**BOOK REVIEW**


**Overview**

Todd Kashdan’s first book for the general public, *Curious?*, strikes a perfect balance between engaging and informative. He offers interesting and accurate accounts of empirical research, dovetailed by vivid and often amusing images and stories, toward the general argument that curiosity is central to one’s ability to achieve meaning in life. In the process, he provides the reader with useful and (for the most part; see below) easy-to-implement suggestions for increasing curiosity. Much like his public speaking style, Kashdan writes with energy and humor that pervades the book and keeps the reader’s interest throughout. Furthermore, he tackles many of the ideas that are seemingly ‘well-beaten paths’ in positive psychology and adds new twists, describing classic findings in new ways and synthesizing them with other, more often neglected research findings. While *Curious?* is clearly intended for lay audiences, it is arguably a worthwhile read for researchers for this reason – in much of his work, Kashdan has a way of turning assumptions on their head, bringing much-needed perspectives that are often conspicuously missing from discourse in positive psychology, and this book is no exception.

In Chapters 1 and 2, Kashdan provides a theoretical overview, explaining why curiosity is worth pursuing. He introduces the idea of the ‘curious explorer’, in many ways similar to a person who is mindful in the traditional sense: fully ‘in’ the present moment, keenly aware of her entire range of emotional, cognitive, and physical experiences, and non-judgmental about these experiences (Brown & Ryan, 2003). However, according to Kashdan, the curious explorer enjoys several additional benefits; in addition to interacting with her environment with an open and curious mind (as one who is mindful does), the curious explorer is physically healthier, is more successful socially as a result of her curiosity about other people, feels engaged and invigorated by her work because she approaches it with intense interest, and lives a life full of meaning as a result. Chapter 3 provides a detailed account of the physiological processes that underlie curiosity, focusing on the roles played by dopamine, opioids, and the hippocampus with a brief treatment of neural plasticity. Chapters 4–6 discuss particular arenas in which curiosity is important and worth cultivating – in everyday routines, related to one’s interests and passions, and in close relationships – including suggestions for increasing curiosity in those domains. Chapter 7 addresses an important barrier to curiosity – namely, anxiety – while Chapter 8 discusses exceptions to the argument that more curiosity is better, focusing on pathologies that arise from overly intense or misplaced curiosity. Lastly, Chapter 9 discusses the big picture purpose of becoming more curious: meaning in life.

Kashdan’s overarching point, crystallized in the final chapter, is that curiosity is the path through which individuals can find meaning in life. Interestingly, this argument did not resonate so well with me in earlier chapters; it seemed at first to be both a stretch and an oversimplification. However, all of that changed upon my reading of the final chapter. Here, Kashdan’s argument gels together in a way that is systematic, persuasive, and truly engaging. In this final chapter, he integrates themes from previous chapters to establish the following theoretical causal chain: meaning comes from knowing one’s values and behaving in accordance with those values. What one values stems from one’s interests, and curiosity is the mechanism by which interest can be lastingly maintained. At the same time that curiosity helps one act in accordance with one’s values by maintaining interest, values also work to maintain curiosity; values serve as a ‘compass’, which can provide motivation to overcome anxiety and worry that might otherwise stifle curiosity. All of this comes together in the final chapter – and even to someone familiar with the literature Kashdan cites, as many readers of this journal will be, the way that Kashdan weaves these details together surprises and intrigues.

**Theoretical considerations**

In its rhetorical approach, *Curious?* sounds very much like a book about mindfulness meditation at times, while in its content, it resembles many other popular happiness books. Where Kashdan has struck gold is in marrying these two together. Positive psychology has historically neglected mindfulness despite its clear relevance to happiness and fulfillment, and *Curious?* is an excellent step in showing readers why this lack of discussion between people who study mindfulness and people who study happiness is very unfortunate. This
Theoretical framework turns out to be a good one— it does not simply repeat what proponents of mindfulness say, but rather, carefully interweaves the concept of mindfulness with relevant research findings from positive psychology, enriching the discussion and making connections that have otherwise gone unacknowledged in the field.

While it is clear that Curious? is firmly grounded in empirical work, some chapters are more overtly research-based than others. It is worth noting two places in particular where although it was clear that Kashdan was inspired by existing literatures, he did not cite or explicitly discuss these literatures, potentially to the detriment of the chapter’s ability to make a compelling argument. First, Fredrickson’s broaden-and-build model of positive emotion (Fredrickson, 2001) is never explicitly mentioned or explained, despite the fact that it is theoretically relevant. Furthermore, Kashdan reports several findings that came out of this line of research. In addition to being confusing for researchers familiar with the field, who are familiar with and will wonder how this model fits in with Kashdan’s, this choice also muddies the water theoretically: Kashdan goes out of his way to make the distinction between ‘curiosity’ and ‘happiness’ (which, I infer from his usage of the term, is synonymous with positive emotion), when it is clear from the research that he discusses that the two are, at the very least, interrelated, perhaps so much so that it is impossible to distinguish between them. It seems, for example, that curiosity shares many features with positive emotion as we understand it—it makes people think more flexibly, it leads to improved social connections, and it seems to be self-maintaining in the form of upward spirals. This almost makes it sound like curiosity is a positive emotion; later, Kashdan argues that a positive mood makes curiosity more likely, and repeatedly suggests that positive emotion is not the end goal (e.g., that curiosity is not just a positive emotion). So what is curiosity? As far as I could tell, Kashdan did not address this conceptual inconsistency, which may leave the more theoretically inclined a bit unsatisfied.

A second place where Curious? might have benefitted from a more overt use of existing frameworks—this time, for the benefit of lay readers more so than researchers—was the section on lasting interests and passions, in which Kashdan leans heavily on the concept of identifying and using one’s own strengths, but neither defines what he means by a ‘strength’, nor makes reference to any existing classification of strengths, despite the fact that several exist (Lopez, Hodges, & Harter, 2005; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). He suggests, for example, that the reader identify her strengths and inform others of those strengths (in work, relationships, etc.), but does not make any suggestions for how one might find out what one’s strengths are. This is not to say that the sections on strengths are not worth reading—Kashdan provides a questionnaire about values which is very useful, and ties strengths to values in a way that is both very interesting, and not something I have heard proposed in the literature—but rather, to say that these sections might be confusing to individuals not already familiar with the concept of character strengths.

Is Curious? a worthwhile read for clients?

Some points of application in Curious? are truly excellent, and come highly recommended for clients. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the two chapters that revolve around Kashdan’s areas of expertise (relationships, Chapter 6, and anxiety, Chapter 7) are particularly strong, both in terms of their theoretical and practical content. In both of these chapters, Kashdan makes arguments that are well-grounded in research and seamlessly transitions from the empirical to the applied, presenting applications of the existing research that are clearly empirically informed, as well as practically feasible. For example, Chapter 6 (‘The Rewards of Relationships’) applies research that suggests that curious explorers are more successful socially by offering several very specific and feasible pieces of advice about how to be more curious about the people one interacts with. He also provides compelling and nuanced rationale for the importance of novelty (both in terms of shared activities, and in terms of interactions with people outside of a relationship) in maintaining romantic relationships—as well as several practical hints for increasing novelty. The same is true of Chapter 7 (‘The Anxious Mind and the Curious Spirit’), in which Kashdan lays out a compelling argument for the ways in which anxiety can be both helpful and problematic and presents a helpful metaphor to illustrate the interplay between curiosity and anxiety (which, he argues, are ‘two sides of the same coin’). While several of his suggestions draw from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy—another nod to mindfulness—he presents one technique that is especially novel, and sets the stage perfectly for his concluding argument about curiosity and meaning (see above). Specifically, Kashdan suggests identifying one’s values, then using those values as what he calls ‘a well-calibrated compass’ to help one push oneself through anxiety.

As described above, there are several clear and straight-forward applications of curiosity research proposed in Curious?. However, this is less true of the chapter on interests and passions (Chapter 5), for example; while the early sections on identifying one’s values are interesting and practical, both the underlying theory and the suggested exercises in the sections on finding meaning in the workplace are not as strong. Especially difficult were the guidelines for infusing
work with meaning – for example, Kashdan suggests that readers in a position to supervise others should ‘be flexible about the ways [subordinates] can behave and express themselves [because] rigid rules prevent people from finding their own individualized strategies to enhance their interest’ (p. 87). Good advice, to be sure, but how does one ‘be flexible’? How can a person help his employees find strategies to enhance their interest? A similar quandary emerges around Kashdan’s suggestion that people discover and make use of their strengths in their workplace; again, excellent advice, but how? The chapter on enhancing everyday moments (Chapter 4) had some similar problems, though less so.

On the whole, for clients looking to understand what makes a relationship flourish, and clients suffering from anxiety that prevents them from engaging in activities that they want to be doing, Curious? is a must-read. Although the book is also intended for individuals looking to transform their everyday moments and understand their interests and passions, as mentioned previously, points of application on these topics are somewhat weaker. It is worth mentioning, however, that the sections on values and meaning – particularly once crystallized by the stellar final chapter on the interplay between values, meaning, and goals/motivation (see above) – are helpful both for helping individuals identify what gives them meaning, and in thinking about how to pursue meaning more.

Is Curious? a worthwhile read for researchers?

In addition to providing a great overview of relevant research for lay readers, Curious? is certainly worth reading for the more scientifically inclined. One of Kashdan’s strengths is the ability to take a research finding that is often taken as a given in the field, and to think about it in a new way. For example: one very commonly cited finding in positive psychology is Gable’s work on active-constructive responding to good news (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004); the emphasis tends to be on teaching individuals how to react more actively and constructively to news when it is brought to them by friends and loved ones. Kashdan discusses this issue from the opposite side in Chapter 5, offering ideas for how individuals can be more deliberate about the circumstances under which they share good news in order to maximize the chances of receiving an active and constructive response.

Even more valuable still, Curious? presents a perspective on the role of negative experiences that is worth consideration for researchers in any area of positive psychology because, in large part, it is sorely neglected. We all go ‘yeah, yeah, negative stuff is important, too’, but Kashdan tells us why in a way that really makes us understand it. For example, the concept of an ideal ratio of positive to negative emotions (particularly when it comes to social interactions) is often tossed about in papers and talks (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005; Gottman, 1994), with little attention paid to what it actually looks like when positive and negative emotions interact in a way that is helpful and harmonious. Kashdan brings this often idea to life in Chapter 6, explaining quite vividly why negative emotions are an important component of close relationships. It is not just hand-waving – the positive and the negative go hand in hand, and he walks us through the evidence that suggests this while simultaneously making us believe it.

Concluding remarks

Despite Kashdan’s best efforts to argue that Curious? is not another happiness book, it is debatable whether, in the end, this book is any less about happiness than The How of Happiness (Lyubomirsky, 2008) or Authentic Happiness (Seligman, 2002; it does, after all, address pleasure, engagement, and meaning in turn – essentially, all three aspects of ‘happiness’ by Seligman’s definition). This is not to say that Curious? does not bring anything novel to the table – in fact, it does, in several respects. Curious? is unique in that it places its emphasis more squarely on the intersection between positive psychology proper and the important but under-discussed concept of mindfulness. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, Kashdan transforms seemingly well-worn paths of research into new and interesting adventures— in many ways, the very epitome of what he is hoping to teach his readers!

Kashdan’s specificity in defining the goals of his book – if not the scope of his discussion – is to be applauded. In a market flooded with books about ‘happiness’, offering myriad techniques with no empirical basis toward the pursuit of some murky, ill-defined end goal (e.g., ‘being happy’), one has to appreciate Kashdan’s willingness to be more specific. And in the end, even if Curious? is no less broad in scope than any other happiness book, it may be that curiosity is for many readers a more appealing goal than ‘happiness’, which can be a loaded term that immediately turns people off. There is nothing about Curious? that leaves the reader worrying about whether the path laid out by the author is self-indulgent – and, in a field where this kind of skepticism is common among the lay readers whom we are trying to motivate, that alone is enough of a reason to pick up a copy.

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References


