



Guide to a life less ordinary

Choosing Happiness: Life & Soul Essentials

By Stephanie Dowrick
Allen & Unwin, \$39.95

IN THE COURSE OF A single day, you will have about 50,000 thoughts," writes Stephanie Dowrick. "Sometimes, though, it may feel as though you are having the same thought 50,000 times. More worryingly, when you are depressed, 90 per cent of your thoughts may be miserable . . . That's a lot of your life."

As stress levels rise and marriages break down, how to be happy preoccupies more people more of the time. *Choosing Happiness: Life & Soul Essentials* could be another self-help tome in an already crowded market. But it's not.

Written with lightness and elegance, Dowrick brings more than 20 years of research and life experience, distilling spiritual traditions and inspired common sense, in what will be, she says, "her last major psychotherapy book".

Choosing Happiness marks a departure from Dowrick's earlier works — *Intimacy & Solitude*, *Forgiveness and Other Acts of Love* — in its breadth and style. Written to appeal to a broader readership of all ages, it offers answers in bite-sized chunks.

The book grew out of a friendship between "two overcommitted working mothers" — Dowrick and Catherine Greer, a 38-year-old Canadian living in Sydney, who suggested that her generation "were hungry for depth", spiritually and psychologically but "at speed".

The result is a dialogue between a writer and a reader, with real-life questions posed by Greer and insightful, if at times confronting,



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answers offered by Dowrick. For those with time, it can be read from front to back, for others it's ideal for dipping.

Each chapter begins with a list of short phrases — "Trust your intuition, Resolve conflict" — that are then explored, sometimes in a mere paragraph and at the chapter's end summed up as "essential insights" and "essential actions". Anchored firmly in the daily challenges many of us face — how to avoid the perennial argument with one's partner over time, or lack of it; how to deal with anger — Dowrick addresses topics such as relationships and bullying at work.

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PICTURE: JANE DYSON

As a writer of the human condition, broadcaster and newly ordained as an inter-faith minister, Dowrick's gift is to bring the sacred into the mundane in a way that is not preachy, even those parts that can make you feel uncomfortable. "The truth is stark," she writes. "No matter how powerless or insignificant you may feel on any particular day, you affect everyone with whom you come into contact . . . Are you lifting their spirits?"

With its emphasis on each person taking responsibility, *Choosing Happiness* is not a passive read. It may be subtle, it may be radical but it demands change in one's behaviour. There are suggestions on how to do so — write a journal, say an affirmation or simply take a breath and pause before you go to criticise another.

Choosing Happiness is less about always being cheerful, although a positive outlook is part of it, as a wealth of invaluable reminders on how to sustain our spirits during the hard moments. Dowrick doesn't skimp on them. As a child who lost her mother to cancer at the age of eight, she writes from a perspective of someone who has learnt through her own pain: "Grief and sorrow are not 'negative' feelings . . . It is a precious thing to learn that you can survive even the worst losses. You will be changed. But you need not be diminished."

Ultimately it is Dowrick's honesty, that she is a "patchy optimist still subject to self-doubts", combined with her huge heart, that lifts *Choosing Happiness* above others. This modern bible for the soul, teaching how to live an ordinary life with "a more-than-ordinary awareness", should sit alongside our dictionaries and encyclopedias. With that many thoughts a day, it makes you think doesn't it?