



Walking on Custard & the Meaning of Life: A Guide for Anxious Humans

Neil Hughes

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Occasional comedian and full-time worrier Neil Hughes isn't the kind of person whom you would expect to write a helpful book. He's an idiot. (At least, according to his Inner Critic.)

But, during his anxious bumbling through existence, he has somehow accumulated plenty of knowledge on how to live a rich, meaningful life, how to be happy(ish) even when things don't go your way, and - especially - how to find freedom from unpleasant thoughts, feelings and panic.

In this humorous exploration of an anxious life, Neil mixes embarrassing real-life stories with inventive fantasy as he explains how he learned to understand and control his anxiety.

Despite the constant interruptions of his Inner Critic, he explores the workings of the brain, love, relationships, purpose, contentment... and even death and the Meaning of Life itself.

In between battling aliens in outer space, talking flowers, arguments with himself, and other flights of fancy, he warmly shares practical techniques to live less nervously and more happily.

And, somehow, it turns out everything can be explained using custard...

Walking on Custard & the Meaning of Life: A Guide for Anxious Humans Details

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From Reader Review Walking on Custard & the Meaning of Life: A Guide for Anxious Humans for online ebook

Angela says

I have long thought that if I were given the power to rid the world of one disease, it wouldn't be cancer or leprosy or any of the terrible diseases and conditions that we read about and sometimes experience in our lives and in the lives of those we know and love. Instead, I would choose to heal the world of anxiety because anxiety just makes everything about life miserable (and probably causes, or at least contributes to, all the other pain, discomfort and disease).

One of the best antidotes to anxiety, after remembering to breathe and keep your feet on the floor, is humour. In fact, it can even help to ground us and get our feet back on the floor and remind us to breathe - it's hard not to breathe when you are laughing.

And when humour is combined with authenticity and some serious commentary on the issues at hand, then a powerful tool can be created for the use of those who engage with it.

That's why I like this book - it brings together the author's experience (including his ability to laugh at himself), his own journey towards a more peaceful way of living, a whole raft of sometimes quite whacky humour and a serious offering to help others on their own personal journey towards a more harmonious life. It's also highly accessible which, if you are feeling even slightly anxious, is a HUGE gift because, as you will know, anxiety knocks out your ability to think straight (or at all!).

All in all I recommend it to anyone who suffers from anxiety or who knows anyone who suffers from anxiety - because it is a contagious disease.

Neil Hughes says

A serendipitous encounter involved me Neil Hughes the Tech Blog Writer bumping into another Neil Hughes, who was the author of Walking on Custard & the Meaning of Life: A Guide for Anxious Human and the rest is history.

This is a fantastic self-help book for those who don't usually like self-help books which often find themselves with self-doubt, self-awareness but tackle everything in their path with a good old fashioned sense of humour albeit of the self-deprecating variety.

Really enjoyed the read that tackles a very serious subject with humour and after seeing him bravely performing a speech at a TED Talks event with ease, I found both the author and the book somewhat of an inspiration.

Alexander Green says

Probably the best book I've read on this subject. Mostly because it was more specifically about anxiety than mental health in general.

Filled with funny stories, great exercises and reassuring pointers, walking on custard has really helped me in understanding my own anxiety. I'd recommend to anyone.

Anchit says

I'm already learning cognitive behavior therapy. This book didn't feel like it offered much in terms of learning new coping skills. I would recommend reading mind over mood or feeling good. As for the writing style, the author has put in all his inner critic's thoughts as he talks about anything. he's got a pretty nasty inner critic like how I too used to have. Reading those thoughts were triggering for me because he usually does a bad job of disproving them.

I remember a time when I used to sit down at a cafe everyday after office, and work on one thought at a time. Pick up something, then keep trying to disprove it, prove it then again disprove it and you'll start understanding that thought much better. It gets more realistic and decreases the anxiety. I would highly recommend the author to do the same thing. Read the books that I've recommended in my review here and work on their logs.

On my final note I just want to let the author know that just because I gave a bad rating to this book it doesn't mean that he can't write books. He has the unique ability to write books, to observe his thoughts to have enough self control to sit and work through all these. These are big positive traits that very few of us have. Look around you and see how many wannabe authors are there and how many actually take the plunge. The author has no doubt fine a remarkable job of putting the effort to write itself. Plus he did it while his demons were alive so he deserves bonus stars for that. :)

Sienna says

As someone who knows a lot of chronically anxious people, and who suffers the occasional panic attack herself, I've done my fair share of research on anxiety management/emotional regulation/mindfulness/etc. It's got to the point where I have no idea where I've even picked up half of the tips and tricks I know, whether it's grounding exercises or a crash course on the amygdala. When I bought Walking on Custard I bought it for my partner originally, because I thought it would mostly cover all of the things I already knew. It would be a good refresher (because these are the sorts of things you can always, always use a refresher on, no matter how well you've internalized them.)

And it was. But it also went beyond that. I remember reaching the end of the "SELF" section and beginning the "OTHERS" section and suddenly having the realization that, oh, wait, here are a bunch of things I *don't* know so much about. One of the highest compliments I have to pay is that I genuinely learned something from the chapters and their anecdotes and predicaments and advice.

I think one of Walking on Custard's biggest strengths is the voice in which it is written. There's enough literature on anxiety and mental health out there to papier-mâché the entire globe, but most of it also carries this authoritative, supercilious tone that X WILL work or Y WILL make you feel Z. That sort of tone can be a big enough turn-off for anxious folks that they don't bother to read the information that could genuinely help them. This is where the book excels--Neil never has much to say about what WILL work, but he has a lot of suggestions about what MIGHT work, and that makes all the difference. It's also accessible as heck--and beyond accessible, it's fun! Between wacky differential equations and stories about timelocked siblings to the very format of the chapters, everything about the book is geared towards poking gentle fun at itself,

which makes it incredibly endearing and, seemingly paradoxically, much more likely to be taken seriously.

I also hugely appreciate the book's overall emphasis on mindset. I used to eschew philosophy as 'navel-gazing' until I realized that philosophy was a way of changing how you see life and the world, which in turn changes the ways you engage with it. In a way, the theory gives birth to the practical. In the same way, Neil's advice to observe and adjust your mindset to be a little more patient here, a little more accepting there--that's a technique that has benefits across the board. "There is no automated process that makes us wiser", true, but a change in mindset is as close as you're going to get.

I'll also point out that this thing is extremely quotable. I've underlined probably a dozen sentences throughout the pages which I've returned to periodically to read to suffering friends or else just to myself. Neil doesn't just give good advice or tell a good story, he's also got just the right words to do it with. Today's relevant quote is probably "Realising the truth of the human condition doesn't make it harder to endure." Been doing a lot of that lately. It's helping!

All in all, I opened this book thinking it was going to be a nice light refresher on some mental health pointers, and I closed it feeling inspired and fulfilled and understood. It was a very pleasant surprise.

Sharmila says

An extremely helpful manual for anyone who has ever struggled with any sort of anxiety or self-doubt, and for anyone lucky enough not to have experienced anything of the like (although, I imagine this may only include a handful of people, if any at all...) still a very worthwhile read, as I can't believe you couldn't take at least something useful from it. Intelligently and humorously written, yet so honest and heartfelt, the theories and findings are straightforward to grasp and the exercises suggested are easy to put into practice. I would go as far as saying it has almost been more useful than all the hours spent in therapy. Would recommend everyone to read it.

Rebecca says

I did not expect this book to be so awesome. I was drawn in by the self-effacing and amusing voice and even as I bought it I thought, "this is probably going to be pretty lightweight, but hey, it looks like a fun read."

I was so very wrong. This is a substantial, surprisingly comprehensive, multifaceted, and utterly down-to-earth guide to how to work with your own brain to short-circuit bad habits, habitual worries, feedback loops, and crusty old beliefs to free yourself from the quicksand/custard of your own head. It offers practical tools and tips to help you work with your own beliefs, thoughts, and behaviors to help relieve anxiety by increasing your ability to let go of things that aren't important and giving you overall coping mechanisms to deal with everything else.

Before I get into the things I loved, a few things that might be helpful: this book mentions suicidal thoughts pretty early on, so anyone who would be affected by that, beware. Also, it does not touch on medication or

seeking professional help for anxiety or other mental illnesses. In fact, that's a downside, I think. The tips in here will likely be helpful to everyone, but some acknowledgement that altered brain chemistries can sometimes be made 1000X easier to deal with when medicated would have been nice.

On to: Reasons I Love This Book:

- It is practical. The book is filled with actual exercises that you can do to put into practice what you're reading about. These are all excellent and usually focus not on "do X and you will feel Y", but at training your brain to look at things differently. This is something I like best about this book: it's not going to beat you up for not being able to meditate for 30 min every day. It will instead give you a plethora of tools and let you decide what will work best for you.
- It has a fresh voice and an innovative, down-home take on the topic. This book is about putting mindfulness and thought processes to work for you. But it does not get too deeply into the whys and wherefores of either religion or science. It's advice that doesn't take itself too seriously, like the author is friend you asked to help you out. It's a conversation, not a lecture. The author doesn't set himself up as an expert, and neither is he selling anything, and that combination is actually very refreshing in this genre.
- It is comprehensive. This is a substantial book, and I found myself several times going "I hope he talks about X!" and lo and behold, he did two chapters later. It's organized differently than other self-help books I've read, but he rounded out his thoughts, covered all the major bases, and overall left you feeling like he'd adequately covered every issue he brought up.
- It isn't afraid to wade into the deep water topics and how they actually impact your life. Instead of lumping all existential questions into a chapter on "dealing with death", there's a wider discussion. There's even a section at the end that talks about how to live with the knowledge that eventually the universe will collapse into its own heat death, or with lack of meaning in general. And the advice here is solid, giving you fresh perspectives on those thoughts and possible ways to look at the issues differently.

This book is at least 5X better than I was expecting. Maybe 10x better. I bought it for myself and actually now want to give physical copies to everyone I know who could use a little mindfulness in their life but who would be scared off by any whiff of New Age or Buddhism. This is a book on mindfulness you could give to your white-bread grandmother (and I might do just that.)

George says

I loved this!! This was an incredibly relatable read and it really helped me to get it into my anxious, ever-looping brain that anxiety is something that affects so many of us and it was such a relief to be able to read something that I felt I could have written (though not as cleverly or funnily) and to be able to laugh so much while reading it too!

Neil writes with such warmth and acceptance that I felt like I didn't have to be embarrassed anymore about when I over-reassure someone or I'm 'drowning' in a replayed embarrassing incident that won't leave my brain alone until I feel awful about myself. It helped me to see my anxious tendencies as more of a reaction that occurs in my brain rather than something that's consuming me. I find that I can snap myself out of an anxious thought loop more easily. So, thank you Neil! :)

Bibi says

So good! Lots of practical advice. Loved it

Jenna says

OK, I'll be honest: I'm a little bit anxious about writing this review. My own Inner Critic is telling me that I shouldn't even try to make this review slightly amusing because I'm not really funny like Neil Hughes is, and that I probably shouldn't even leave a review at all because what can I really say to convey what an enjoyable read this book is?? Oh well, I'm giving it a go anyway:

'Walking on Custard' is a very fun exploration of the not-so-fun problems that anxiety can cause. Hughes explores various concepts related to anxiety including (but not limited to) the pratfalls of perfectionism, the agonies of indecision, and even the dolours of depression and low self-esteem. Along with articulating the experience of anxiety and thereby providing a sense of solidarity and not-alone-ness (oh God, sorry; can't think of a better word) for those of us who constantly live with anxiety, Hughes also offers some uniquely creative and helpful strategies for understanding and managing anxiety.

Buy it and give it a read if you have EVER struggled with indecision or general anxieties, even and especially over small things (like I do at times, which you can probably tell from this review!). Hughes' narrative style will make you laugh out loud, and his insights into the thought lives of people with anxiety will make you wonder if this book was written just for you.

Erin Cataldi says

Even though this was listed as a self help book I kept waiting for it to turn into a novel (no idea why), maybe because Neil says he's a comedian?!? Anyhoo, I actually picked up waay more advice than I ever thought possible from a self-help book. Author, Neil Hughes, makes concepts, theories, and practices understandable, relate-able, and funny, which makes it infinitely easier to like and use in real life. I don't particularly find myself an anxious person, but I do stress over small things and have a wicked mean inner voice so I was able to glean a lot of helpful information from this book. Another reason I think I enjoyed it so much is because Neil isn't some fancy dancy psychologist or therapist, he's an average educated bloke that's dealt with anxiety his whole life and has compiled years worth of researches and best practices to help others out. Humor is an underlying element which helps make the topic of anxiety less scary. This is a must read for anyone suffering from anxiety, minor or major it doesn't matter, it's helpful, funny, and insightful. At times you'll find yourself groaning at the author's ridiculous puns and inner critic, but it's all in good fun and makes the book even more enjoyable.

I received this book for free from the author in return for my honest, unbiased review.

Jane says

If you have ever wondered what was wrong, why you feel 'bent out of shape,' why there is this cloud

following you around everywhere you go... then read Neil's book. He asks as many questions as you are probably doing, he has a few answers (possibilities) and lots of personal (& quite funny) anecdotes. If you want to understand yourself better, and why you feel the way you do - with a guy whose humility invites you in to the warmth of his writing... then read this book. You will be glad you did.

Rachel Rose says

I loved the conversational style of this book and found it a really engaging read. I particularly liked the structure of it, as it was well thought through and a little bit different. It really worked. Although I am not someone who has experienced severe anxiety first-hand, I definitely related to many of the (often very amusing) anecdotes and found myself taking away a number of important personal learning points. It's really funny too (beware if you're reading it in public, like I was - you may chortle out loud). I'd definitely recommend to all human beings, regardless of perceived anxiety levels!

Ross Clark says

A really interesting book for those struggling with anxiety

The Scribblebug says

The more years that pass, the more I almost believe in serendipity. Certain things occur at certain times – experiences occur, ideas are discovered, people are met – all through seemingly fortunate happenstance.

Neil Hughes' debut, *Walking on Custard*, is one of the reasons I believe this – that fate brings you exactly what you need when you're ready for it. That meaning is made by us.

It all started in March. Following one of the most anxious periods of my twenty-something life, I somehow discovered Neil's Ted X talk through twitter on the day it went public despite not following him. Insightful, hilarious, poignant: the talk remains one of my favourites.

Reading *Walking On Custard*, was a no-brainer after the talk (and even more so after speaking to Neil in person).

Part-memoir, part-self-help, and part-something-else-entirely, *Walking On Custard* is a journey complete with stick men and anecdotes, science and beautifully articulated advice.

And it had me from 'hello.'

Literally.

That's how the book starts.

With an awkward wave and a greeting and a nod to some themes and a subtle little bit of word play about preparing yourself for the ominous bit by giving you warnings about the ominous bit by overusing the word

ominous. It's amusing. Wry. And that humour continues throughout despite dealing with subjects like depression, suicidal thoughts, imposter syndrome, and anxiety.

In my opinion, this is precisely why the book is so wonderful. Because there is whimsy in some of the stories, a hint of the absurd in some of the examples, a joke smuggled in amongst the self-doubt and negative inner voices – the relative pragmatism of the narrative voice stands out. It makes the text feel exquisitely self-aware and compassionate.

Sure there are parts you may find yourself disagreeing with (are all comparisons negative? Can we admire another person's achievements or aspire to do better ourselves if we don't compare our present self to a potential future self?) but there's no doubt that Neil's arguments are sound and that the mental habits picked out are all too relatable.

For anyone who has ever struggled with their mental health – or who knows some who has – *Walking On Custard* is an absolute must-read. It's reassuring, heart-warming. It's as challenging and as helpful as you personally want to make it.

For more on the ineffable Neil Hughes & the writing of *Walking On Custard*, he was also kind enough to do a little Q&A with me last year: <https://thescribblebug.com/2016/10/18...>
