



## When Misery is Company: End Self-Sabotage and Become Content

By Anne Katherine M.A.

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This book offers solutions to anyone who has felt victimized, ostracized or left behind by life.

Surprising as it may sound, many people take comfort in their own misery. Feeling too good for too long (or even feeling good at all) can be scary for people, explains Anne Katherine. "Achievement creates anxiety. Intimacy leads to fear. Happiness produces uneasiness. Pleasure causes pain. The solution to this dilemma: what feels good has to be stopped. I call this an addiction to misery." Katherine's fascination and perspective book provides immediate assistance to those people who think they might be making choices that keep them at a "carefully calibrated level of existence--beneath bliss and above despair."

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## **Editorial Review**

### About the Author

Anne Katherine, M.A., is a psychotherapist, licensed mental health counselor, and popular author who is known for her pioneering work in developing effective programs for recovery from food addiction and discovery of life purpose. She is the author of the best-selling book, *Boundaries: Where you End and I Begin*, and her newest book is *How to Make Any Diet Work: Repair Your Disordered Appetite and Finally Lose Weight*. Katherine lives in the Pacific Northwest.

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### **from Chapter 1 Can This Book Really Help?**

Carrie left me a message. I'm scared. My new office was finished yesterday, so I moved into it today. It's really beautiful, with a view of the ship's canal. My new boss likes me a lot. This morning she asked me to join some of the managers at an informal dinner at her home tonight. I accepted and got directions.

I hadn't eaten breakfast and then I worked through lunch. After work, I went into the ladies' room and looked at myself and I thought, How could anyone believe in me? I'm gross looking. My clothes are all wrong.

So I putzed around, arranging my office, and lost track of the time and left fifteen minutes late. And then I got stuck behind a school bus. So I got to her place thirty minutes late. And then I saw the house she lives in. It's huge. It's elegant. What was I doing there?

And all the cars were there already. Nobody was still arriving. I sat outside for an hour and I couldn't make myself go in. So I finally just left. I went to a restaurant and ate about three meals. Then I came home.

I'm not good enough for this kind of job. I was afraid I would do some stupid thing if I went inside and that she'd think she made a big mistake hiring me.

I closed my eyes as I heard this because I could see the series of actions and nonactions that became a cascade of self-sabotage for Carrie. I could tell she wasn't seeing how her failure to show up would come across to her boss. In the state she was in, she couldn't imagine what would be happening inside the house—her boss and the managers waiting for her, delaying dinner, wondering and worrying, then waiting for an explanatory phone call. She'd gotten lost in a tunnel in her head and saw everything from inside out.

At first it seemed to me that the trigger—the first event that started her slide—was seeing herself in the ladies' room mirror. But her anxiety had been brewing before that. Her fancy new office scared her. Her boss's appreciation scared her. Even her own thoughts scared her—what if she couldn't measure up? The invitation to be a member of the inner circle may have been the final straw.

So much bounty so soon in her new job led her to fear that she might not rise to others' expectations. This fear caused her to see herself as unattractive when she looked in the mirror.

Carrie had already put herself in danger of not thinking clearly by skipping breakfast and lunch. Then she made a series of decisions—or, rather, failed to make decisions—that could have led to a better outcome. She putzed instead of thinking about how to get ready, didn't set an alarm in order to get out of the office on time, and didn't call a therapy group member to get help with her anxiety and decisions. By not acting in an effective way, she allowed the internal avalanche to build.

By the time she was sitting outside her boss's elegant home, she was in too deep. She had been swallowed by her anxiety and couldn't think clearly enough to figure out how to ring the doorbell and go inside. Her world had gotten very small; at that moment it consisted entirely of her fears and that big, imposing house. Eventually I realized that I had my eye on the wrong thing too. I wanted Carrie to keep that job and the support of her boss. I wanted her to succeed in her profession and have enough money to allay her financial worries. I wanted very much for her to not rack up another failure. I wanted her to be happy. Many years of being a therapist had honed my ability to work effectively with people. But in Carrie's case I was operating under a wrong assumption. I believed she wanted to be happy.

I was missing the paradox. For some people, happiness is upsetting. For them, every joy must be equalized by a setback. Too much success must be balanced by failure.

### **Comfort in Misery**

We are creatures of survival. We were biologically designed, engineered, and programmed to survive, more or less, at all costs. Yet survival can carry many faces. If, for whatever reason, misery seems necessary for our survival, we'll choose misery.

Simplified, the logic goes like this:

Something good happened to me! I was happy! Then this horrible thing followed or came from the same place or person that made me happy! I was nearly crushed by my grief. This means that happiness leads to crushing grief! Therefore, if I avoid happiness, I'll protect myself from grief.

Different people might substitute other words for happy, such as safe, joyful, free, or honored. Or they might use other words for grief, such as fear, disappointment, shame, or disaster. For example, I felt so special as they sang "Happy Birthday" to me. Then my father slapped me out of the chair, and I nearly died from shame. So if I can avoid being honored, I'll protect myself from shame.

In all of these cases, the internal logic is the same: people try to protect themselves against feeling bad by not feeling too good.

### *Triggered by Joy*

A triggering event is one that sets off an inevitable chain reaction. To trigger all the dominoes to fall, tip the first domino. To trigger yeast to grow, add water and sugar.

Abstinent, recovering food addicts can get triggered by one cookie. It may take an hour or a week for the relapse to take hold, but the trigger is the first bite. From then on, for most sugar addicts, the slide into relapse is inevitable.

For some of us, happiness itself can be a trigger, a trigger that makes a slide into misery equally inevitable. In Carrie's case, she was triggered by a symbol of success, her boss's appreciation and an invitation into the inner circle. These were positive, exciting possibilities, and Carrie recognized them as such. But that recognition caused a surge of anxiety for Carrie, and she ended up handling that anxiety by behaving in a way that made her unhappy—and made others unhappy with her.

### *Ensuring Misery*

On the surface, Brian's pattern seemed quite different. Though he hated hospitals, he worked as an orderly. He had a quick wit and an intelligent mind but stopped attending his advanced training program at the community college even though the course was interesting, his instructor was good, and the program could have led to a better job with more money.

He lived in a dank, bare studio apartment that he hadn't made comfortable. He dated women he did not love or even like. Nothing in life entranced him. He plodded from requirement to requirement without being engaged.

He seemed to have an instinct for making choices that would keep him at that same dutiful, empty level of existence. If he needed to turn left to take the only available parking space, he'd turn right.

When a coworker lovingly teased him, Brian took offense and chewed her out so harshly that the coworker, who had been taking some first steps toward an offer of friendship, decided not to pursue it.

Brian was so afraid of happiness that he made sure he was always miserable.

Brian and Carrie lead very different lives. Brian's life is colorless and dark. Carrie is successful, and she has reason to be happy. But both keep making choices that maintain them at a carefully calibrated level of existence—beneath bliss and above despair.

### *A Larger Addiction*

Sugar made Stephanie fearful and listless. If she took a bite of a doughnut or two swigs of cola, within forty-eight hours she would be eating sugary foods addictively. Her whole focus would switch to her next bite—where, when, and how she'd get a new stash of sugar and eat it. She would be distracted from work and her relationships.

When she abstained from sugar, Stephanie was clearheaded, made positive choices, and felt good. All aspects of her life improved.

Through concentrated attention and effort, she stayed abstinent from sugar for seven months. Then she sent me an e-mail: "I lost my abstinence."

My heart groaned. I knew what would happen next. She was headed for a downhill slide in which she would binge on sugar more and more and feel ever worse about herself. Her abstinence had been hard-won. It would not be easily regained.

Was she just a typical addict, I wondered, with the typical propensity for relapse? Or was something larger going on?

Among addicts of any stripe—alcoholics, drug addicts, food addicts, compulsive workers—some achieve a level of recovery in which their lives gradually improve and become more fulfilling. And there are others who relapse again and again.

In some cases, the addiction has too firm a hold. The addict seemingly cannot become reconciled to a life without his addiction.

But there's another category of people who relapse. These are the people who are triggered by recovery itself. They are also the people who we helping professionals have failed to help.

Recovery brings clarity, friendships, and joy. It draws people into union with life. Serendipity shows up, again and again.

For some addicts, this is too much of a good thing.

Why? Because a bigger addiction, a more powerful and more subtle addiction, is pulling the strings àn addiction to misery.

It's a subtle addiction that has many faces, but the common thread is this: when things go too well or the person feels too good, she sabotages herself in order to return to the more comfortable or familiar state of misery, unhappiness, or grayness. In some cases, the mere possibility that things might go well or that good feelings might arise is enough to trigger behavior that brings back the misery.

Brian nips joy in the bud....

## **Users Review**

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#### **Marlys Wieland:**

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#### **Anita Burns:**

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