesburg is my home. I love its pace and the feeling that people are always trying to make things happen. But Cape Town gives me a kind of everyday beauty that Johannesburg often does not. Neither city is objectively better. They simply give me different things.

"Where is the best place to live?" is a useless question. Best for who? At what age? With which responsibilities? At what cost?

What matters is whether you have good reasons to move towards a new environment, rather than only reasons to escape the old one. What does the new one offer that you genuinely value? What will it cost you? What happens when the excitement disappears and ordinary Tuesday afternoons begin again?

None of this means you should keep moving whenever discomfort appears. If you do that, you may spend your whole life blaming rooms and people for patterns you refuse to confront in yourself. You travel with your unresolved shit. It can clear passport control remarkably quickly.

Who do you become around the people you see most often? What parts of you do they encourage, and what parts do you feel you have to hold back? Does your workplace make good use of who you are, or are you spending most of your energy trying to become somebody the organisation can tolerate?

Before you conclude that every difficulty is evidence of something broken inside you, ask yourself: Who do I keep becoming here?