“I’m as happy as I could possibly be.” It’s not often that one says this and even when someone does, the sense of complete happiness and fulfilment is often short-lived. Most of us, most of the time, have the sense that things could be better. So then why don’t we make major changes?

Harold Macmillan, a former prime minister of Great Britain, was once asked by a newspaper reporter why he hadn’t done all the things that he had promised he would do if he won the election. Macmillan thought for a moment and replied, “Events, dear boy, events.” He meant that things kept happening which he had to attend to, and so he could never find the time to do the things that he really wanted to do. Many of us feel the same way; there always seems to be something that we have to do, some obligation that we have to deal with, before we can concentrate on the really important matter of improving the quality of our lives.

In an effort to gain control of our lives, many of us make declarations of good intentions – promises to ourselves that we are going to do better, to be better in the future: “I’m going to make major changes.” And there are many self-help books that claim to show the way: books that tell you to tidy your room, to take up yoga or meditation (or both), to look for a new hobby or seek out new experiences, books that suggest you be more assertive or less assertive, that you start talking to strangers on the bus, etc.

But I can’t help thinking that if one of these books was genuinely effective, we wouldn’t need all the others – we could simply follow the instructions. Unfortunately, despite what the books suggest, it’s not easy to radically improve your own life. It takes time to develop new habits and in the meantime there’s the ever present danger of falling back into your old ways. As the famous American author Mark Twain said, “Giving up smoking is easy … I’ve done it hundreds of times.” The biggest obstacle of all, it seems, is … ourselves. The French novelist Marcel Proust once said that it’s not about travelling to new places, but about looking with new eyes. And of course, we can’t change our eyes – or the brain behind our eyes. The truth is: you can never stop being you. Perhaps the wisest sentence I ever heard is, “Wherever you go, there you are.”

So, instead of trying to change ourselves, we should try to know ourselves. When you know yourself well, you realise that there are situations that are advantageous for you, places that are favourable for you, and those that aren’t. Just as different species of flowers need different conditions, so there are circumstances and conditions that will be especially good for you. Rather than trying to change yourself, change your circumstances; put yourself in situations where the conditions suit you – discover what you are good at and when and where you prosper and flourish.

fulfilment: satisfacció / satisfacción
former: antic, ex / antiguo, ex
to seek out: buscar
assertive: segur de si mateix / seguro de sí mismo
old ways: antics hàbits / viejos hábitos
to suit: convenir a
PART 1: Reading comprehension

Choose the best answer according to the text. Only ONE answer is correct.
[3 points: 0.375 points for each correct answer. Wrong answers will be penalized by deducting 0.125 points. There is no penalty for unanswered questions.]

1. According to the text, Harold Macmillan didn’t keep all of his promises because he
   a) didn’t win the election.
   b) didn’t really want to.
   c) didn’t have the time to do so.
   d) changed his views as a result of events.

2. Like Harold Macmillan, many of us
   a) read self-help books.
   b) want to change something about ourselves.
   c) have trouble concentrating.
   d) are prevented from doing things because of events.

3. The writer’s tone at the end of the third paragraph becomes
   a) serious.
   b) sarcastic.
   c) sad.
   d) angry.

4. According to the writer, it is common for people to
   a) want to be more assertive.
   b) read lots of self-help books.
   c) understand themselves.
   d) feel they need to make major changes.

5. The writer’s purpose is to
   a) warn people about the dangers of self-help books.
   b) promote an effective self-help book.
   c) explain why self-help books don’t work.
   d) encourage people to make major life changes.

6. The writer mentions Mark Twain as an example of someone who
   a) found it hard to change old habits.
   b) gave up smoking.
   c) developed new habits.
   d) was an amazing writer.

7. The writer encourages
   a) self-awareness.
   b) self-help.
   c) self-discipline.
   d) self-control.

8. The best title for the text is
   b) In Search of Your Ideal Circumstances.
   c) Change Yourself and Change Your Life.
   d) Happiness Through Gardening.
PART 2: Writing

Choose ONE topic. Your answer should be 125-150 words in length. There is no specific penalty for exceeding 150 words in length. Extra points are not given for exceeding 150 words. [4 points]

1. What is your opinion about the following statement: “Money doesn’t buy happiness”?

2. Write a for and against essay explaining the advantages and disadvantages of self-help books. What is your personal opinion of them?
Answers
1. c
2. d
3. b
4. d
5. c
6. a
7. a
8. b