



THE SCIENCE OF SELF IMPROVEMENT

*how to use the latest research in psychology
to change your life*

steven handel

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Steven Handel

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Introduction

These are exciting times in the world of psychology. Over the last few decades, there has been an explosion of research showing how individuals can live happier and more fulfilling lives. And never before in our history has there been so many websites, blogs, and other resources available where people can learn advice, tools, and techniques designed to improve how they think, feel, decide, and take action.

In many ways, this has been a benefit for everyone. It has improved the availability of psychology to average people. And although it may not replace seeing a therapist or psychologist, it is a valuable option people have if they want to start improving the state of their lives – even if they don't necessarily have a mental illness.

In fact, over the last few decades, psychology has become much more than just the study of mental illness. It is also now focusing on aspects of human flourishing and excellence. Psychologists are now seeking answers to questions like:

- How can people lead happier lives?
- How can people change their beliefs and thought patterns?
- How can people become smarter decision-makers?
- How can people regulate their emotions better?
- How can people change habits more easily?

- How can people become more motivated?
- How can people become more productive at work?
- How can people manage stress more effectively?
- How can people improve their relationships?
- How can people improve their brains through diet and exercise?

These are important questions to almost anyone. And fortunately psychologists are now beginning to discover some very valuable insights and answers, many of which you will find throughout the scope of this guide.

The goal of *The Science of Self-Improvement* is to help people understand how their minds work and how they can use them more effectively in creating a better life. The guide will offer various advice, tools, and techniques that anyone can begin applying today to make these positive changes.

This guide draws on research by many different psychologists and schools of psychology. What I've found is that no single person has all the answers, but many have important pieces to the puzzle.

This is one of the biggest reasons I was motivated to write this guide – I wanted to create a comprehensive framework that takes into account all aspects of mental health. These aspects include:

How we can change our thoughts and think more efficiently

Our thoughts are one of the most important factors that contribute to our mental health and well-being. If your mind is filled with negative, destructive, or erroneous thinking, that's going to negatively affect how you perceive the world and how you respond to it.

For example, if you have a belief in your head such as, "I'm never any good at talking to girls." Then that thought pattern is going to influence the way you talk to girls. In all likelihood, you won't try your best, because you don't believe you're any good. Instead, you may hide your personality or not even bother approaching girls, because deep-down you believe it is pointless.

What then happens is your negative thought becomes a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. A self-fulfilling prophecy is when you believe something so strongly that you act in ways that reinforce that belief.

In return, you keep creating more experiences that justify "I'm never any good at talking to girls," and the pattern becomes harder and harder to reverse.

Thankfully, psychology tells us that we do have some control over how we think. And this guide is going to teach you how to identify

thought patterns that don't serve your interests and replace them with more constructive thinking.

Please keep in mind: This guide isn't going to teach you what to think, so much as *how* to approach thinking. I'm not going to tell you what to believe in or not believe in, but I am going to give you ways to test those beliefs and thought patterns to see if they are working for you or against you.

How we can accept and learn from our emotions then let them go

Another big contributor to our mental health is how we respond to our emotions. Emotions are an intricate part of being human. But we don't always have control over how we feel, and at times emotions can be very unpleasant and painful.

The key toward living a life of emotional intelligence, however, is accepting the full-range of our emotions, including "negative" feelings such as anger, frustration, sadness, and guilt.

Instead of running away from negative emotions, we should accept those feelings, learn from them, and then let them go once they have been expressed in a healthy and constructive way.

Although it may seem counter intuitive, having negative emotions every now and then is an important part of being a mentally healthy person.

Often these emotions are signs of ways we should change and improve our lives. Like pain from touching a hot stove, emotions are signals in our nervous system motivating us to take action.

This guide will provide you powerful techniques to help you become more attuned to your emotions (through techniques such as mindfulness meditation) and how you can better learn from them and apply them in a constructive way.

How we can build new habits

Another big part of improving our mental health is knowing how to build new habits. This includes aspects of motivation and productivity.

Often times people know the ways they want to change their behaviors, but they fail due to anxiety, fear, or lack of drive. Someone may want to get better at public-speaking, but they never do because they are afraid to try it out and start getting their feet wet.

Psychology research has found that there are systematic ways to get people to effectively change their habits. A big part of it is identifying the cues and rewards that motivate you to do a certain habit. And once you are more aware of your “habit loop,” you can try to consciously change it by changing how you respond to those cues and rewards.

There are also other recommended guidelines to help make habit change easier. These include focusing on only one major habit at a time, taking small steps, and having a support group to help hold you accountable. This guide will elaborate on many useful tips and techniques to help habit change become more natural for you.

How we can manage work, stress, and relaxation

Stress and relaxation are very important factors to both mental health and physical health. To many stress is a natural part of our everyday existence. However, when stress levels get too high, they can cause many negative effects on our body and minds.

Research in biology shows that high levels of stress are often associated with weakened immune systems, greater risk of heart disease and cancer, as well as shorter lifespans.

Research in psychology has found high levels of stress to be associated with depression, anxiety, and mood disorders.

Stress can exacerbate many problems in our bodies and minds. For this reason, managing stress is very important in maintaining our physical and mental health.

In this guide you will find many tools and techniques for managing stress.

Knowing when to be motivated is one part of mental health, but knowing when to relax is just as important. People who manage stress the best know when to take a break from their work and obligations. They also know when to have fun, enjoy life's little pleasures, and just unwind.

The importance of relationships

Psychology research makes it clear that our mental health is greatly dependent on our ability to build meaningful and supportive relationships.

Whether we are at work, at home, or at a party, individuals who know how to be social show greater happiness and success in life

than those who don't. Even people who are very introverted need a social life, even if it's not a very active one.

Throughout our evolution as a species, our survival has been dependent on our ability to connect with others. Individuals who were ostracized from their tribe often didn't make it very long.

Instead, we had to learn how to cooperate with other members of our tribe in order to work together and overcome obstacles in life. Today, this need to belong in a group is still very much hard-wired into our brains.

Research in social psychology shows us how we can connect with others and build more meaningful relationships. This guide will cover key principles to help you become more social and likeable to others.

How our physical health affects our mental health

One of the oldest myths in psychology is that our minds are separate from our bodies. However much research over the last decade has shown just how important our physical health is to our mental health.

Our brains and biology are directly related to how our minds work. A big part of this comes from what we inherit from our genes, which we don't have much control over.

However, diet and exercise also play an important role in maintaining a healthy body and healthy mind – and those are things that we do have the power to change.

In this section of the guide I will go over some research on exercise and diet tips that have been specifically shown to improve mental health and brain functioning. I will also make suggestions on health changes you may want to consider for yourself.

An integrated approach to psychology

There are many different factors that contribute to our psychology and mental health. And it's important to remember that all of the things mentioned above are very interrelated with one another.

For example, changing your thoughts can change your habits. If you learn to think of something in a new way, it's going to change the way you respond to it. If you approach a problem with confident thinking, this will lead you to act in a different way than if you thought you were helpless. That is going to change the results you get out of life.

But it's also true that changing our habits can change our thoughts. When you try out a new habit, such as eating healthier or being more social or smiling more, it's going to change the way you think about yourself too. Sometimes you need to make a habit-based change before you can change your attitude.

Our minds are a system of many different parts, and when you change one part it can have a rippling effect throughout the whole system.

This is why the best approach to psychology is an integrated one. This means acknowledging all the areas of our life that contribute to our mental health including: thoughts, emotions, habits, stress, genes, environment, diet, exercise, and relationships. All have an effect on our happiness.

Some of these factors we have more control over than others. We can't change our genetic code. We can't change our past. And we can't always change how other people think or feel about us. In spite of these limitations, people often forget that they DO have a significant amount of control over their lives.

Being able to exercise greater control over our lives is the primary lesson in *The Science of Self-Improvement*. And I sincerely hope that as you read the following chapters, and practice the tools and

techniques throughout this guide, you will gradually learn how to exercise more control over your life.

Beliefs and Your Map of Reality

Thinking is our mind's way of understanding the world around us. We take in information about our environment through our senses, then our brains process that information into thoughts and beliefs about how the world really works. These beliefs then tell us how to act, which will play a big role in the results we get out of life.

The process looks something like this:

Environment → Senses → Thoughts → Beliefs → Actions → Results

Psychology research has shown that it is possible to change our thoughts and beliefs if we are willing to dedicate the time and effort. Old thought patterns are often wired into our brains. However, we can rewire these connections by actively reflecting and modifying what we think and believe about ourselves and the world we live in.

Beliefs and your “map of reality”

Your thoughts and beliefs reflect your **map of reality**, a mental representation of the world in your brain, which helps you navigate your life by guiding your actions and choices.

Everyone has a map of reality whether they are aware of it or not. The human mind is a “belief factory.” We are constantly observing

our world, inferring things about it, and choosing what to do with this knowledge. We need to. Without beliefs, we'd never be able to make decisions or take action in our lives.

However, our beliefs and map of reality aren't always perfect. A lot of psychology research in recent years has demonstrated that our minds are incredibly prone to error and bias. Very often, we aren't capable of being 100% certain in our beliefs, so we have to make the best with what we have and hope it's a good enough model of the world despite its imperfections.

A Polish scientist and philosopher named Alfred Korzybski once said, "the map is not the territory." This is true for both physical maps and mental maps.

Think about it: if you wanted a completely accurate map of a geographic region such as Iceland, then it would have to be the actual size, dimensions, and shape of Iceland. It would have to share all of its features to be 100% accurate – hell, it would have to be a clone of Iceland itself!

In the same way, your map of reality is never the complete picture. At best, the thoughts and beliefs you have about the world are helpful guidelines or representations. The more accurate your map of reality, the better you can adapt to your surroundings.

What influences our beliefs?

We often like to think that we come up with our beliefs solely on our own, and without any kind of outside influence, but the truth is that there are a wide array of different factors that shape our belief system. Some of the big ones I like to pay attention to include:

- **Authority figures.** Especially from an early age: parents, teachers, coaches, priests, etc.
- **Culture.** Movies, music, TV, books, religion, society, tradition, politics, etc.
- **Role models.** The personal lives of musicians, authors, comedians, actors/actresses, philosophers, scientists, artists, celebrities, and even fictional characters.
- **Past experiences.** Just one really memorable or traumatic event can condition us to have certain beliefs that persist for a lifetime.
- **Knowledge.** Learning and discovering new things about reality can cause us to reshape our beliefs in the face of new evidence
- **Reflection and contemplation.** Actively introspecting to better understand our beliefs, thought patterns, and how they affect us.
- **Conversations and debates.** Many times we find ourselves having conversations with other people who may have

different beliefs than we do. This can cause us to change beliefs if we are persuaded by another person's opinion or argument.

All of these influences can affect our beliefs in a positive or negative way. The key is to be more aware of where our beliefs come from and what factors are shaping our map of the world. If we discover that we learned something unhelpful as a child, or from an old TV program, or whatever, then it may be necessary to filter out some of these negative influences and replace them with something that better suits our values and goals.

Beliefs should be flexible and subject to change

Beliefs should be subject to change for two reasons.

One, as I mentioned before, our minds are imperfect and incredibly prone to error. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that we will sometimes come across new evidence that will challenge our old beliefs and assumptions. When that time comes, it's important to acknowledge that we may be wrong about something, and only then can we update and correct our map of world.

This can be difficult, because it requires us to put aside personal biases and be honest with ourselves when we discover new information or evidence that challenges our existing beliefs.

Two, every individual has a different window into reality. That's why our society has such a diverse range of belief systems. Your mind prefers beliefs that serve a function within the *context* of your life, not absolute truths that are often disconnected from practical reality. Therefore, a belief may work perfectly well for one person, but not so well for another person. This is especially true for beliefs about yourself, which are more subjective than beliefs about objective reality (facts, historical events – things that don't change regardless if people believe in them or not).

If you only determine your beliefs from outside influences – like your parents, schools, or government – then it is very likely that your “map of the world” won't suit your subjective interests, values, and goals. Those beliefs ultimately serve the people who found them to be useful in the first place, but they may not serve you in the same way. In the end, you have to think for yourself and question these old thought patterns – this could mean that you will abandon old beliefs that you may have been taught by others.

We should be careful not to be too stubborn with our beliefs.

One analogy I like to use for changing beliefs is a tree in the wind. If a tree's branches are hard and rigid, they are more likely to snap when it gets windy. However, if a tree's branches are soft and flexible, they are more likely to bend in the wind and not break. They adapt to change more effectively.

The same is true for our beliefs. When we are firm and stubborn, we are more likely to fight against resistance and have our beliefs backfire on us. But if we are willing to be more flexible and change our beliefs when met with resistance, then we are more likely to adapt and evolve accordingly.

Challenging beliefs

It's important to challenge beliefs to see if they fit with our map of the world or if they are better left discarded. When you identify a belief you have, you can analyze it by asking yourself questions like:

- What caused me to believe this in the first place? Where did I learn this?
- How does this belief guide my actions and choices in life?
- Can I think of a time where this belief would not hold true?
- Are there alternative beliefs that may be just as valid, if not more?

- In what ways might this belief be considered irrational or absurd?
- Does this belief conflict with any other beliefs I hold?

Questions like these can play an important role when reflecting on your thoughts and beliefs. If you are willing to keep an open mind about your beliefs, you will be much better off than if you take everything you believe for granted.

The importance of daily reflection

We learn a lot throughout the course of a day, but if we don't take the time to reflect on what we learn, then a lot of that information gets misused or forgotten.

Recent studies using fMRIs have shown that rats who were given a chance to reflect showed better signs of learning than rats who were not given a chance to reflect. Scientists now believe that "replaying a thought, memory, or mental event" in our mind is an important mechanism in effective cognition, learning, and memory retention.

Positive psychologist Tal Ben-Sahar draws a relevant distinction between information and transformation. "Information" is the raw sensory data that our brains collect throughout the day. "Transformation" is the framework we build around that data making

up our map of reality. During transformation we decide what parts of our experience were most important and worth paying attention to.

Reflection is something that can be practiced a short amount of time each day. Just 15-20 minutes of reflection can help you gain valuable insight into your day and how you can improve it tomorrow. This practice is essential to thinking more effectively.

Minimizing bias

As we already know, our minds can often look at the world in a biased way.

A bias is any inclination toward a particular belief or perspective, often one that is ill-supported by reason or evidence. When we call another person “biased” we usually mean that they are incapable of looking objectively at the facts. They are too stuck in their own world view, with their own prejudices, and usually unwilling have an open mind about certain issues.

Psychologists claim that many of our biases are evolved mental processes which at one point may have been adaptive to our environment. Because the mind is not a perfectly calculating machine, it uses many different heuristics (or “rules of thumb”) that help guide our decisions.

Although this process isn't perfect, it often gets the job done in terms of survival and reproduction. Many of these biases may still serve a function in today's world, but others can greatly inhibit us from making rational and intelligent decisions.

Here is a list of some of the key biases we often face. By being more aware of them, you can avoid some of your faulty thinking and make smarter decisions in the future.

Bias Blind Spot

The bias blind spot is our tendency to think we are less biased than others. That's right, as you read this article, you may think that all of these biases are interesting phenomena, but they don't describe *you*, right? You're special. You're smart. You're better. BUT – if you actually believe this, you may have already discovered your first personal bias. Many social psychologists find that people on average *think* they are above average, when of course this isn't always true. This effect is also sometimes called "illusory superiority."

Solution: Try to be more modest in estimating your own intelligence and admit that you are subject to biases like everyone else.

Confirmation Bias

Another bias many of us face is we tend to favor information that supports our preconceptions. When we come across information that supports our theories and hypotheses, we are much more likely to pay attention to it and remember it. But when we find something that challenges our assumptions, we often search for ways to invalidate it or ignore it. This tendency can keep us stuck on old beliefs even when we have been presented evidence that disproves them.

Solution: Try your best to set equal standards for all evidence regardless of whether or not it supports or challenges your current view. Always be open to changing your mind.

Framing Effect

The Framing Effect describes how presenting the same information from a different perspective can dramatically alter the decisions we make. For example, research by psychologists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman shows us that when participants are presented a hypothetical scenario where they need to save the population from a deadly disease, participants are more likely to avoid risk when a

positive frame is presented but seek risk if a negative frame is presented.

Picture yourself in the following scenario. You need to come up with a disease preventive strategy in order to save as many lives as possible. You are presented two options:

A) Save 200 people's lives.

B) There is a 33% chance of saving all 600 people and a 66% possibility of saving no one.

In this case, Kahneman & Tversky found that 72% of participants chose option A.

Now consider a different two options:

C) 400 people die.

D) There is a 33% chance that no people die and a 66% chance that all 600 people will die.

Between these two options only 22% of participants chose option C (the equivalent of option A) over option D (the equivalent of option B). So even though the two options are computationally equivalent, the way the situation was framed (gains vs. losses) changes which option we choose.

Solution: Try to look at a situation from as many perspectives as you can. Sometimes one perspective can limit the way we look at a problem.

Planning Effect

The Planning Effect is a tendency to underestimate how much time we need to complete a task. In a study done in 1994, researchers found that students expected to complete their senior theses in 27.4 days (if everything went as well as it possibly could) and 48.6 day (if everything went as poorly as it possibly could). It turns out they completely missed the mark: the average time students took to complete their senior theses was 55.5 days and only 30% of students completed in the amount of time they expected. Since then Lovallo and Kahneman expanded the Planning Effect to also include underestimating the costs and risks of a project while overestimating the benefits.

Solution: Be aware of your limitations when planning and setting deadlines. We have a tendency to overestimate our ability to plan correctly for the future. It might be better to focus on smaller and more foreseeable goals, rather than abstract and distant ones.

Halo Effect

The Halo Effect is the reason so many advertisers put celebrities in their commercials. We falsely believe that if a person is good at one particular trait then that means they are also trustworthy in something else that is completely unrelated. Why is Dr. Dre telling me to drink Dr. Pepper? Sure, he is a great rap producer, but does that have anything to do with knowing good soda? Why do people listen at all to what Jenny McCarthy says about the causation between vaccines and autism, even though there is no medical evidence to support her claims, and she is obviously not a medical professional? People are willing to believe others simply based on the fact that they like them from an overall viewpoint:

“Edward L. Thorndike was the first to support the halo effect with empirical research. In a psychology study published in 1920, Thorndike asked commanding officers to rate their soldiers; he found high cross-correlation between all positive and all negative traits. People seem not to think of other individuals in mixed terms; instead we seem to see each person as roughly good or roughly bad across all categories of measurement.”

Solution: Everyone has good traits and bad traits, so try to understand that people are often more complex than we think they are.

Availability Heuristic

The Availability Heuristic is a bias in which we predict the frequency of an event based on how easily an example can be brought to mind. For example, many people think planes are more dangerous than cars, perhaps because catastrophic events like 9/11 are so salient in our minds. However, the truth is much more people die in car crashes per year than plane crashes.

Solution: Just because you can think of an example for something doesn't necessarily mean that it's usually the case. Be careful of "stand out" examples which may make you believe something to be more common than it actually is.

Bandwagon Effect

The Bandwagon Effect is a tendency to believe something because many other people believe it to be true. This is a very popular phenomena in politics, fashion, economics, and other social trends. For example, a person sees a lot of his or her peers investing in the housing market because they believe housing prices will continue to go up. As a result, that person becomes more motivated to "jump on the bandwagon" and invest some of his or her money in the housing market as well. The more we see other people do it, the

more we are willing to do it ourselves. The Bandwagon Effect is a type of conformity.

Solution: Try your best not to form your beliefs solely on the beliefs of others. Practice thinking for yourself, not just following the herd.

Negativity Bias

The Negativity Bias is a tendency to only focus on negative events and ignore the positive ones. Some psychologists, such as Roy Baumeister, believe negative events are more “attention getting” because our brains are designed to react to painful memories and learn from them. However, when we pay too much attention to negative events, while ignoring the positive, we are likely to experience higher levels of stress, anxiety, depression, as well as low-self-esteem.

Solution: Don’t just focus on the negative events in your life. Both positive and negative feedback are important for shaping our thoughts and behavior. Positive feedback encourages us to continue doing what we are doing. Negative feedback acts as a warning signal that tells us to moderate or stop what we are doing and reevaluate the course of our actions. Psychologists say we need both. Barbara Fredrickson has conducted key research that suggests

we need a *positivity ratio* of about 3:1 (we should focus on positive events 3 times as much as we should focus on negative events).

Optimism Bias

According to research in psychology, excessive optimism can cause us to ignore information that goes against our rose-tinted perspective. This leads some optimistic people to only focus on the benefits of their actions, but at the same time ignore risks and costs.

The Optimism Bias is a type of wishful thinking. We have such a strong belief that things will always work out perfectly, that we ignore the possibility that things may be worse than they really are.

In one study, experimenters had participants estimate the risk of a negative event happening to them in the future, such as car theft or getting cancer. After the participant predicted a probability, they were told the actual statistical likelihood it would happen to them.

After a short break, participants were then asked again what the probability of a certain negative event was. What researchers found was that optimistic people only changed their estimates when the information they were given was better than expected, but tended to ignore information that went against their optimism:

“For example if they had predicted that their likelihood of suffering from cancer was 40%, but the average likelihood was 30%, they might adjust their estimate to 32%. If the information was worse than expected – for example, if they had estimated 10% – then they tended to adjust their estimate much less, as if ignoring the data.”

These findings were consistent with brain research that was also conducted. Researchers found that when people were presented information better than expected, there was high activity in the frontal lobes (suggesting that the participant was re-calculating their estimate). But when the information was worse than expected, there was much less activity in the frontal lobes, almost as if participants were disregarding the new information.

Solution: Optimism is important, but it should be balanced and realistic. Ignoring reality might bring us some temporary relief, but it can also hurt us badly in the long-run. We need to learn how to acknowledge the obstacles, risks, and costs that come with life, while still being confident and hopeful about our future.

Stereotyping

Stereotyping is a tendency to expect a member of a group to have certain characteristics without having any actual information on that individual. People are often stereotyped due to their sex, race,

nationality, religion, and a variety of other traits, but these stereotypes are often inaccurate.

Solution: Look at people as individuals, just because someone is associated with a certain group of people doesn't mean they are all the same.

Status Quo Bias

The Status Quo Bias is a tendency to prefer what is familiar versus what is new. It's common as we get older and become locked into certain routines and behaviors. The problem with this bias is that it limits us from trying new things and finding better ways of going about our life. Instead of growing as a person, we become stagnant. We get stuck in the grind of our daily routine, never deviating from our old habits.

Solution: Be willing to try new things when you have the opportunity. This will lead you to discover more about yourself and your interests. It will also make you a more well-rounded and balanced person.

Black and White Thinking

Black and white thinking is a tendency to look at the world in terms of “all or nothing.” We either find things to be solely “good” or “bad,” “beautiful” or “ugly,” “easy” or “hard,” “right” or “wrong,” “happy” or “sad.” Black and white thinking often creates a false choice between “A” and “B,” when “C” is the more accurate and helpful view. Unfortunately, if we only think in black and white terms, then we are unlikely to even consider “C” a possibility in the first place.

Solution: Remember that the world is often more complicated than we think. Often reality isn’t as black and white as we would like it to be, but instead many different shades of grey. Practice taking the “middle road” more often.

More on biases

I don’t want you to stress too much about all these biases, I just want you to be more aware of the types of tricks our minds can sometimes play on us, and how these tendencies can inhibit us from thinking effectively. If you catch yourself committing one of these errors, try your best to modify your belief so that it’s more realistic and helpful.

Reframing thoughts and beliefs

Reframing is our ability to look at a situation from another perspective. Often the goal is to reframe a situation so that we can view it in a more positive light, such as viewing failures as learning experiences. By taking upon new perspectives, we can form beliefs that are more empowering and constructive to our lives.

When we reframe a situation, it doesn't mean that we ignore the facts, only that we look at them from a different angle. By doing this, we can take something away from the experience, and thereby foster an attitude that is more conducive to self-improvement and mental health.

This is an important tool in Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT). Psychologists often work with their patients to help them reframe their beliefs so that they can discover new outlooks on life. Here are some common types of reframes:

Failure as a learning experience

Almost any time you try something new and fail at it, you can see that experience as a starting point to learn from and improve upon.

It doesn't matter what the failed attempt is, whether it's approaching a girl in a café, having a job interview, starting a business, getting a poor grade on an exam, or striking out in baseball.

There is almost always another chance to meet another great girl, get another job, start another business, do well on the next test, or get a hit your next time at bat. One failure cannot define you.

So instead of thinking, "I struck out, so I must suck at playing baseball" you can reframe it and say something like, "I struck out, but I'll learn from that experience and hopefully do better next time."

Anyone who has ever been successful has used this reframe.

Thomas Edison once said, "I didn't fail a thousand times, I only found a thousand ways that don't work." Another famous Michael Jordan quote is, "I've missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. 26 times, I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed."

Reframing failures as learning experiences is one of the most powerful tools you can use throughout your self-improvement.

Context reframe

Another valuable reframe is to take a situation and look at it within a different context. Beliefs can often be very relative. What we see as bad in one situation can look dramatically different in another situation.

One common example is this:

Person A: "I procrastinate all the time; I just can't get things done."

Person B: "That's a great skill to have; especially when you apply it to overeating – just put off having that second helping. Lucky you."

First Person A expresses a belief that suggests procrastination is a universally bad thing. But Person B takes that belief into a new context and shows how in some situations "procrastination" might be a useful thing, especially when applied to overeating.

The main lesson here is that something that may be seen as a weakness in one situation may actually be a strength in another situation. Try not to think of your characteristics in universally "good" or "bad" terms. Pay attention to context.

The bigger picture

The “bigger picture” reframe is a very helpful tool for changing the way we look at something that is outside of our control. Sometimes the goal of a reframe isn’t necessarily to get us to act differently, but to get us to think and feel differently about something.

Say you have a really bad morning on your way to work. You forgot to set your alarm, the kids took a long time to get ready for school, you got caught in traffic on your way to work, and you spilled your coffee all over your clothes as soon as you walked in the office.

In the heat of the moment, you probably feel terrible – like it’s the end of the world. But if you “zoom out” and see the bigger picture of your life, the events that defined your terrible morning don’t seem as important. And when you look back on that event after a week, month, year, or even a decade, the event often loses a lot of its affect. In ten years, chances are you may not even remember it anymore.

Have you ever looked back on an experience you once thought was really awful (maybe an embarrassing experience at school or at a party), but then you look back and realize it wasn’t as bad as you first thought? Maybe now you can even look back and laugh at yourself.

The next time you find yourself in the midst of a negative experience, try stepping back and asking yourself, “Will I really care about this in 10, 20, or 30 years?” Often you’ll find the answer is “no.” This is because most of the things that upset us on a daily basis actually pale in comparison to the bigger picture of our lives.

Solution-focused vs. problem-focused

Many people who experience excessive negativity in their lives often have a very “problem-focused” mindset.

This means they are actively searching to find things in their life that make them unhappy – whether it is something wrong with tonight’s dinner, or their favorite sports team losing a game, or their inability.

Some people seem to always find something new to be upset about. And instead of trying to find solutions, they ruminate on everything that has gone wrong, then use this as evidence to justify their misery and unhappiness.

If you go throughout life searching for problems, you’re going to find them. That doesn’t mean you should ignore real problems in your life, but try to approach them from a solution-focused perspective.

Instead of asking, “What’s wrong with this?” ask yourself, “How can I make this better?” It may not sound like a big difference, but it can significantly change the way you approach obstacles in life.

Things could be worse

Even the most positive thinkers must acknowledge that there will always be some aspects of our lives that don’t fully meet our desires and expectations.

However, in spite of these occasional shortcomings, there are still positive perspectives to take that can increase our gratitude for what we *do* have in life.

One of these perspectives is the “things could be worse” reframe. This perspective is especially useful for negative situations in our life which we have no control over.

No matter how bad things are for you, there is almost always an alternative situation that could be much worse.

By imagining how things can be worse in our lives, we can actually cultivate a sense of gratitude and appreciation for the things we have in life, instead of only focusing on what we don’t have.

Maybe something really terrible happened in your life – like your house burned down and you lost all your possessions. That is a truly awful situation, but you can reframe it by thinking things like, “At least I didn’t lose my friends and family.”

Maybe you are going through some financial troubles, but what about all those people all over the world who are in even worse poverty?

We can almost always take a bad situation and imagine how it could be much worse. In fact, no matter how bad things may get, as long as you are still alive and conscious, there is always that to be grateful for.

The “things could be worse” reframe is especially useful for changing our perspective on things which we have very little control over, but it can be applied to almost any situation.

What would _____ do?

There are many influential and inspirational figures to find throughout our lives, and by temporarily adopting their perspective we can sometimes learn new insights into their thoughts and behaviors that we can later apply to our own lives.

One of the most popular examples of this is when Christians use the phrase, "What would Jesus do?" in order to look at their life from a more Christian perspective.

In the same way, we can use this technique in a variety of other areas in our life:

When we are practicing basketball, we can ask ourselves, "What would Michael Jordan do?"

When we are on a date, we can ask ourselves, "What would George Clooney do?"

And when we are trying to improve a business, we can ask ourselves, "What would Steve Jobs do?"

The point is we can try to see the world from another person's perspective and use that as a resource to borrow and learn from. We can gain a wider range of insight into possible ways to improve different areas of our lives, much more than we could if we only limited ourselves to our own perspective.

Please keep in mind that I'm not suggesting we completely mimic someone's thoughts and actions. I'm only suggesting that we temporarily "place ourselves in someone else's shoes" so that we can gain a new perspective of a situation.

Final word on beliefs

In summary, the thoughts and beliefs we have about ourselves and our world play a huge role in our emotions, behaviors, and the results we get out of life. Our self-improvement is therefore dependent on our ability to change beliefs, by getting rid of old ones and replacing them with new and better ones.

I hope throughout this chapter you've learned a lot about how we think, how we form beliefs, and how we can modify them. I hope you've also realized the importance of having beliefs that accurately reflect the world around us (our "map of reality"), and why we should try our best to minimize biases. And lastly, I hope you've learned the importance of reframing techniques in improving how we think about ourselves and our life.

By changing our thoughts, we can begin to rewire our brains to see the world in new and different ways. This process takes time, effort, and dedication, but it's achievable with practice.

Emotional Intelligence

Ever since Charles Darwin, scientists have theorized that emotions play an important role in our survival and evolution. For example, our brains are hard-wired to respond to dangerous or threatening situations by feeling fear. It is the experience of fear that drives us to run away or fight to protect ourselves, territory, young, or food from predators. If we never experienced fear, then we wouldn't take action in the face of these threats, and we therefore wouldn't survive very long.

All emotions play a role in modifying our thoughts, behaviors, and actions. So even experiencing "negative" emotions from time to time, like anger or sadness, can be part of a normal and healthy functioning mind. In the same way, as pain motivates us to take our hand off of a hot stove, negative emotions are signals in our nervous system telling us how to adapt to our environment.

Our emotions have a variety of functions in improving the way we respond to our environment. These functions are to:

- Direct attention toward stimuli in our environment that may be important.
- Enhance learning and memory of events which are emotionally significant.
- Guide behaviors in response to how we feel.

- Improve social interaction by communicating our emotions and understanding the emotions of others.
- Drive moral development by providing us with compassion toward the well-being of ourselves and others.

Emotions help us adapt, but they can also become dysfunctional when not properly managed. Sadness at an extreme can become depression. Anger at an extreme can cause unprovoked aggression. Pleasure at an extreme can cause addiction. And fear at an extreme can cause anxieties and phobias. These emotions can be important, but we have to beware not to take them to unhealthy extremes.

This is why emotional regulation and emotional intelligence are so important for managing our feelings and mental states.

How many emotions do we have?

Paul Ekman, a leading researcher on the psychology of emotions, claims that we have 6 primary emotions: anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and surprise.

Ekman devised this list after doing research on many different cultures. In one study, he described a situation and then asked participants to choose a facial expression that best fit the scenario. In another study, he showed photographs of different facial expressions

and asked individuals to identify the emotion being conveyed. He found that these primary emotions were detected universally, regardless of the culture the individual grew up in. This means that even people who live halfway around the world from each other probably experience the same types of emotions.

In Ekman's research, he placed a strong emphasis on facial expressions being used to distinguish emotions. As a social species, psychologists know that we are highly sensitive to other people's faces and what emotions are being communicated. Ekman found we can even pick up on "microexpressions" which only last from 1/25 to 1/15 of a second. Someone may unconsciously make a very quick facial expression, and we can intuitively pick up on how they are feeling – that's how sensitive we can be to other people's facial expressions. It's also known that up to 42 muscles in our face can be used to express a variety of different emotions.

However, psychologists have struggled to classify all of our emotions because they come in many different degrees, flavors, and intensities. Emotions aren't just facial expressions, but highly complex physical and mental processes (someone may have an emotion, but show few outward signs of it). As a result, it can be hard to tell where one emotion begins and another ends; and sometimes our experiences can even be a combination of several different emotions at once.

Today psychologists try to measure emotions using a variety of different methods:

1. First person subjective reports.
2. Observing body language and facial expressions.
3. Physiological measures like skin conductance, muscle contractions, heart rate, and breathing rate.
4. Brain imaging techniques to look at neural activity. (for example, fMRIs measure blood-oxygen levels in certain regions of the brain).

For self-improvement purposes, it's not really important how many emotions we have or how we classify them. You probably already have a rough idea in your head of the emotional range of your experiences. And I'm sure you can reflect on many different events throughout your life that have led to different feelings and emotions (some pleasant and some painful).

What's important to note is that our mind's have evolved to experience many emotions in order to better adapt to our environment. And a species with a richer emotional world, like humans, can often experience and understand the world in deeper and more complex ways than a species with a dull emotional world, like a fly.

What influences our emotions?

One important aspect to managing our emotions is understanding what influences them. Our experiences can be affected by many different variables. These include:

Thoughts and beliefs. Consider some of the lessons discussed in the previous chapter. How might different patterns of thinking influence the way you feel about yourself or the world you live in?

Actions and habits. Some habits leave us feeling better about ourselves than others. What is a habit that may lead to negative emotions? Maybe a bad or destructive habit, like biting your nails or smoking cigarettes, can later lead to feelings of guilty or shame. What is a habit that leads to positive emotions? Maybe something more constructive like learning a new skill, which can later give you a boost in confidence and self-worth.

Environments and situations. The places we choose to surround ourselves in can also affect our emotional well-being. Maybe you feel less anxious at a library or cafe than you do when at a bar or party. Or maybe you prefer the excitement of a music concert rather than staying home and watching a movie. We all have different preferences, but some people thrive in different environments than others. Understanding what situations suit you best plays a key role in better managing your emotions.

Genes and biology. Everyone’s genes and biology are slightly different, and this can also create differences in how we experience emotions. Some people are born with high sensitivity to emotions, while others are born with low sensitivity. Some people may have certain chemical imbalances that make them more susceptible to anxiety or depression or mood swings. In such cases, medication may be an important part of treating these emotional disorders. Just as some people are born with different physical conditions that need to be treated medically, we have to also acknowledge that some people are born with different mental conditions that may need to be treated medically.

Relationships and social interactions. The way we build relationships with others can also have a tremendous effect on our emotions. People who stay in unhealthy relationships, with lots of arguing and blaming, are likely to experience more negative emotions than people who build healthy relationships, focused on understanding, respect, and compassion. As a social species, we are very attuned to the emotional states of others. Sometimes we are so connected with others that we experience their emotions as if they are our own. Psychologists call this phenomenon “emotional contagion” – the idea that emotions can be contagious, like a virus that spreads. Have you ever found yourself laughing simply because everyone else in the room was laughing? That’s emotional contagion. Have you ever found yourself feeling miserable because

everyone else in the room was gloomy? That's another example of emotional contagion. If you surround yourself with happy and optimistic people, you are much more likely to become happy and optimistic yourself.

Health. Taking care of your physical health is going to mean a healthier brain. It's been shown in various studies that individuals who exercise and eat a proper diet show improved mood and emotions than individuals who don't pay much attention to their health. For example, exercise often releases many "feel good" hormones like endorphins and dopamine. You'll learn a lot more about how our physical health and mental health are connected later on in this guide.

Traumatic experiences. If someone suffers from a traumatic experience, it can sometimes make long-term changes in how we experience our emotions. Individuals who have Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder can experience severe anxiety, fear, and hostility, and research shows traumatic experiences can lead to structural changes in the brain.

Movies, TV, music and art. Art and entertainment can also greatly affect our emotions. We may experience joy, sadness, fear, surprise, anger and a variety of other emotions depending on the movies we watch, the music we listen to, and other forms of art and

entertainment. For example, you may be motivated to watch a funny movie to help lift yourself from a bad mood.

It's important to acknowledge that all of these aspects of our lives can have an influence on the emotions we experience. Paying attention to how our emotions are affected is one of the first steps toward emotional intelligence.

Neuroscience of emotions and self-regulation

For a long time neuroscientists have found emotional processing to be dependent on our amygdala and the limbic system in our brains. For example, Paul D. MacLean claimed that the limbic system was an older part of our evolutionary brain and is responsible for a lot of the circuitry in various animal's "fight or flight" response.

If a zebra sees a lion closing in for the kill, the amygdala kicks in and the animal will experience a high state of arousal and fear, which then motivates the zebra to run away and try to escape. This was one of the primary roles of emotions during the early stages of our evolution, and a lot of it resides in the amygdala.

However, in contrast to our amygdala and other parts of our limbic system (which are sometimes considered more "primitive"), there are

the frontal lobes which are unique to the brains of mammals. This part of our brain is a newer addition in our evolutionary history and it's responsible for thinking, reason, decision-making, and other forms of executive functioning.

Although these two brain regions were once seen as separate entities, now neuroscientists know they are highly interconnected with one another. Our thinking and emotions are in-fact a two-way street.

Richard Davidson is a psychologist and neuroscientist who specializes in the study of emotions at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Through brain imaging techniques, he found that there is a connection between our amygdala and a part of the frontal lobes called the pre-frontal cortex (PFC).

He discovered that the more connections there are between our amygdala and PFC, the better we are at managing our emotional states.

In one study, he used electrodes to measure brain activity and then showed participants videos and pictures that elicited feelings such as fear, sadness, or joy. His researchers then measured how long it took for the participant to recover or "bounce back" from these emotionally charged states. Davidson concluded that activity in the PFC was much higher in individuals who were more resilient to

negative emotions. He infers that the PFC sends inhibitory messages to the amygdala telling it to “quiet down.”

Individuals who have fewer connections between their amygdala and PFC, are often poor at regulating their emotions. They aren’t as consciously aware of their emotional states, and they can become easily impulsive, quick-tempered, and irritable.

This is similar to what Daniel Goleman called *amygdala hijack*. This is what happens when our emotions are so strong that they overpower the “thinking parts” of our brain. At this point, we have little conscious control over how we feel and act. When someone gets caught up in the “heat of the moment” and starts being very irrational and aggressive, they are most likely experiencing some kind of “amygdala hijack.” The PFC isn’t able to regulate the amygdala’s activity, so the amygdala begins to run the whole show.

How to change the way you process emotions

One of the most promising findings in recent neuroscience is that we have the ability to rewire our brains so that we experience our emotions differently. We can’t always control exactly how we feel,

but we can control the way we process our emotions and respond to them.

This process of rewiring our brains and making long-term structural changes is known as “neuroplasticity.” New research has confirmed that our brains can change depending on our environment, habits, and life experiences.

Two forms of mental training that have shown to be particularly effective are mindfulness meditation and Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy. But although these techniques have proven to be useful for many people, it’s important to keep in mind that neuroplasticity takes a lot of time, effort, and dedication.

In a recent interview with *Salon*, neuroscientist Davidson gives a great explanation for why rewiring our brains is a real possibility, but it takes work:

“I think that we’ve learned a lot about what can induce these plastic changes in the brain. It’s quite similar to engaging in physical exercise or learning to play a musical instrument or chess. All of these require regular practice in order to become more fluent in them, and it’s the same for happiness. Well-being can be thought of as a skill; you learn it better when you practice it over time. [My findings] come from different strands of research, but they all point to the idea that we can take responsibility for our own brain. Often,

we leave our emotions to happenstance and we don't intentionally cultivate them. But we shouldn't think of emotional intelligence as any different than cognitive skills, or activities with a tradition of intentional training. Eastern contemplative tradition, and particularly meditation, is exactly this technology of mental exercise. It fosters better habits of mind, and our neuroscientific research has shown this."

Psychologists have come up with various strategies to help individuals better regulate their emotions by changing how the brain responds to emotional stimuli. These strategies include:

Find out what triggers your emotions to understand what they are caused by.

Be more mindful of your inner state by stepping back and observing your emotions in the moment (both physical and mental components).

Describe what you are feeling in a non-judgmental way. State the facts without resorting to labels like "good" and "bad" or "right" and "wrong."

Investigate emotions by asking yourself questions like, "Why do I feel this way?" or "What are my emotions trying to tell me?" Sometimes there is a logic behind our emotions than we can learn

from and improve (this is also where some reframing techniques can be useful).

Recognize the impermanence of emotions. Often our thoughts and feelings are in a constant state of flux, changing slowly moment-by-moment.

Practice channeling your emotions in new and constructive ways (for example, talking to someone about them, writing, painting, or playing music).

Exercise more. Working out can release endorphins and dopamine in your brain which can help improve your mood for days or even weeks at a time. Some studies even suggest that exercise can be used as a secondary medication for depression.

If possible, try to avoid triggers (behaviors, people, situations, or environments) that may elicit strong negative emotions. This is especially useful for those who suffer from Post-Traumatic Disorder, in which case they may be highly sensitive to certain stimuli.

If possible, engage in positive activities to reverse negative patterns (such as watching a funny movie or reading an exciting book). These can sometimes provide temporary relief and pleasure from otherwise distressing states.

Meditate on your breath to help cultivate a more focused, calm, and non-reactive mind. Check out the “100 Breaths Meditation.”

These are the most notable ways psychologists have found that we can change the way we process our emotions. Studies have shown that strategies like these can cause a reduction in brain activity associated with emotional reactivity, especially when we are presented with negative stimuli. These strategies can also strengthen the connections between the “thinking” and “feeling” parts of our brain, which lessens the risk of us experiencing “amygdala hijacks.”

Please keep in mind however that some strategies may be more effective than others depending on the situation and the causes behind your emotion. Be patient with yourself, and be willing to experiment a bit with your emotions before you find what works best for you.

Emotional Intelligence

Many psychologists now believe that the way we process emotions can be thought of as a kind of “intelligence.” This intelligence is different than what IQ tests measure; instead, emotional intelligence is the ability to monitor the emotions of both ourselves and others, to discriminate among different emotional states, and then use this information to guide one’s thoughts and actions.

The cognitive scientist Marvin Minsky argues that emotions, contrary to popular belief, play a crucial role in certain types of intelligence. Instead of thinking of emotions as something “lesser” or “more primitive” than rational thought, Minsky says emotions are different “ways to think” about different “problem types” that exist in the world. These different “problem types” may include how to achieve personal well-being, relationships, morality, creativity, intuition, and other problems in the world which can’t be solved through a pure logic and rational-based approach.

The goal of emotional intelligence, therefore, isn’t to suppress our emotions or make us into robots, but to learn how to feel, respond, and/or express our emotions in more intelligent ways.

Following your emotions and “gut instincts” can be a crucial aspect of decision-making and intelligence. In one study conducted by Michael Pham at Columbia Business School, researchers had undergraduates make predictions about 8 different outcomes, from the Democratic Primaries of 2008, to the finalists of American Idol, to forecasting the Dow Jones, to picking the winner of the BCS Championship game.

The participants tried to predict a wide range of different events, and results were consistent through every trial that individuals who were more trusting of their gut instincts were more likely to accurately predict the outcome of each event.

Psychologists now believe that many of our emotions and feelings are like “summaries of data” in our brains that we aren’t completely aware of. This is because a lot of our thinking is influenced by unconscious factors. Our conscious minds can only juggle about 5-9 bits of data at a time, so our brains do a lot of work “behind the scenes” that drive our mental processes.

Emotions are, in many ways, a quick snapshot of a lot of information being calculated at an unconscious level. This is especially true for intuition and “gut instincts” – we know we know something, but we aren’t sure exactly how or why we know it. We can’t explain the logic or reason behind it, but we *feel* that it’s true because our brains are signaling an intense emotional response telling us so.

Of course, this doesn’t mean our intuition is always right. Sometimes it can be horribly misleading. Listening and evaluating our emotions takes practice, and some people start off better at it than others.

Start by following your intuition in safe and small ways. If you get a gut instinct (and acting on it doesn’t risk you hurting yourself or others), then follow that feeling and see where it leads you. Follow your heart in a new song you’re writing, or listen to that gut instinct about who you should ask on a date. Often the more practice and experience we have following our emotions and intuition, the better we are at it. It’s like any other skill.

Sometimes it's important to sit down and think about a problem before solving it, and other times its better to go with our emotional instincts. One is not necessarily better than the other – it really depends on the person and the situation. Often the smartest people know how to exercise a healthy balance of both thinking and feeling.

Expressing emotions

Expressing emotions can be one common way to release them, although there is mixed evidence on what types of expression are most effective. A lot of scientific research shows that playing violent video games or hitting a punching bag as a way to release anger can actually increase our negative feelings, as well as make us more aggressive in real-life. This is because these activities often reward us for responding to anger through violence.

However, other forms of expression like art therapy and expressive writing have shown to be very beneficial for understanding and managing our emotions more effectively (without necessarily acting them out). These are probably most effective not for cathartic reasons, but because they give us an opportunity to reflect on our emotions, become more aware of them, potentially learn something, and then let them go.

Expressing emotions is one way we can better manage them and release them, but the way we express them matters a lot. Some studies have even shown that forms of venting and crying (often recommended even by mental health professionals) can sometimes exacerbate negative emotions and prolong them.

While I don't think this is true for all cases, it's important to balance emotional expression in a constructive and healthy way, one which doesn't just give our emotions something to feed on.

For example, it's natural and healthy to cry in response to grief from the loss of a loved one, but if we find ourselves crying every time we feel the slightest bit of sadness or disappointment, then we may want to practice expressing these emotions in a less dramatic way.

Healthy expression of emotions is about channeling your feelings in new and positive directions, not simply dwelling on them or re-living them. Hitting a pillow and pretending it's your ex-boyfriend may give you a temporary high, but it's probably more constructive to channel your feelings into a beautiful poem or short story. The way you express yourself matters, and some ways are definitely more adaptive and beneficial than others.

According to Daniel Goleman, even certain "amygdala hijackings" (bursts of emotions) can be beneficial. He calls these "positive

hijackings,” and one example is when someone tells you a really funny joke and you can’t help but burst into a fit of laughter.

Sometimes it’s good to let your emotions run wild as long as you do it in a safe and healthy way. Expressing positive emotions, like joy, laughter, gratitude, and kindness, have scientifically shown to be a great way to improve both physical and mental health. And even expressing negative emotions, in moderation, can be helpful. As positive psychologist Tal Ben-Sahar puts it, “we must give ourselves permission to experience the full-range of human emotions.”

Final word on emotions

There is still a lot more to learn about emotions, but we know many of the basics on how we can manage and respond to our emotions differently. This chapter is an excellent starting point for anyone who wants to live a better emotional life, but it’s important to remember that this change is a process that takes time, effort, and patience.

Actively practicing things like mindfulness meditation and CBT techniques (such as inquiring about emotions or using reframing tools) are essential to rewiring our brains so that we become more emotionally intelligent. If you can dedicate just 10-15 minutes a day toward meditation or reflection, I guarantee you will see an improvement in the way you handle your feelings and emotions.

Later in *The Science of Self-Improvement* we will talk about relationships, health, and managing stress, which are also huge factors in determining our emotional life and overall well-being.

Changing Habits

A lot of what we covered up until this point has been focused on our “inner change” – how we think about ourselves, and how we react to our emotions and experience. While these things are very important for our happiness and success, they are only one part of a much bigger picture.

As it turns out, self-improvement is a two-way street. Our thoughts and emotions can affect our habits and behaviors, but our habits and behaviors can also affect our thoughts and emotions. Sometimes it might be better to approach a problem by focusing on habit change, rather than only working on how we think or feel about a situation.

If you work on your thoughts and emotions, but you aren’t getting the habit change you want, or the outcomes you want in life, then you may have to focus on the structure of the habit itself.

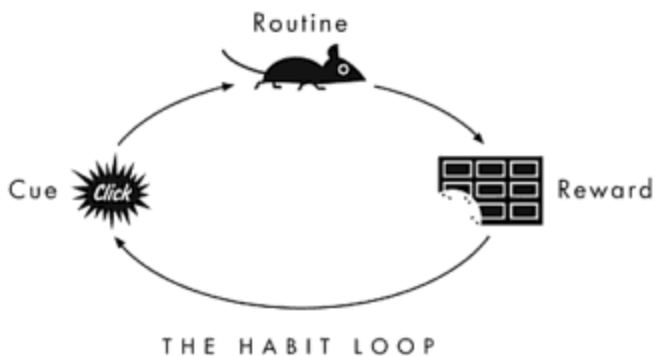
Habit Loops

There is a structure behind most habits which behavioral psychologists refer to as “habit loops.”

Habit loops consist of three main parts. First is the **cue**, the trigger from the environment that tells your brain to go into autopilot and which habit to use. Next is the **routine**, which can be a mental or

physical action you take whenever presented with the cue. And lastly is the **reward**, which is what you get from the habit that fulfills a craving in your brain.

When this pattern of “cue-routine-reward” gets repeated many times it becomes more and more automatic. This is because the more we repeat it, the more it gets wired into our brains (in neuroscience, this is called “long-term potentiation.”) However, by better understanding habit loops, we can more easily disrupt the cycle and rewire our brains to new habits.



For example, let’s say everyday after dinner you sit on your couch to watch TV while eating a carton of ice cream. It’s a nasty habit – and it’s probably the reason you’ve gained 25 pounds over the past few months. However, no matter how hard you try to break the habit you can’t seem to change it.

What you need to do is identify your habit loop. What is the routine that you want to change? What are the cues triggering you to do that routine? And what are the rewards you are getting as a result of that routine? By better understanding the cycle of “cue-routine-reward” you can more easily modify your behavior.

Find the cue

A cue is a stimulus from your environment that triggers you to do your routine. Often we have trouble identifying cues because there is so much unconscious information that motivates our habits.

For example, do you eat dinner a certain time each day because you are hungry? Or because the clock says 630PM? Or because your children start asking for dinner? Or because you’re home from work, and that’s just when your dinner routine begins?

Psychologists have identified different categories of habitual cues that often trigger our habit loops. These are:

Location – Where are you when your habit loops are triggered?

Time – What time of the day is it?

Mood – What’s your emotional state?

Thoughts – What are you thinking?

People around you – Who is around you when you act out these habits?

Immediately preceding action – What do you do right before the habit starts?

Once we understand the cues that trigger our habit loops, we can use that insight to modify our behaviors.

For example, say you're an alcoholic whose habits are triggered by your location (party, bar, or club) or the people you are with (friends who love drinking). One way you can try to disrupt your habit loop is by avoiding places or people that motivate you to drink.

Try out different rewards

Once you find the cue that triggers your behavior, you can experiment with different rewards to see what your brain is actually craving.

Let's go back to the example of you eating ice cream while watching TV. By trying out different rewards you can see what it is you get from the activity. Are you eating ice cream because you're hungry?

Are you just bored and it's a way to pass the time? Or maybe it's something you do to socialize with family or roommates?

There are a number of reasons we may build a certain habit, but it's not always clear why we do the things we do. By experimenting with different rewards, you can discover what it is you are really getting out of your routine.

It may take a couple weeks before you discover what it is your brain is craving. Maybe the first day you experiment with eating a salad, but afterwards you still feel an urge for ice cream. This suggests that the reward you're getting is probably not related to hunger.

Next you might try socializing with the family in a different way, such as playing a video game together instead of eating ice cream together. After this activity maybe you find that your craving for ice cream goes away. If that's the case, your routine of "eating ice cream" may be a result of your desire to connect with your family.

This is just one example, but hopefully you get the idea. People do things for many different reasons, but experimenting with different rewards can help us find what it is our brains actually want fulfilled. If we understand that, we can replace our old habit loops with new habit loops that still fulfill the rewards we want.

Make a plan to change unhelpful habit loops

Once you identify the “cue-routine-reward” behind your habit loops, it becomes much easier to make a plan on how to change them.

Psychologists have found compelling research that making a plan to act in a certain way at a certain time and place makes it much more likely that we will commit to these new behaviors. These are called implementation intentions.

The basic idea is to form an if-then plan to help instill new habits. Write down and repeat your plan, such as, “If situation X arises, I will perform response Y.” X refers to the cue from your environment. Y refers to the new routine you want to replace with the old routine.

You’ll probably make some mistakes along the way. Maybe some days you’ll miss your cue. Maybe other days you’ll find it easier to just resort to your old habit. It’s reasonable to expect that it’s going to take some practice before your new habit loop is set in motion.

As Charles Duhigg, author of *The Power of Habit*, writes:

“Habits aren’t destiny — they can be ignored, changed or replaced. But it’s also true that once the loop is established and a habit emerges, your brain stops fully participating in decision-making. So unless you deliberately fight a habit — unless you find new cues and rewards — the old pattern will unfold automatically.”

Simply understanding how habits work makes this process easier. However, there will always be some self-discipline and patience needed to get the results you want. Don't be too hard on yourself if you stumble a bit along the way. Remember, you're trying to do something that is ultimately going to rewire your brain.

Maximizing will-power

Understanding the structure of your habits won't always be enough to modify your behaviors. There is an element of willpower that plays a key role in all habit change.

Willpower is the self-discipline to do something even if you don't have a lot of motivation to do it.

For example, those who have strong willpower will be able to resist a slice of cake or push themselves to go to the gym, while a person with less willpower will find it more difficult to do these things if they aren't already used to them.

Recently there has been a good amount of research on how we can maximize our willpower when changing habits. Here are the important findings:

- **Willpower is a limited resource that needs to be used wisely.** When researchers have participants resist eating a

cookie, they perform worse on a difficult puzzle afterwards. That's because when we exercise our willpower at one task, we have less willpower to dedicate to another task. Therefore, it's best to only focus on changing one major habit at a time. If you spread yourself too thin, by trying to change too much about your life at once, it's very likely that you will get tired faster and give up quicker on your goals.

- **Willpower can be strengthened like a muscle.** While it's true that it's limited, we can build upon our long-term capacity by actively exercising our willpower more often. Practice by changing small habits first – like switching soda with water, or just going out for a walk every morning – and then you can move onto bigger habits once you strengthen your willpower and motivation. It's just like exercising any other muscle. You can't expect to go into the gym and bench press 200 lbs, but if you work at it overtime then maybe one day you will. Our willpower works the same way.
- **Believing you have more willpower makes you push yourself harder.** A study published in 2010 in *Psychological Science* found that students could fight off taking a break from studying simply by having the mindset that they can go longer. When motivating ourselves to change habits, it's important to remember that our attitude and beliefs play a

crucial role. If you believe that you can achieve something, you're more likely to push yourself and go that extra mile. But when you believe your willpower is weak, you're more likely to settle for less.

- **Practice taking a step back.** One of the best ways to disconnect from our routines and change our behavior is to practice a short STOP meditation (see "Meditation Guide" for instructions). This is when we step back from what we are doing in the moment and reflect on our current mindset. Willpower requires focus and awareness. If you go about your day unconsciously, without ever second-guessing yourself, then you aren't exercising very much of your willpower and potential.
- **Once you build a new habit, you can concentrate your willpower on another new habit** - Habits are often characterized by the fact that they are routine and automatic. When you first learned how to tie your shoes, it may have taken a lot of effort and concentration. But now that you've practiced it so many times, it's second-nature to you – and therefore it takes practically no willpower or energy at all. In the same way, once we build a new habit we no longer need as much willpower to do it, so we can begin focusing that willpower on adopting new behaviors.

Psychologists admit that some people are probably born with more willpower than others. However, it's good to know that we can improve our willpower in various ways by exercising it more.

Social support and accountability

Finding people who support your goals can be really important in motivating you to achieve them. Supportive people help keep you accountable by following your progress, listening to your problems, giving you valuable feedback, and inspiring you to keep going. Sometimes it can make all the difference between following through on your habit changes or not, which is why surrounding yourself with these types of people can be so important.

One of the best ways to hold yourself accountable is to find people with common goals.

For example, let's say you and a friend both want to start going to the gym. You guys can make a pact to go together every Monday-Friday morning. Then you can motivate each other, learn together, and hold each other accountable when you miss a day. This can make it a lot easier than having to conquer your new habit all by yourself.

Other great options for finding social support include finding a coach, mentor, support group, or even joining an online forum or social network, such as on [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#).

Research shows that inspiring people can play a key role in our happiness, health, and success, so don't underestimate their importance. While we sometimes think self-improvement is something that we do solely on our own, having people by our side helps make the process a lot easier.

Keeping track of your progress

When changing habits during your self-improvement, it can be very beneficial to keep track of your progress. You can try to measure your progress in two main ways:

- **Numbers and measuring** – This is progress that you can measure and reduce to a number. For example, maybe in January you could run a mile in 9 minutes, and by April you could run a mile in 7 minutes and 30 seconds. That's hard evidence that you improved your speed and stamina over the course of those few months. Another example may be a business using sales or revenue to measure whether or not they are being successful. By using measurements like this, you can find out what works for you and what doesn't work

for you. If you aren't noticing improvements, then you can change your course of action until you start seeing results in whatever it is you are doing.

- **Writing thoughts and feelings in a journal** – This is progress which you can't easily define with a number, but you can report on it based on how your thoughts or feelings have changed. For example, it can be hard to measure the health of a relationship or marriage, but you can try to keep progress by writing entries in a journal about what you think and feel about the relationship. Are you happier? Do you feel more satisfied? Have you enjoyed each other's company more? These are the types of things which may be better to keep track of qualitatively rather than quantitatively.

For most habits and goals, you can probably keep track of your progress using a mixture of both.

At the very least, you can always measure how much time you spend doing something. For example, if your goal is to learn how to meditate, then you can keep track of how many hours a week you spend practicing. Or, let's say you want to improve your relationship, one thing you may want to keep track of is how much one-on-one time you spend together with your partner.

These measurements won't always explain the full picture of your progress, but they can be valuable guidelines.

In addition, writing your thoughts and feelings in a diary or journal is always a good idea as well. Many studies have shown the benefits of writing. It can help keep our minds on track, organize our thoughts, learn from our mistakes, and find ways to better improve ourselves. It gives us a chance to reflect on our habits and goals and see if we are making the type of progress we really want to make in our lives.

Pros and cons of setting deadlines

For many people, setting deadlines can be a great way to stay committed to a goal.

When we set a specific date to have our goal accomplished, we become more motivated to get our work done so that we meet that date. Deadlines are especially effective if not meeting them leads to certain consequences, like getting a lower grade in a class, or getting fired from your job. A deadline can be like a "beacon of light" into the future, motivating you to continue on until you get to the end. Many people claim to work better when they are pressured to meet a goal by a specific date.

However, it's also important to know that some deadlines can backfire on us. For example, let's say you make the goal to lose 10 pounds in a month, but then the month comes around and you didn't achieve your goal? Some people can find this really demotivating and therefore give up instead of being more patient with themselves. Or what happens if you achieve your goal, but then you become content with your progress and you snap back to your old ways? Next thing you know, you gain that 10 pounds right back. The problem with some deadlines is that many focus on the short-term, and therefore don't always cultivate the attitude needed for long-term change.

Deadlines are great for some people in some situations, but not everyone. If you're someone who doesn't respond very well to external motivators, then a deadline may not do anything for you.

And if you make a deadline but are unable to meet it, don't be too hard on yourself. Try to keep deadlines realistic, but beware that you may undershoot your goals simply because no one is perfect, and it can often be difficult to forecast how much time is needed to complete something.

Collect inspirational resources

Another important contributor to our motivation can be collecting resources to be inspired by. Some things you may want to collect are:

- Inspiring quotes.
- Motivational images.
- Video clips (such as movie scenes, speeches, and lectures).
- Educational links and articles.
- Success stories.
- Uplifting music.

These can be really helpful when we need that extra boost in motivation. I've personally collected over 500+ motivational images that I've found on the internet (some great places to find these are [Get Motivated](#) or [Quotes Porn](#)).

I'm also an avid collector of quotes and music, and I often dig into my collection whenever I'm feeling down or need some positivity and encouragement. These resources won't make or break you, but they can be very valuable tools.

Exposing yourself to fear

Often when trying new things we are exposing ourselves to stuff that may be outside of our comfort zone. This can cause a lot of anxiety, fear, and stress. Psychologists who specialize in behavior have a technique called "gradual exposure" to help us better manage our fears and anxieties in these situations and eventually overcome them.

The technique works by first breaking up your new habit into a hierarchy of smaller behaviors. For example, let's say you are a very shy person who wants to be more social. You can start by exposing yourself to social situations that only elicit lower levels of anxiety, and then work your way up to social situations that may elicit higher levels of anxiety.

A hierarchy for a person trying to be more social may look something like:

- Low anxiety
- Talking to your mom.
- Talking to a best friend.
- Talking to a store clerk.
- Medium anxiety
- Talking to your teacher.
- Talking to your boss.

- High anxiety
- Talking to an attractive girl or guy that you want to date.
- Talking in front of a large group.
- Talking to a celebrity.

This is just a quick example. Your hierarchy is going to depend on you and the behavior you want to change. Many psychologists have used this technique to overcome fears and phobias that may inhibit certain behaviors. By gradually exposing ourselves to these fearful situations, we slowly become more comfortable in them.

Exposing yourself to unpleasant situations can sometimes be a great way to test your limits and improve yourself. Psychology writer Susan Cain found that when introverts acted in extroverted ways by initiating conversations with others – even if it first made them feel uncomfortable or awkward – they ended up thinking about themselves more positively once the event was over. This is because they took the initiative to do something that they otherwise couldn't imagine themselves doing. And even though it was painful, they learned something new about themselves and what they are capable of.

This principle is true for many different aspects of our lives. Maybe when you went on your first airplane you were scared and nervous because you've never done it before. But usually as you start flying more often, you begin to feel more safe and comfortable. In short,

exposing ourselves to new things (even when they can be temporarily unpleasant) can sometimes be a really great way to familiarize ourselves with new habits and build up more confidence in the long-term.

Using visualization for changing habits

The only real way to successfully build new habits is to start doing them more often, but we can also mentally rehearse these habits through visualization to build the habit stronger and faster.

Recent neuroscience has revealed that when we imagine ourselves doing a particular habit it activates many of the same regions in our brain as when we are physically doing that same habit. This is strong evidence that mental visualization can be a useful way to condition ourselves toward new and more desirable behaviors.

The more we visualize ourselves doing an activity, the stronger the neural connections are which are associated with that habit. This is because the more certain neural firings occur, the more likely they are to undergo long-term potentiation, a cellular process that underlies all learning and memory.

After the neural associations are successfully built, they become a more natural reaction in the brain. In return, when we are presented

with a situation similar to the one we imagined, we become more likely to act out the habits we trained ourselves to act out during the visualization exercise.

This is a very popular and effective technique used in sports psychology and success coaching.

Now that you know exactly how visualization is supposed to work, you're probably wondering how to actually do it. The truth is a lot of people practice visualization – *but they do it absolutely wrong*. Here are some tips to help you cultivate a visualization exercise that actually works and gets you results:

1. Begin your visualization with a relaxation exercise.

Do something short and simple – like the “100 Breaths Meditation” – just to get your mind in a more clear, focused, and relaxed state before starting the visualization.

2. Picture yourself in environments that are similar to your everyday life.

If you are trying to improve school work, imagine yourself actually sitting in the classroom you go to. If you are trying to improve sports performance, imagine yourself on the fields you play at. The more

your visualization relates to the real world, the more effective it will be.

3. Visualize process, not end goals.

Research has shown that visualizing process is much more effective than visualizing end goals. You need to actually see yourself going step-by-step in achieving your habit. For example, if you want to go to the gym every morning, start your visualization from the moment you wake up. Imagine yourself going through your morning routine, driving to the gym, walking inside, lifting weights, and then eventually leaving. The more thoroughly you go through each step of the habit, the less likely you are to hit a snag along the way. Some people imagine themselves fit and healthy but they never actually see themselves doing the habits that it takes to actually becoming fit and healthy.

4. Evoke as many senses as possible.

In truth, effective visualization is about more than just vision. When you mentally rehearse a habit, try to evoke as many senses as possible, like hearing, touch, smell, and taste. The better you can replicate the actual experience of a new habit, the better prepared you will be to duplicate that habit in the real world.

5. Practice 15-20 minutes a day.

Mental rehearsing is practice, by definition. That means it is very unlikely that you will get it right after just one try. Instead, I recommend trying to do about 15-20 minutes of visualization a day when first starting your new habit. And you should start seeing improvements by the end of the week. Also, please don't forget to only practice one new habit at a time- any more than that and you will probably get overwhelmed.

Try one small habit change – just for this week

It's not hard to make a decision that impacts your life. Even small and simple changes can make a big difference if you make them where they really count.

Here is an experiment you can try in changing one small habit in your daily routine. The goal is to try it out successfully for one full week, then re-evaluate whether you would like to continue the habit change in the future.

Step 1: Choose one habit.

We all know the kinds of habits we want to change. They aren't hard to think of. The problem is focusing in on one and putting in the effort to make it happen.

Concentrating all your energy on one habit is often better than trying to change too much at once. When we spread our efforts too thin, we burn out easily and nothing gets accomplished.

However, when we focus on one small but meaningful change, we are more likely to see it become a reality. Not to mention we build more momentum to make changes in the future.

If you can't think of any small change to make, consider one of these common suggestions:

- Substitute every glass of soda with a glass of water.
- Wake up an hour early every morning.
- Sacrifice 15-30 minutes of TV each day and meditate instead.
- Read a chapter of a novel every night before bed.
- Do 10 push-ups every time you want to smoke a cigarette.
- Floss every morning.
- Write a blog/journal entry once a day.
- Make time in your schedule to jog a mile each day.
- Plan 2-4 social interactions throughout the week.

Remember to only choose one of these habits at a time. Also, try to choose something that is relevant to an area in your life that you want to improve.

Step 2: Stay committed.

Now that you have chosen your habit to practice for the week, the key is staying committed.

Because you are only making one simple change, try to be as disciplined as possible about it. If you slip up once, that's fine, but try to not even let that happen. Remember, you are only trying to stay committed for one week, so it shouldn't be that big of a deal.

Here are some suggestions to keep you motivated:

Repeat an affirmation 10 times right when you wake up: "I will do X today."

Leave appropriate reminders around the house, such as a sticky note on your kitchen cabinet.

Tell a couple supportive friends about your goal. Have them keep you accountable.

Take 5 minutes and imagine yourself doing the habit.

Notice the bigger picture. How can this habit benefit you in the long-term?

Avoid excuses. It's just one week, really.

Step 3: Evaluate your progress.

Once the week is completed, take the time to reflect and ask yourself:

- Was this habit change worth it?
- How did it change my thoughts and emotions?
- How did it change my behavior?
- Did it improve the overall quality of my life?
- Is this a change I want to continue in the future?

If the answers to these questions are positive, then consider sustaining your new habit into the future. If not, scratch the new habit and try something different.

There are always adjustments to make in life. That doesn't mean every new thing we try is going to be the best possible choice, but we should always consider room for improvement.

Final word on habits

This chapter is filled with plenty of advice, techniques, and tips on how to be more effective at changing your habits.

However, you have to remember that – like most stuff in this book – changing habits takes time, work, and dedication. Simply reading this chapter isn't going to be enough to instill the changes you want, you have to actively take action and find what works for you.

Habits make up a big part of our happiness and success. They are also intimately intertwined with our thoughts and emotions. If you combine the lessons in this chapter with the last two chapters, you will be very well-equipped to take your life in new and better directions.

Work and Leisure

Work and leisure are two closely related aspects of our lives that play a major role in our happiness, success, and well-being.

If you work at a job that you absolutely hate, then it can be really hard to find satisfaction working there. Maybe it doesn't suit your interests, skills, and talents. Maybe you can't stand your boss or the people you work with. Or maybe you can never find time to relax and enjoy yourself. These are all legitimate reasons to re-evaluate your work and try to find better ways to keep yourself both happy and productive.

Finding ways to work that maximize your happiness and well-being is not something that should be underestimated. While at times we may often feel trapped or stuck at our job or career, the truth is we often have much more choice and control than we think – whether it's finding a new job or going about our current job in a different way.

This chapter is going to focus on ways to make work more meaningful, enjoyable, and productive. It's also going to focus on the importance of maintaining a balance between work time and leisure time.

Finding work that you enjoy

No job may be perfect, but there are some jobs that we will enjoy more than others.

Finding work that resonates with us is important to both ourselves and society as a whole. People who have a passion for what they do are often much harder workers and more productive workers than people who settle for jobs which they have no interest in.

But maybe you don't really know what you enjoy doing. Sometimes it takes a little time and self-discovery before we find something that makes us think, "Yes, I can do this for a living!"

Here are some guidelines to help you find work that you have a passion for:

Activities that bring out your strengths

No one is good at everything, but anyone can be good at something. As Albert Einstein famously said, "Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid." Humans are an incredibly diverse species, and in that diversity we each have certain things we are better at than others.

If you have no clue what your passion may be, a good way to start is to write out a list of some of your strengths and skills. What are you good at? Why do people like you? What have you accomplished in the past? We all have positive attributes and small victories here and there, pay attention to these and consider ways to build them more in the future.

Activities you can do for extended periods of time

If you can remain engaged in an activity for a long time without getting bored, distracted, or tired, then that's a good indication that this is something you enjoy and have a passion for. Even those with ADHD have an easier time staying focused and engaged in activities that they find more stimulating and interesting (like video games or sports). The point is that when we find an activity we see as interesting, we are much more willing to invest our efforts and time into.

Activities that make you want to discover and explore new boundaries

Similarly, when we are engaged with an activity we are much more aware of the details and nuances of what we are doing. Compared

to those who aren't as passionate, a passionate person can usually distinguish smaller details of what they are doing, discovering new boundaries, and finding ways to overcome those boundaries and get to the next plateau.

Passion often makes us better learners because we are driven to understand as much as we can about what interests us. And when we are presented with an obstacle, we don't get discouraged, but instead motivated to improve and continue onward.

Activities that put you into a state of flow

Psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi defines *flow* as a mental state where we are completely focused, energized, and motivated to do an activity. It is often described as a "single minded immersion" of our consciousness, thoughts, emotions, and actions.

During flow, we may often experience high feelings of joy. It is also common to experience a loose sense of self and a distorted sense of time.

Flow has been discovered in many successful athletes, musicians, writers, artists, and other professional. We sometimes refer to flow in everyday language as "being in the zone" or "being on a groove." You can probably identify some activities that put you into this state

of consciousness. When we find activities that create flow, it often means we have an intrinsic motivation and passion to excel at those activities.

Activities you do *not* just because other people think you should do them

Often we may do certain things only because other people think we should do them. But when we do activities we love, we often don't need this external motivation. Instead, we are motivated to do the activity simply because we enjoy doing it.

Sometimes people may even disapprove of what we do. Maybe your parents don't trust your pursuit to become an artist, and they'd rather you do something more safe and secure. However, despite criticisms we may get from family and friends, we often know in our hearts and minds what we really want.

These are some of the most notable ways we can identify activities that we genuinely enjoy doing. While it's true that we may not be able to turn every interest or passion into a job or career, these can give us very valuable insights into the *types* of jobs that may suit us best.

For example, maybe one of your biggest passions is playing video games. Although this activity isn't usually seen as very productive, it may still be possible to make a living that is related to it such as designing games, becoming a game tester, writing reviews, or becoming a journalist.

These are just some suggestions if you are someone who has no idea what they want to do for a living. Many of you probably already have jobs that you are happy with – or at least mildly happy with. The rest of this chapter is going to be dedicated to how to improve your work life once you've already had a job.

Improving your work life

It's difficult to have to work in an environment that often stresses you out and drains you of your energy. Most of us probably spend between 30-50 hours a week dedicated to our job or career. It makes up a huge part of our lives. Yet, we seem to accept the mantra that "work sucks," so instead of trying to adjust our work life and make it more pleasant, we learn to grin and bear it.

A healthy workplace depends on our ability to feel more in control. And while some jobs don't permit us with a lot of freedoms, there are always a few key things we can do to make our work more enjoyable and less stressful. Here are some things you can do.

Focus on aspects of your job that you like

All jobs have their upsides and downsides. However, by focusing on the aspects of our job that we like we can cultivate more positive feelings toward our work.

Take the time to write down or reflect on the parts of your job you enjoy doing. What got you interested in this kind of work in the first place? Which parts of your day do you enjoy the most? What other parts of your job do you enjoy: the people you work with? The schedule? The money?

There are many different reasons people may like the job they have. However, many only focus on the negative aspects of their job, and they forget the value of having a job in the first place. Especially in today's economy, where work can be very scarce, we should all be able to find something to be thankful for if we have a place to work.

Identify the purpose of what you do

It's true that not everyone has a career that really resonates with them deep-down. I respect that. But I also think most jobs serve an important function in our society. And when you recognize that you

are an important part of what keeps society going, you sometimes find a new sense of purpose and pride about the things you do.

Ever seen the documentary *The Philosopher Kings*? It's an interesting portrayal of some custodial workers at major universities (Duke, Princeton, U.C. Berkely, etc.) who are really passionate about their job. Now normally a custodial worker may not be a very revered job, but these workers clearly had a fire in their souls for what they did. They cared about where they worked and how it looked, and they recognized the importance of their job.

We could all learn something from these custodians. No matter what type of work you do, it plays an important role in our society. Sometimes you just need to look at the "bigger picture" of your actions, and how it fits into the grand scheme of things.

Acknowledge your achievements

Sometimes it seems like we always have something new to get done. New projects. New deadlines. This can make us easily frustrated and tired, because it can create the illusion that we're never accomplishing anything.

One thing you can do is take the time to reflect on your past achievements. Looking toward the future can be good, but

sometimes it makes us forget to be happy and content with the things we've already accomplished in our lives.

Don't be afraid to step back and show a little pride for all the good things you've already done at your job. This will help reinvigorate positive feelings and a sense of purpose toward your work again. This is especially useful if you've been working somewhere for a long time.

Change your work environment

Despite spending most of our work hours in our office, we often spend very little time keeping it fresh and stimulating. The truth is that our surroundings, even when not consciously noticed, can have a huge effect on our mood and well-being. For example, studies have shown that the presence of plants in the workplace help boost people's moods and increase cognitive functioning.

Another key study done in 2010 has shown that when workers have more control over the design of their workplace, this improves their happiness, productivity, and even health.

Often when working for large companies we can lose a sense of our personal identity. Your office is usually the one place you are allowed to express yourself. Create a work environment that works for you.

Something that reflects some of your own values and interests. And something that motivates and inspires you.

If this means changing your office around every few months or so – do it. Keep things interesting. Make your work environment stimulating (but not too distracting).

Integrate more play

Many who study productivity know the balance that needs to be maintained between work and play. Work without any play can become mundane, tedious, and unfulfilling. But play without any work can become aimless, misguided, and unproductive.

Whether we are at work, school, or home, we should find ways to integrate playfulness and curiosity to help fuel our creativity, motivation, and commitment to whatever it is that we are doing.

If we think of our work or chores in a more fun and uplifting way, it can become a powerful force in changing our behavior and making us more motivated.

A great recent example of this is when a group of people redesigned stairs into a piano (that actually made sounds when you stepped on it). Once they did this, they noticed a 66% increase in people who chose to walk the stairs over taking the escalator. Why? Because they

had more fun taking the stairs and playing with the musical notes, even though it takes more work than just standing on an escalator. You can watch a video of this [here](#) on YouTube.

In the same way, we can turn otherwise tedious and boring activities into something more fun and enjoyable. Sometimes it takes a little creativity, but even simple things can make work a little more pleasurable.

Work with a group of friends rather than alone.

Make your work into a healthy competition

Listen to music, as long as it's not distracting. Instrumental music has shown to be good for tasks involving thinking and problem-solving.

Entice yourself with a reward. "If I get this done today, then I'll go out and have a beer later."

Joke about work-related frustrations to employees, friends, or family. (that's *sjoking*, not complaining)

Try to be creative with parts of the job you dislike. Ask yourself, "Is there anyway I can make this more fun and enjoyable?"

Certain professions may be more conducive to creativity and play than others. Google is one company that is driven by the principle of “work hard and play hard,” but they are also a company that relies a lot on creativity and innovation. An accountant or doctor may have less room for play than a writer or artist, but I think we can all find small ways to make our jobs a little more creative and enjoyable.

Ease any tension with co-workers or bosses

Relationships can make or break a work environment. When people don’t get along and don’t know how to communicate effectively, there is a lingering tension in the office that can ruin everyone’s day.

We dread walking into the office, not because we don’t like what we do, but because we have to deal with an assortment of jerk-offs, bullies, whiners, and other vampires who suck up any positive energy in the room. Every office has them.

So what can we do? First, you have to learn how to let a lot of this negative energy just roll off your shoulders. The more you respond to negative energy in a negative way, the more you are contributing to the problem. Trying to reframe some of the negative aspects of work in a humorous or joyful way is often very effective for breaking the cycle of negativity in your work environment.

When someone makes a sly remark to you, just nod your head and smile. When someone gives you an order in a condescending tone, just imagine that person with a baby face talking in a really high-pitched voice. When someone starts a heated argument with you, know how to defuse it as soon as possible (whether that means cracking a joke or politely walking out of the room).

No, you won't get along with everyone, but there will always be some people who you hit it off with better than others. Build solid relationships with these people. Get to know them better. Have lunch with them. Share interesting stories. Vent about work to each other. Having a work buddy (or two, or three) can really help you get through those tough days.

Also, if you have a bad past with some coworkers, try to fix them. You can try to patch things up with them, apologize for your mistakes, and start again on the right foot. Or – if they are truly that unbearable – try to deal with them on strictly business terms and minimize any excess interaction.

If you can, consider avoiding some vampires entirely. Some people you just can't get along with no matter how hard you try. It's very likely your work environment has one or two of these people. Recognize those boundaries. Sure, it's not the ideal situation to be in, but it's better than feeding into a destructive relationship and making it grow worse. If avoiding these people means moving to

another office or part of the company, consider bringing up your concerns to management.

Have healthy snacks around

A lot of people get so focused on their work that they sometimes forget to eat. Or they have so much to get done, that they have to skip lunch to make sure they meet their deadline.

I'm a strong believer that we need to stay healthy and nourished if we want to be effective at our jobs. Ignoring our bodies, and focusing all our energy on our work, is going to drain you and hurt your work ethic.

No matter what kind of work you do, your body and brain need fuel to do it. This means drinking water and having healthy snacks between meals to keep your body replenished. The less you take care of your body, the more it's going to affect your work.

A fatigued body and mind can't possibly work to it's fullest potential, so keep yourself hydrated and nourished as often as possible.

This rule is actually pretty simple and easy to follow. Re-stock your office with healthy snacks every Monday: grapes, nuts, water, cheese and crackers, tuna, eggs, etc. If you have the choice, I recommend

storing this stuff in a personal office vs. the company kitchen. This just makes it easier to access food when you are in the middle of work.

Balancing work and leisure

How we spend our time working is often just as important as how we spend our free time.

A 2011 study published in *Journal of Family Psychology* found that how we balance leisure with household chores affects our workload recovery. Individuals who spent more time doing household chores when they got home from work experienced higher levels of stress and longer times recovering from work-related burnout.

It is therefore important that we balance our work and leisure in a healthy and sensible way. Our bodies and minds aren't designed to be productive all the time, so we need to also give ourselves time to relax and recharge our batteries.

So whether you are working too hard at your job or at home, be sure to schedule some time to yourself to enjoy life and unwind. Some of the most effective ways of spending our free time include:

- Meditating.

- Reading a book.
- Listening to music.
- Spending time with friends or family.
- Going for a walk.
- Taking a short nap.
- Exercise or go to the gym.
- Going to the movies.
- Playing video games.
- Do something creative, like painting or playing an instrument.

These are great activities we can do to help take a break from work. Even short breaks taken throughout your work day can help make you more productive and happy.

It's not always true that the more we work the more we get done, sometimes it's actually more productive to step away from our work and give ourselves time to replenish. That way when we go back to our work we have a fresh mind.

Of course, not all breaks can be beneficial. And often times the type of break we take depends on the type of work we do.

If you're a construction worker who does a lot of heavy lifting, then physical exercise is probably not the best way to spend your lunch

break. Instead, try reading the newspaper or playing some video games. Something that gives your body a rest.

In the same way, if you work at a job that requires a lot of thinking and problem-solving, doing other cognitively-demanding tasks may not be the best way to give your mind a rest. A writer, for example, may benefit more by going to the gym or going on a nature walk.

Here are helpful tips for how to take a break from your work:

Identify times of the day when you start getting tired or distracted. These are usually signs that you're energy is depleting and it's time to rest up.

Experiment with different types of breaks to find the ones that work best for you.

Consider the type of work you do, and what types of breaks would be a good balance.

Take a vacation or mental health day when you really need one.

Understand that managing work stress is key toward long-term productivity. Don't believe the myth that breaks are a sign of laziness.

In summary, we shouldn't be workaholics. There's a time to be driven and motivated, but there's also a time to sit back and unwind. Both are needed.

Positive Relationships

Humans are a very social species.

Throughout our evolution, it was important to our survival that we learned how to cooperate and get along with members of our tribe. Individuals who didn't learn how to cooperate we're often ostracized and thus less likely to live very long.

Today, our desire to belong and build positive relationships is still alive and well. Even someone who is very introverted enjoys the company of a few loyal friends and family. Without these positive relationships, we can often become stressed and depressed.

There are many ways our relationships can affect our happiness and well-being. Some benefits include:

Relationships encourage personal growth. Family and friends often want to see you succeed and be happy, and often they will help motivate and inspire you to achieve our goals.

Relationships provide support during tough times. We all have our bad moments, whether it's our health, finances, happiness, or other relationships. Having someone to talk to and share our feelings with can help us overcome these downfalls.

Relationships are great for collaboration and working together. Human relationships thrive when individuals can combine their skills and talents, and successfully create something greater than the sum of their parts. This is the stuff that makes businesses, politics, and other social organizations work.

Relationships give us pleasure and joy. One of the more obvious benefits of positive relationships is that they make life more enjoyable. Good friends, family, and co-workers make life an overall more pleasant experience – we enjoy spending time with these people and we often share positive moments with them on a frequent basis. They provide that extra flavor to life that we can't find by ourselves.

Relationships add meaning to our life story. Having positive relationships in our life increases our sense of purpose and meaning. When we have a real, positive effect on someone else, we feel like we are making a significant difference in the world – and we are. Relationships fulfill our need to belong in a community and they give us a stronger sense of identity.

A lot of research confirms that relationships are a very important aspect to our happiness and well-being. Studies in social psychology and positive psychology also confirm the different ways we can build stronger relationships with others. This will be the main focus throughout this chapter.

How to become a more effective communicator

All relationships depend on effective communication. If we can't accurately express ourselves to others, then we're going to have a hard time connecting with people in a meaningful way.

Here are useful guidelines for becoming a more effective communicator:

Listen to others

While it may seem like common sense, listening to others is often the first step in effective communication. Communication isn't just about talking, it's also about letting others voice their thoughts and opinions. Try to understand where they are coming from. And if you can understand their point-of-view, then you'll be able to more easily communicate with them in a healthy way. Keep in mind, understanding someone's perspective doesn't necessarily mean you have to agree with it.

Ask questions

Asking questions is a great way to learn more about someone or something. Every individual has different knowledge and experiences. Showing a genuine interest and asking to hear more about a topic is going to give you a deeper understanding of the other person (and a deeper understanding of the world in general). If you are willing to listen and learn from everyone, then you are going to be much more well-rounded and likeable person than if you only stuck to talking about what you know.

Watch your language

Language and words are our primary form of communication. However, they are only effective when their meaning is understood by both the speaker and the listener. It is therefore very important that we use words that accurately get our message across and don't make people confused or angry. The words you use are going to vary depending on the person you are talking to and the social situation you are in. You won't talk to a child the same way you talk to your boss, and you won't talk at a bar in the same way you talk at a library. Being able to modify your language depending on these factors is what separates a good communicator from an inappropriate one. If you find a word that doesn't get your message

across within a social context, then consider replacing it with something different.

Notice how you speak

Research in social psychology shows that how we say something is often just as important as what we say. Speech cues such as tone, pitch, volume, and pacing can greatly affect how someone perceives us. Take three simple words like “I love you” and imagine the different ways people can say it and the different meanings being conveyed. A serious and heartfelt tone can be a sign of intimacy, but a joking or playful tone may just be a sign of friendship. And if you say “I love you” sarcastically, it can even sound hateful. In the same way, a lot of the language we use throughout our day can have different meanings depend on the way we say it.

Body language and facial expressions

Another huge component of our communication is our body language and facial expressions. Often times our body and face communicate more than we realize. If we tell someone we are happy, but we are frowning on the outside, then people are going to know that we are lying. It’s important that what we say is congruent

with our body language. This should come naturally, but sometimes we need to first become more aware of our body and facial expressions because we may not realize they aren't consistent with what we are trying to communicate.

Make eye contact

Making eye contact is one of the most important aspects of communication. Often it is through eye contact that we know someone is listening and actually paying attention to us. On the other hand, people that can't hold eye contact or often look away, we see as disinterested, shy, and even untrustworthy. Making eye contact is a simple thing, but it can be essential toward building a meaningful connection with someone.

Tips for practicing better communication

Here are some practical ways to improve various aspect of your communication:

- Record yourself reading an article in a newspaper, then listen to it and see what you like or dislike. This is a good way to improve clarity while you speak, as well as the dynamics in

your voice. Do you sound monotone? Do you mumble your words? Do you speak too softly? Try re-recording with new changes in mind – the more you practice, the better you will become at speaking.

- Before a big interview or speech or date, practice a mock one with a friend. Sometimes role-playing situations with others can be a great way to prepare ourselves for a social situation. This is actually what many kids do when they are first developing social skills.
- Practice many different forms of communication like joke-telling, sharing a personal story, recapping the news, pitching a business idea, or presenting scientific research. The more diverse you are the more adaptable you will be around others.
- Pay attention to the feedback you get from others. If someone responds in a way that is unexpected or undesirable, consider ways to change your communication so that it gets a more positive response in the future.
- Spend time in front of a full-length mirror to work on your posture, body language, or facial expressions. This can be very useful in combination with Yoga or The Alexander Technique.

- Watch movies or TV shows and note how the characters interact with one another. Often a really good movie can give you some valuable insights into how we convey social signals through our voice and body language.
- Remember that consistent and conscious practice can embed habits so that they become second-nature, but it may take some time and effort before you see results. The important thing to know is that social skills are a skill that can be learned like anything else.

In the end, practice and exposing yourself to more social situations is really the only way to improve your communication. You can read about this stuff all you want, but if you don't try applying it in the real world, then you'll never know what really works and doesn't work for you.

Everyone communicates in slightly different ways. Some people are more outgoing – and that works for them. Other people are more reserved – and that works for them too. Our personality is going to obviously play a role in how we wish to communicate, but in order to find a style that suits us we need to practice, socialize more, and experiment (which sometimes means being willing to make mistakes).

Conversation threading

It's important to be able to hold meaningful conversations with people. However, a lot of us struggle with keeping conversations going because we don't know what to say, we over-think our responses, or we think we have nothing to add to the conversation.

There's a very helpful technique called "conversation threading" that is great for helping people become better at talking to others.

If you notice other people's conversations, you'll find that they rarely follow a logical sequence from beginning to end. Instead, we usually go in many different directions. We start talking about one thing and then we get lost in another.

Have you ever realized you were talking about something really weird and then thought, "How did this conversation start again?"

That's because there are many possible paths a conversation can take. In fact, it's possible to keep a conversation going forever without ever running out of things to say.

A **thread** is a single subject or topic or idea in a sentence. In a typical sentence there can be many threads. For example:

"On Sunday, Steve saw the movie Moneyball."

This is a very basic sentence, but there are several threads in it. In each thread, you can find something to reply to. For example:

Sunday – “Oh yeah? On Sunday I was helping my mom clean out the garage all day.”

Steve – “How is Steve doing? I haven’t seen him in awhile.”

Moneyball – “I saw Moneyball last week, definitely one of the best movies in 2011.”

Threads are a lot like branches. When we reply to someone, we usually add new branches – new possible directions that the conversation may lead.

If you choose the “Steve” branch, then you may start talking about what he’s been up to lately, as well as other old friends and how they’re doing. If you choose the “Moneyball” branch, then you may start talking about other good movies that have come out recently.

Conversation threading is effective because it continues the flow of conversation by staying on-topic and relevant.

Here are some tips to help apply threading to your everyday conversation:

- **Actively listen for threads.** Be an engaged listener when someone is talking to you.

- **Introduce new threads.** Don't just repeat back what people say to you, be willing to take threads into new directions.
- **Use open-ended questions.** Close-ended questions can often be answered with a simple "Yes" or "No." But asking open-ended questions, like "Why?" or "How?", take the conversation to a deeper level and give you more threads to branch out from.
- **Have general knowledge about pop culture.** Do stuff that other people do once in awhile, like watch popular movies, TV shows, or sports. Read newspapers, magazines, and some books as well. These will become great sources for conversation fodder.

I first discovered this idea of "conversation threading" in Sean Cooper's guide [The Shyness and Social Anxiety System](#). If you are someone who suffers from a lot of social anxiety, I highly recommend checking out this guide to help you overcome your fears.

How to build positive relationships

As humans it's important that we know how to get along. As mentioned before, relationships are a key component to happiness

and success, but if we have trouble connecting with people in a positive way, it can make building relationships very difficult.

There are valuable guidelines we can follow so that we become more easy to build a positive relationship with. Key things to keep in mind include:

View everyone as equals

Many people tend to judge a person, label them, and then put them into a “social hierarchy” of importance based on how valuable we *perceive* that person to be.

Those who we typically perceive as high value (like CEOs, celebrities, athletes, politicians, good-looking people, etc.) we place at the top of our social hierarchy, while those we typically perceive as low value (like homeless people or the unemployed) fall to the bottom of our social hierarchy.

While sometimes it may be useful to make distinctions about certain people, this kind of thinking can also hurt our ability to connect with some individuals in productive and meaningful ways.

If we perceive someone as having really high value, then we often see ourselves as inferior when compared to this other person.

This perceived difference in value can then cause us to act and think in desperate and anti-social ways so that we are “liked.” For example, we may feel the need to pretend to be more than we are, but the problem is this inauthenticity is often counter-productive to real, long-lasting relationships.

In the same way, when we perceive someone as having really low value, we may treat them with less respect, because we think we are better than them (or that they aren’t worth our time and attention). This perceived difference causes us to be more anti-social to people who we think aren’t as good as us.

It’s important to remember that while everyone is different in their own way, we are all just people in the end. We all have thoughts and emotions. We all go through struggles in life. And when it comes down to it, we all just want to be happy by the end of the day.

If you can try to view everyone as equals, then you’ll notice a huge improvement in your ability to be more friendly and likeable toward everyone. People of both “high status” and “low status” will recognize that your kindness extends to all of humanity, regardless of race, nationality, occupation, gender, or whatever other characteristic people often use as an excuse to divide people and treat them poorly.

Focus on people's strengths

While no one is perfect, everyone has some strengths and positive attributes. Focusing on these positive aspects of other people can be beneficial for many reasons.

One, it makes us like the person more, respect them more, and treat them better. In return, this influences other people to like us more, respect us more, and treat us better.

Most people will like you if you make them feel good, especially when you make them feel good about themselves.

Although this may seem like commonsense, we often don't make a conscious effort to compliment other people on their strengths or encourage them to feel good about themselves. In fact, many people are quicker to point out the negatives than point out the positives. By reversing this tendency, we become increasingly more friendly and likeable.

Even just acknowledging the good aspects of someone inside our minds will make us unconsciously act nicer toward them. So if we find a relationship that is struggling, one thing we can do is take the time to write down a list of all the positive things we associate with that person.

Respect people's boundaries

Not respecting people's boundaries often comes off as controlling and manipulative. We should never make another person feel like they have to do something they don't want to do, or change who they are so that we like them.

Instead, we should acknowledge and accept everyone's freedoms and differences.

Of course, we all have expectations about how people should act and the kind of relationships we want to have throughout our lives – so it's normal to sometimes want to change people so that they better meet these expectations.

However, this desire to change people can be unhealthy and detrimental. Our influence over other people is limited, and we can't expect ourselves to completely change any one person. At worst, we may even push someone further away by trying to change them when they don't want to be changed. Sometimes you just need to leave people alone and let them do their own thing.

If you respect people's boundaries, they will respect yours. And in the long-run, being able to give people their "space" is key toward building healthy and constructive relationships.

Smile, have fun, and laugh

One of the best parts of having friends is being able to share fun and pleasurable experiences. Socializing is about *enjoying* the time we spend with other people, whether it's at a music show, playing sports, going out to a bar, checking out a new restaurant, or just stopping for a few seconds to chat.

What happens when you are enjoying yourself? You smile, have fun, and laugh.

These release neurotransmitters and hormones that make your body and mind feel good. You aren't concerned with your troubles or worries, you're just enjoying the moment for what it is – even if it's only a temporary getaway from a stressful day.

At the same time, your positivity can become contagious. When other people see you are having fun and enjoying yourself, they are more likely to have fun and enjoy themselves too.

When you find yourself laughing for no other reason but everyone else in the room is laughing, you are experiencing something psychologists call “emotional contagion.”

There is a lot of neuroscience that suggests that our emotions are contagious, just like a virus. When we see people acting a certain way, it activates neurons in our brain that synchronize with the

neurons in other people's brains. These are known as "mirror neurons," and they play a big role in experiencing the thoughts and feelings of others as if they were our own.

In the same way, when we step into a room with all sad and gloomy people, we too start to catch on to these negative feelings. Being able to reverse the cycle and radiate positivity can help everyone you're around become more positive too.

Share yourself

Sharing stories about your life is a good way to build deeper connections with people. The more someone knows about your life, the more they understand where you come from and trust you as a person.

It's possible to talk about yourself without being self-centered or egotistical. If a certain topic of conversation reminds you of something that happened to you in the past, then feel free to share your experiences. People will often appreciate your honesty and openness. They will learn more about who you are and feel more connected to you.

Often times the closer our relationship is with a person, the more we are willing to share ourselves. This keeps our relationships healthy

and strong. It also is great for our personal well-being, because we usually enjoy having someone to share our world with.

Let go of grudges

Everyone makes mistakes from time-to-time, but sometimes people can really hurt us. Often because of this we can hold on to grudges for long periods of time. We begin to stop speaking to certain people, and we may even start to dislike them or hate them.

Unfortunately, holding on to these grudges can often drain our energy and make us feel worse. We grow bitter toward the person. When we think about them, we are reminded of all that they did wrong to us – and we begin to think they are a terrible person. This can stop us from ever fixing the relationship and moving forward.

But the past is in the past and it can't be changed. Sometimes it's better to forgive someone and put your best foot forward rather than throw away the relationship because someone made a mistake.

Forgiveness is important for both yourself and others. We all make mistakes, but letting people learn from their mistakes and improve themselves is key toward maintaining a healthy relationship with them.

Be authentic to yourself

We never want to be in a relationship where we feel like we have to be a different person so that another person likes us. If you have to pretend or lie about yourself, the relationship is only going to last for so long, because eventually the real you will come out.

Positive relationships are built on honesty and trust. When those are broken, relationships can be really difficult to repair.

The occasional white lie can be fine – you don't have to really tell your wife she looks terrible in that dress – but, in general, the best course of action is to be honest with yourself and others whenever possible. If you are honest with yourself now then you will greatly minimize conflict in the future.

Know when to end a relationship

Of course, there will always be conflict here and there. We are a diverse species with many different beliefs, personalities, values, and goals. As a result, there are going to be some people who we get along with better than others. This is natural.

Recognizing what relationships are healthy vs. unhealthy is key toward improving our overall well-being. At times, this means ending

toxic relationships with people who only cause distress and harm to our lives.

Sometimes the ending of a relationship doesn't mean anyone is "right" or "wrong" – it just means you two are incompatible.

Other times, someone may actually be physically or mentally abusive, in which case you need to get out of the relationship to protect yourself from someone who is treating you wrong.

It can be tough to end relationships, but sometimes it's necessary. You may have invested a lot of your time and energy into someone, but if the costs are outweighing the benefits, then it may be time to re-evaluate the relationship and possibly move on.

In behavioral economics, there is something known as the "sunk cost fallacy." It's usually referred to in an economic sense – which is when we continue to spend money on a poor investment in hopes that it "turns around," when in reality we are just wasting more money. In the same way, we have to be careful not to continue to invest our time, energy, and resources into toxic relationships that are beyond repair.

Meditate on loving-kindness

Buddhism has a long tradition with meditation, and one of the most important meditations they teach is something known as a “loving-kindness” meditation. This technique is intended to spread compassion and good feelings toward all individuals – and it can be great for cultivating feelings of interconnectedness with society as a whole.

The idea behind this meditation is that we all suffer in different ways; and at the end of the day, we all just want to find happiness. Loving-kindness and compassion are the acknowledgement that all humans, at a fundamental level, want the same thing.

“Compassion has the characteristic of wishing that others be free from suffering, a wish to be extended without limits to all living beings...compassion arises by entering into the subjectivity of others, by sharing their interiority in a deep and total way. It springs up by considering that all beings, like ourselves, wish to be free from suffering, yet despite their wishes continue to be harassed by pain, fear, sorrow, and other forms of dukkha [suffering].”

- Bhikku Bodhi

You may not get along with someone. You may not want to associate with them. You may not want to be their friend. But that

doesn't mean you can't have good intentions or wish them the best. While you may not interact with the person or directly help them in any way, you can still hope that they find their way and eventually achieve happiness.

This may sound inconsequential, but the implications are tremendous. Cultivating compassion toward others (even people we will never meet) is closely linked to mental health and well-being. It makes us feel more socially connected to everyone and it allows us to maintain a positive outlook on life as a whole.

By the end of the meditation the goal is to build warm, positive feelings toward all conscious beings – even “enemies” and people we don't know. To learn how to do this meditation, please check out the “Meditation Guide” that came with your copy of *The Science of Self-Improvement*.

Final word on relationships

Relationships are important – if not essential – to our well-being and happiness. In many ways, our desire to associate and belong with others is hard-wired into our brains, and when we don't satisfy this desire, it can often lead to feelings of sadness and frustration.

The information and tips discussed in this chapter should give you a good *starting point* for improving your relationships. However, as with everything else discussed in this e-book, at the end of the day you need to put this stuff into action. Only then can you find what works and doesn't work for you.

The Connection between Physical and Mental Health

One of the oldest myths in psychology is that our minds are separate from our bodies. Today, however, there is an overwhelming amount of research that shows how our happiness and well-being is directly influenced by our brains and biology.

A big part of this influence comes from what we inherit from our genes, which we don't have much control over. However, diet and exercise also play an important role in maintaining a healthy body and healthy mind – and those are things that we do have the power to change.

Here are some of the latest findings on the importance of diet and exercise in mental health, as well as some suggestions on how to improve these aspects of our lives.

What you eat affects your brain

Your brain needs nutrients and a healthy diet in order for it function at its best.

High-powered brain foods are rich in complex carbohydrates (your brain's primary source of energy), fiber (which improves absorption

of necessary vitamins and minerals), lean protein (for building new neurotransmitters), and unsaturated fats (especially omega-3 fatty acids, which improve cognitive abilities).

You can satisfy most of these nutritional needs by following a healthy diet rich in fresh vegetables, fruit, whole grains, and high-quality meat and fish. Psychology studies have found that a healthy diet that follows these core food groups can significantly lower the risk of psychological disorders such as anxiety and depression.

In contrast, an unhealthy diet contains a lot of processed foods and saturated fats, like potato chips, fried foods, chocolate, sweets, ice cream, and other junk food. These are not only associated with physical problems like heart disease and obesity, but have also shown in recent studies to lead to long-term problems in mental health.

The scientific journal *PLoS One* published a longitudinal study in 2011 showing that changes in diet correlated with changes in mental health. Among 2,000 participants, those who made healthy changes to their diet experienced improved mental health, while participants who made unhealthy changes to their diet experienced a deterioration in mental health. This is one of many empirical examples of how our diets affect our brains.

Key “brain foods” to keep in mind and why.

Fish, eggs, and grass-fed meats. Several studies have shown a strong association between seafood consumption and mental health, especially mood disorders. This is because most fish (as well as eggs and grass-fed meat) contain high levels of omega-3 fatty acids, which have been shown to lower depression and anxiety levels, as well as improve memory and cognition. Limited research also suggests that omega-3 fatty acids may be effective in preventing psychotic symptoms in those with schizophrenia. In a six-month study of those with schizophrenia, those who were treated with E-EPA supplements (a concentrate of omega-3 fatty acids) showed a significant increase in grey and white matter, while those who took a placebo had shown a loss in cerebral tissue. Foods such as fish, eggs, and grass-fed meats are widely considered to play an important role in neural growth and healthy brain functioning.

Nuts and seeds. Many nuts and seeds are also good sources of omega-3 fatty acids, especially butternuts, walnuts, chia seed, and flax. Nuts and seeds are also a great source of protein, fiber, and vitamins – all of which your brain needs to function most effectively. If you are vegan or vegetarian, nuts and seeds are essential for maintaining a healthy body and mind, since they provide a lot of the same nutritional value that can't be found in other non-animal food products.

Whole grains. Whole wheat breads, grains and pasta are great sources of complex carbohydrates, fiber, and B vitamins. Your brain needs a steady supply of carbohydrates, which your body breaks down into glucose, the brain's main source of energy. When glucose is low, psychological processes that require mental effort (like self-control and conscious decision-making) are impaired. Therefore, it's important that you give your brain the energy it needs to function effectively throughout the day. Without the right amount of complex carbohydrates, your brain will become fatigued and inefficient – it needs energy to function! Other excellent sources of complex carbohydrates include beans, legumes, fruits, and vegetables.

Many fruits and vegetables. Many fruits and vegetables contain loads of essential vitamins, dietary fibers, carbohydrates, and antioxidants which improve brain function. Blueberries and strawberries, for example, have shown to improve memory and cognition by cleaning out toxins in the brain that cause age-related memory loss and mental decline. Most fruits and vegetables play an important role in maintaining a healthy and balanced diet. It is therefore preferred that you eat a variety of different fruits and vegetables throughout your day, rather than just increasing the quantity of any one specific fruit.

Water. Up to 70% of our brains are water. Drinking water is therefore essential for keeping our bodies and brains hydrated. When we

don't get enough water each day, this can lead to long-term declines in brain functioning, including stress and fatigue. Water is key for delivering nutrients to our brains, keeping them healthy, as well as eliminating toxins.

Coffee or tea. Studies show that a moderate amount of caffeine can be beneficial toward brain health. For example, one study found that coffee can slow down dementia and Alzheimer's disease, as well as improve cognitive functioning and alertness. Similar effects have been found in green tea, which also includes powerful antioxidants that help clean out the brain. Some research has also suggested that caffeine can mimic some of the effects of antidepressants.

There's no conclusive research on what exactly the "best diet" is for mental health. In all likelihood, there is probably no such thing, as it probably depends on many factors including each individual's biochemistry and the combination of foods they consume as a whole.

That being said, I think we all have an intuitive sense of what makes "healthy" foods and what makes "unhealthy" foods. The truth is most of us probably don't need to read a book on nutrition to begin making more health-conscious choices. When we choose to have that piece of cake while watching our favorite TV show, instead of the bowl of salad, we know deep-down that we are choosing the less healthy option.

So while some of these health suggestions may seem like commonsense, please remember that the bigger point here is that what we choose to eat matters to our brains and mental health. Therefore, maintaining a healthy diet plays a significant role in also keeping our brains working properly.

Please talk with your doctor and do more research before making any dramatic changes to your diet.

Exercise improves mental health and cognitive ability

Over the past decade, research has shown that exercise is just as important to our mental health as maintaining a balanced diet. In a 2011 issue of the *Journal of Applied Physiology*, researchers did a meta-analysis of over 100 studies looking into the effects of aerobic exercise and strength training on mental health and cognitive ability.

One finding was that exercise during childhood led to a faster rate of cognitive development. Children who were physically inactive tended to perform worse on academic exams and neuropsychological tests, while children who exercised showed improvements in memory, attention, and decision-making.

This was also found to be true in younger and older adults. According to researchers, there is solid evidence that exercise can benefit a variety of executive functions, including multi-tasking, planning, and self-control. Neuroscientists have also done fMRI scans in humans and rats showing that exercise can lead to increases in brain volume, specifically in areas of the brain associated with cognition and memory.

Exercise has also proven to be an effective treatment for several mental disorders. One study published in a 2011 issue of the *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry* found that exercise can substitute as a second medication for those with depression. Often depressed patients begin to feel better when they receive their first medication, but they don't feel completely well. In the past, psychiatrists have prescribed a second medication, but now research shows that prescribing exercise instead can be just as, if not more effective.

One of the reasons exercise may help alleviate depression is because it releases neurotransmitters like endorphins, serotonin, and anandamide, which are known to elevate mood and feelings of pleasure. This experience is sometimes referred to as "runner's high," and these biochemical levels are known to stay elevated in the body for up to several weeks at a time, contributing to improvements in happiness and increased self-esteem.

Exercise has also been known to increase neural growth and neuroplasticity, which helps protect against neurodegenerative diseases such as dementia and other age-related declines in mental health and cognitive ability.

Minimize alcohol, cigarettes, and drug use

The other aspect of our physical and mental health are dangerous habits that include excessive alcohol, cigarettes, and drug use. In many ways, substance abuse is a mental illness all on its own. It's also true, however, that many people who engage in substance abuse can develop other brain abnormalities and mental illnesses later in life, such as alcohol-induced brain damage.

Of course, some drugs can be taken in moderation and not have any adverse effects on your physical or mental health. Every now and then a study comes out showing how the occasional glass of wine or marijuana joint can actually improve certain aspects of our physical and mental health. But even so, it's important to keep moderation in mind at all times.

There are also some drugs that are probably best avoided altogether. Hard drugs like heroin and cocaine often serve very little long-term benefit physically or mentally (if at all), and the costs just far outweigh the benefits.

Make a conscious choice to be smarter about drugs. I can't realistically tell everyone to avoid alcohol or smoking altogether, but I think it's wise to do these things with some caution and mindfulness. Because, like all things that you consume into your body, it's going to affect your brain and mental health in some way.

Making changes to your diet and exercise

Most of us know the types of things we need to do to be healthier. The problem is we rarely find the motivation to start making these changes. Of course, everything discussed in *Changing Habits* is applicable to changing habits related to health. However, here are some additional suggestions:

Start with simple habits. You don't have to become a health nut over night. Sometimes the best and most sustainable way of making changes is to start small. For a week, just focus on substituting soda with water, or going for a walk every morning. You don't need to change anything else about your health right away, just take one small step to get you started.

Consume smaller portions. Often we have a habit of just eating anything we put in front of our faces. However, one way we can make this habit work in our favor is by serving ourselves smaller amounts. If you have to drink soda, pour it into an 8oz cup rather

than a 20oz. And instead of buying two slices of pizza for lunch, just buy one. At first you may be left feeling a bit hungrier than usual, but eventually your body will get used to the smaller portions. You don't have to completely fill your stomach up whenever you eat.

Practice being a more conscious eater. Next time when you eat, just focus on the process of eating. Don't get distracted by the TV, or newspaper, or internet. Just become aware of the sensations you get from eating (taste, smell, touch, etc.) and become aware of how your body is reacting to the food your digesting. Often turning our awareness to our body can give us important signs, such as when we are satisfied and don't need to eat anymore. However, when we distract ourselves with other things while eating, we often end up mindlessly consuming more than we really need.

Try eating with your non-dominant hand. An interesting study published recently found that individuals eat less when they eat with their non-dominant hand. Try switching which hand you eat with if you want to slow down your eating and consume less. The reason this probably works is that it switches up the usual patterns in your brain.

Bring a friend to the gym for motivation. I've mentioned in previous chapters the importance of friends who share mutual goals and can thereby motivate you more. No need to expand on this, just

a reminder. Instead of joining a gym, you can also consider joining a sports league together, or even a workshop in yoga or something.

Go to a doctor. Part of being responsible for our physical health is going in for check-ups or seeing a doctor when we notice something is wrong. It's commonsense for most people, but it's worth repeating. Even though it's our body at the end of the day, we don't know everything there is to know about our health. Sometimes going in to get an expert's perspective is the best thing we can for ourselves.

Final words on health

The main lesson in this chapter is that your health matters to your happiness and well-being. While your thoughts and emotions can sometimes seem unrelated to your body, the truth is they are often interdependent on one another. Even something as simple as being grumpy or irritable when you're hungry, is a good example of how our mind and body are intimately related.

As a result, you should pay attention to what you eat and try to maintain a balanced diet. You should also try to find time for physical activity every week. Our bodies are not evolutionary designed to be sitting down for 8-10 hours a day, yet that is what many of us do at work and at home.

Taking care of your body is an important priority to have. When our bodies aren't healthy, our minds can often deteriorate with them. If you want the healthiest mind possible, then having a healthy body is also key.

Conclusion

As you can see from all the previous chapters, there are a lot of different factors that contribute to our happiness and well-being, including our beliefs, emotions, habits, work, relationships, and health. These aren't things that we can improve overnight, but with practice we can begin to make gradual and significant improvements.

Before I end *The Science of Self-Improvement*, I want to go over some general principles about self-improvement that are important to keep in mind while moving forward.

Take responsibility for your life. One of the main themes throughout this e-book is that we do have control over the outcomes in our lives, and therefore it's important to take responsibility for ourselves. No one else can provide you with happiness but yourself. So at the end of the day, it's up to you to make the changes necessary to improve your life. Happiness is something that you need to build for yourself, no one can just give it to you.

Different things work for different people. While this e-book shares many different tips and techniques, it's important to note that not everything is going to work for everyone. Some of you may find bigger improvements when focusing on changing thoughts, while others may show bigger improvements from doing meditation or

exercising. The best thing I can recommend is that you show a willingness to experiment with different techniques. If you give them an honest shot and they don't work, then don't continue doing them. And if you give them an honest shot and you do see results, then continue doing them. It takes a little bit of trial-and-error, but you'll eventually find what works best for you.

Follow your values. One of the biggest traps in life is trying to achieve something because someone else told us we should. Instead of following our own heart and values, we end up chasing after things because they are what society expects out of us (go to college, get a job, get married, raise a family – to name just a few examples). The problem is we each have different things we value out of life. What makes one person happy may be radically different than what makes someone else happy. Some people may not want to go to college or get married – and that's fine, because those things aren't for everyone. It's extremely important that you reflect on your own values in life. Decide for yourself what you want to make out of your life, don't just blindly follow others.

Short-term costs can lead to long-term benefits. Our culture often makes us addicted to instant gratification. We don't like to wait for satisfaction or rewards – we want things *now*. The same is true for self-improvement; that's why so many people get suckered into "overnight success" stories and "magic solutions" that are believed

to provide instant happiness. However, the truth is we often need to suffer short-term costs – such as time, effort, patience and even failure – before we start seeing long-term benefits.

The present moment is your place of power. The present moment is the only time we have to take action. We can't go back into the past, and we can't jump into the future, so the present moment is our only real place of power. It's therefore important to seize the moment whenever we can. If you always put things off for later, then you can get into a nasty habit of procrastination, laziness, and inactivity. You'll find yourself thinking things like, "Oh, I'll start my paper tomorrow" and before you know it you're crunching last minute. Or you think, "I'll talk to that girl later in the night," but the truth is you just missed your only chance. When you live more in the moment, you learn to take advantage of opportunities when they come up.

Learn from the past. We can't change the past, but we can learn from it. Often times even unpleasant experiences (like mistakes or failures or embarrassing memories) can be positive because they provide us with new experiences to learn from and build upon. If we completely ignore our past, we are bound to repeat the same mistakes. But if we take the time to actively reflect on these experiences, we can actually use them as a valuable resource in helping to improve our lives.

Be optimistic about the future. Having a little bit of optimism can be important for living a fulfilling life. We should have some confidence and faith that we can improve our lives into the future. This is because our attitude can often become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If we go through life being negative and believing things will never work out, then often we can invite thoughts and behaviors that reinforce negative patterns in our lives. In order to reverse this vicious cycle, it's important to cultivate some optimism toward your life. Psychologist Martin Seligman came up with the concept of "learned optimism" to describe how individuals can change their attitude about the world by eliminating destructive beliefs and replacing them with constructive ones (this is where the techniques described in the chapter "Beliefs and Your Map of Reality" can be really useful).

Growth vs. perfectionism. When we think of self-improvement, we can often get into the trap of "perfectionism" – we desire for things to be exactly a certain way, and if they don't turn out that way then we can't be happy. However, instead of aiming for some idealistic but ultimately unrealistic goal, we should focus on growth and movement. It's much more important and more realistic that we aim for gradual and consistent change, rather than some unattainable vision of perfection.

You are always changing. Our growth and development as a person doesn't end once we become an adult. We are always changing. Even at the level of our brains, our neural networks are always being re-wired in the face of new experiences and memories. One important aspect of self-improvement is acknowledging that you are a dynamic and changing being. So whether you take some control over this change or let it unfold naturally, change is an inevitable part of life.

Forgive yourself. Throughout life it can be so important that we learn to forgive ourselves when we make mistakes or fail at something. No one is perfect, so everyone is going to do things that they later regret. Having a little guilt and regret can be fine (they are important emotions), but eventually we should learn from them, forgive ourselves, and put our best foot forward. Constantly beating yourself up over one big mistake is often unhealthy and counter-productive. No single event in life can make you or break you as a person, no matter how much you've messed up in the past.

Acknowledge what's outside of your control. While most of this guide is focused on things we can change about ourselves and our world, it is important to recognize that there are also many aspects of life that we can't change. I always like to use the weather as an obvious example of factors that are outside of our control. We can't choose what days the sun is out or what days it rains. All we can

choose is how we respond to these external circumstances. In the same way, we have little control over our genes and other factors that are left to chance and outside forces. *We don't control everything about our reality* – but we do have some control within those parameters. Acknowledging that you don't have control over everything is a great way to limit unnecessary stress and self-blame. When something bad happens to us, we don't always have to think, "What did I do to deserve this?" Sometimes bad things happen to good people for no good reason. It happens. It's a part of reality that sucks, but acknowledging that exists allows us to accept it and make it less painful.

Put what you learn into practice. It's so important that you don't become an "information junkie." Many people get caught in the trap of constantly learning new things, but never putting it into action. Sometimes we think we need to keep reading books or watching videos until we find that one missing piece of information that will change everything – but it never comes. The truth is there are always new things to learn, but at the same time you can never expect to know everything. Sometimes it's more important to take action in the real world, rather than keep your head buried in books. Try to avoid seeking constant information that isn't relevant or practical to your life.

I sincerely hope that you've found some value throughout this e-book. Try to keep these guidelines in mind as you experiment with new techniques.

I also highly recommend checking out the "Meditation Guide" that came along with this guide. There are a lot of useful meditations in there that I think you will find can be very beneficial to a variety of different aspects of your life.

Of course, learning new things about self-improvement doesn't end here. There are plenty of additional resources, videos, websites, and blogs where you can dig deeper into these concepts, if necessary (some of these are listed on the following page).

I highly recommend following me on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) if you want to stay updated on my own research and success in various realms of self-improvement. I honestly believe that learning this stuff and using it to improve our lives is a never-ending process.

If you have any specific questions about any of the material, please e-mail me at **contact@theemotionmachine.com** and I will try my best to get back to you as soon as possible.

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