

Reading self-help books can create new problems

Plenty of self-help material is at hand, but don't expect quick fixes to deeper problems

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Singaporeans famously love to upgrade – their commute, their cars, their homes, their education qualifications and themselves, going by the popularity of self-help books. Go into any chain bookshop here, and the shelves are full of them.

Titles such as *The Subtle Art Of Not Giving A F*ck: A Counterintuitive Approach To Living A Good Life*, by Mark Manson, and *Surrounded By Idiots: The Four Types Of Human Behaviour (Or, How To Understand Those Who Cannot Be Understood)* by Thomas Erikson, have hung around on the bestseller lists of local bookstores such as Kinokuniya for months, if not years.

Decluttering guru Marie Kondo has spawned a host of related titles all in demand. Even the grand-daddy of them all, Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits Of Highly Successful People*, first published decades ago, is at No. 5 in its category for bestsellers for the week of Jan 16, on the Kinokuniya lists.

Local publisher Epigram Books even offers a "self-care bundle" with titles such as *Calm and Do I Matter?* Such is the popularity in Singapore of hoping to become a better you, there is even a dedicated meet-up group, the SG Self-Development Book Club, not to mention numerous self-improvement groups ranging from getting fit through Zumba to small business networking support and learning a new language.

Indeed, the self-help industry can be a lucrative one. The self-help book genre grew annually by 11 per cent from 2013 to 2019, according to market research group NPD, mirroring the astonishing growth in the global personal development market for books, coaches and personal training, and is set to grow by 5.5 per cent annually, according to research firm Grand View Research.

A growing emphasis on acquiring new social skills and the need for self-improvement in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world may have underpinned this surge in demand, as people look to self-help avenues to grow their careers and improve relationships.

CONSULTING THE STARS, THE STOICS AND PSYCHOSOMATIC SYMPTOMS

Self-help texts have been around since antiquity, crafted to capture the intellectual thinking of the period and act as instruction



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manuals. The ancient Egyptians had ethical teachings about how to truly live, grouped under a pharaonic literature genre known as "Sebayt", with most written by elderly visiers passing down sagely advice and wisdom on leadership and governance to the next generation.

The Romans had emperor Marcus Aurelius whose daily meditations have now been turned into a modern mantra of living like a Stoic. He practised a brand of tough philosophy, emphasising personal responsibility as a principal driving force.

The ancients also paid close attention to tempering both the body to steady the mind and soul. Closer to this part of the world is Yang Sheng: *The Art Of Chinese Self-Healing*, or the idea of a mind-body connection helping with healing contained in Ayurvedic texts.

But these days, getting help for modern ailments is just a search engine away to a world of self-help guides, new-age groups and life coaches offering personalised help.

Just look for "guide on how to turn my life around", and you are lambasted with book suggestions on psychology, meditation and accounts of people overcoming traumatic, challenging moments in their lives sharing the wisdom of their experience, not to

mention lists of social media influencers on TikTok and Instagram, as well as websites specialising in life hacks and wiki-hows on how to turn your life around.

But is it all getting just a bit much?

THE PROBLEM WITH A QUICK FIX

Here's an unpopular opinion: Life hacks may be a delusion. Searching for a quick and dirty way involving minimal effort and time to solve a complex issue can be a fool's errand.

There are few shortcuts in life. Neuroscience warns us of the importance of distinguishing between systematic/central processing – which involves methodically sieving through all possible options before coming to a decision based on assessed parameters – and heuristic/peripheral processing – essentially shortcuts to decision-making like asking friends or consulting the Internet for recommendations.

You might discover a cool life hack, but fail to find the profound change only a thorough, evidence-based investigation can deliver. A counsellor or life-coach working through your issues with you might be a more effective way.

The self-help genre also misses out on three things. First, most

tend to attribute immense weightage to the individual and his or her ability to overcome some of our most long-standing and deeply ingrained limitations.

But we are a product of the structures of our social, political, economic and historical context shaped by a multitude of factors and influences. We learn the best way around problems from our schools, family, peers and most often friends, for which the experience of one person without conclusive data on the extrapolation to a wider population may be less generalisable.

So trying to follow something in a self-help guide can be pointless if one does not first discern how much of the problem is the product of one's hard-coded belief systems, emotional and cognitive associations, and conditioning.

While many self-help books do talk about breaking these preconceived associations and the now widely overused term of "limiting beliefs", they are not a substitute for a practical reality check, which requires actually putting yourself out there, learning from failure and experiences, and essentially figuring things out according to the circumstances of your particular situation.

In short, allowing life to be your best teacher.

Second, the problem may not be you. Much of the genre focuses on the idea that sheer willpower can help us shape outcomes as the universal answer to most problems.

This can create a problematic obsession over what's wrong with ourselves when we fail. We assume that we can change our fortunes if we change ourselves while wholly ignoring the possibility that our environment or people around us might be the cause.

Take a toxic workplace relationship as an example. You can become the best version of yourself despite the challenges and that can help you cope with the situation for a long time. You might even get very good at adapting to it, thinking you have little choice.

But at some point you need to face the inevitability that the problem resides in the environment and leaving it may be the only sensible solution.

We may also cling to a wholly inaccurate label but relatable label we identify with. The Covid-19 pandemic has upended lives and created conflicting emotions around the future. But if someone fails to recognise this and imagines the cause is their negative outlook towards life, they may fail to accept the reality that this feeling too will pass.

Third, immersing yourself in the world of self-help can breed caustic habits. When the focus is on self-care, self-help, or seeking positivity and joy for oneself, that search for happiness can become toxic. We end up avoiding anything painful, hard or appearing to threaten our inner balance.

Worse, we might become blind to the painful challenges others are going through when we get absorbed in our own trials and tribulations. Taken to the extreme, self-help books can feed an unhealthy narcissism that prioritises personal issues over focusing externally on altruistic pursuits and contributions to a wider society.

We stop looking outside ourselves to find meaning in the world or solutions through purposeful connections. We cease to put ourselves out there.

NO INSTANT RESULTS

This is not to say that self-help guides are completely pointless – many can be helpful in generating positive thinking, providing hope in people's lives and invigorate active coping. The challenge is whether people follow through with action over the behaviours and poor choices that hurt us in the first place.

So exercise discernment in what you choose to follow. Be aware of any hidden agenda of the author and don't simply blindly follow the latest self-help fad. There are few cookie-cutter solutions to the unique problems we each face.

And on the flipside, don't bemoan the lack of instant results when credible advice sometimes requires the passage of time and constant effort to achieve effects.

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