

No Flotation Tank? Read This Book

A review of



Curious? Discover the Missing Ingredient to a Fulfilling Life

by Todd Kashdan

New York, NY: William Morrow, 2009. 336 pp. ISBN 978-0-06-166118-1.

\$25.99



Reviewed by

[Grant J. Rich](#)

In recent years a number of excellent books geared toward the general reader have been written on various fields in positive psychology. For instance, Diener and Biswas-Diener (2008) contributed a book on happiness, Sawyer (2006) offered one on creativity, and Emmons (2007) has written on gratitude. Each of these authors artfully crafted a book that not only made original scientific contributions to positive psychology but also simultaneously appealed to a broader audience. With his recent book on curiosity, written as the culmination of 10 years of his work on the subject, Todd Kashdan can officially consider himself a member of this elite club. The ability of these authors both to speak to their doctoral-level peers and to give away their work beyond a small coterie of academic specialists is a strength that should be modeled by other psychologists.

In *Curious? Discover the Missing Ingredient to a Fulfilling Life*, Kashdan begins by examining the foundations of curiosity and the implications for a life worth living for those

who possess it and use it wisely. As may be expected, the author sketches the history of the scholarship on curiosity early in the book. Readers who expect that they have learned all there is to know about curiosity in graduate school are bound to be surprised. Kashdan's notion of curiosity differs in important ways from earlier explorations of related constructs. In particular, Kashdan broadens the reach of the term *curiosity*, and while he stops short of making it a master construct above and beyond all others, some readers may feel the term should be applied more narrowly.

Whatever one ultimately thinks, after reading the book, one will certainly be aware of many of the correlates of curiosity and several important domains for which curiosity has predictive value. For instance, Kashdan offers an entire chapter on how curiosity may enhance interpersonal relationships. Probably most psychologists will be surprised at the connections the author makes between the previously quite distinct scientific literatures on the social psychology of attraction, the clinical case studies of healthy relationships, and the personality psychology of curiosity. Yet there is much of value in the highly original chapter, particularly with regard to helping the happily married stay so.

Kashdan chooses to conclude his book with a chapter on finding meaning and purpose or calling in life. Clearly, this is an essential topic for positive psychology, yet it is one that previous research has not connected with the curiosity literature. Kashdan demonstrates how curiosity is vital for meaning making, and the chapter would be excellent bibliotherapy for anyone burned out on life. In sum, Kashdan persuasively argues that curiosity has broad implications. Indeed, the author writes that what he terms the “big five” benefits of curiosity are health, intelligence, meaning and purpose in life, social relationships, and happiness (pp. 35–42). This book offers ample evidence for many of his claims.

Readers raised on Daniel Berlyne (1971) and other such early explorers of related topics may fear that this present incarnation of curiosity research ignores genetic and biological work. Such fears should not be aroused, as Kashdan has investigated curiosity multidimensionally. He does indeed discuss the evolutionary bases and neuroscience evidence for curiosity, yet he is always apt to point out the possibility—indeed the reality—of enhancing curiosity. That is, he clearly views curiosity as a strength that can be developed to a significant degree, as a “clay that can be molded” (p. 30), though he does not naïvely ignore biological factors.

Throughout the book are numerous well-written case studies, and Kashdan, trained as a clinician, often uses self-disclosure to demonstrate how he came to certain moments of insight. Thus the book is a successful blend of reviews of quantitative statistical peer-reviewed scientific research (much of which was authored by Kashdan), case studies from the author's clinical practice that illuminate key points, and often-humorous anecdotes from Kashdan's own life. The typical reader may find himself one moment filling out and scoring the Curiosity and Exploration Inventory–II, which is included in the book, and the next moment laughing at the author's stories about his crush on Jennifer Connelly, his womb

adventures with his twin brother, and his first real job—which was working in the porno section of his uncle’s pawn shop.

One strength of *Curious?* is that Kashdan rejects a naïve notion that curiosity is always positive. Thus, he avoids the pitfall of positive psychology as “happiology,” a worldview that perpetually sees life through rose-colored glasses in Pollyanna fashion. Whereas Pangloss in Voltaire’s *Candide* (1759/2005) may have expressed the view that all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds, Kashdan’s chapter on the dark side of curiosity reminds us that psychological science has made some contributions to the oeuvre of human understanding beyond the Leibnizian optimism expressed by the French intellectual Voltaire’s character. In this chapter, Kashdan discusses how curiosity with regard to “obsessions, sensational thrills, sex, death, and detrimental gossip” (p. 209) can be unhealthy and even pathological. For instance, he cites cases of unrequited love, erotomania, celebrity stalking, and sensational risk taking and connects these examples to the curiosity literature. His meditation on morbid curiosity is fascinating. As he notes, one website, rotten.com, which claims “to document only real instances of bad things happening to people” (p. 233), offers images of injury, death, and dismemberment, and receives about 15 million visitors each day. *Curious?* Read this book and find out why.

In sum, Kashdan has written a book that is both fun to read and that breaks new scientific ground. Its scholarly foundation will please positive psychologists, and its accessible style and sense of humor will attract a broader readership as well.

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