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more from
life

by Scott Young

Introduction

Thanks for downloading this free ebook. I started writing articles on ScottHYoung.com in February of 2006. Now, over two years later, I'm proud to say that I've published over 500 articles, 3 ebooks and an interactive software program. In free articles alone, that amounts to about 500 000 words of content. With an archive that large, it is a bit of a challenge to read every article I've written.

With this ebook I've taken the my favorite twenty articles I've written and bound them together into one source. This ebook highlights the most popular (and some might say controversial) posts over the last two years. With your continued feedback and support, hopefully I'll be able to continue writing for the next two years and beyond.

Best,
-Scott

The Best Of ScottHYoung.com

Habitual Mastery (Parts 1-5)

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Habitual Mastery - Introduction

This is the first part of five in a series about how to change, improve and modify your habits easily and effectively. I have always been very interested in methods for taking control over these subconscious processes that run our life. A few of the more notable habit changes I have made include waking up at 6 AM every day, becoming a vegetarian, giving up television and exercising for an hour every day. I've reached a point where I don't consider habit changes to be oppressive and sacrificial but exciting and fun. Using the techniques and concepts I'm going to describe in this series, you too can gain control over this incredible important factor in your life.

Series - Habitual Mastery

Introduction - In the article below, we'll start on our path to mastering our habits. First we need to really recognize what a habit actually is. From there we need to develop the ability to become aware of these habits and our ability to seek improvements in them.

Conditioning - Conditioning a habit is the primary mechanism for installing it. In this article I'll detail some of the methods I've used to condition new habits to make them an effortless part of my life.

Leverage - What do you do when your habit requires more willpower than you have? In these cases, understanding the power of leverage can allow you to take a small amount of willpower to push through an incredibly difficult habit.

Replacement - Habits can't be removed. They must be upgraded or replaced. In this article I'll detail how we can work on replacing habits to prevent some of the unwanted side-effects caused by massive habit changes.

Experimentation - Now you will know how to change your habits more effectively and easily, you can really start pushing the boundaries for what is possible. In this article I'll give steps for what I feel is the fundamental key from taking your habits from average to excellence.

Our lives run on habits. We have habits for what we eat, how we dress and where we drive. Habits dictate whether we jump out of bed each morning or hit that snooze button... Just... One... More... Time. Habits decide what actions we take on a

consistent basis. Since it is our consistent actions that determine the direction of our life, our habits ultimately decide much of the outcome of our lives.

January 1st seems to create a lot of enthusiasm for people desiring to make changes. But, after a few short weeks, these people revert to their old habits. So disappointing is this ritual that many people have completely given up on the idea of being able to change their habits. These people think that, perhaps, habit changes are only for those with a lot of willpower or drive. The few people that are able to make changes on their habits usually reserve that power for extremely critical changes. Is it even possible to gain control over our habits?

Yes! Habits can be changed and we can even reach a point where even dramatic habitual changes are fairly easy. Changing habits is a skill. Like all other skills it needs both practice and technique. Once you are competent with the skill you can use these techniques to conduct your own personal experiments. Instead of sitting back and theorizing what a different set of habits would be like to live with, you can actually try it out!

What is a Habit?

Our brains are created from a very complex array of neurons. These neurons receive input from our sensory organs and deliver them to the brain. Each of these neurons is connected to thousands of others. By carefully adjusting the importance of each neuron in relation to another, our brain forms pathways of these chemical impulses, processing and interpreting the massive amounts of information we receive from the world.

In order to free up our cognitive abilities our brains streamline common procedures. Some pathways have been used so much that our brain has set up these connections to run through them automatically. If you've ever walked into a room and forgotten why you were there, chances are you understand this process. Actions like walking and driving were incredibly complex and difficult for you to learn initially, but now you don't even need to think about it.

Habits also serve as a mechanism for quick problem solving. Whenever we encounter pain, our brain immediately searches for a way to avoid it. Similarly, whenever we encounter joy or gratification, our brain stores those neurological linkages

to benefit from that pleasure in the future. Some people use food or alcohol as a mechanism to get out of depression or boredom. The habits that are closely linked to our mechanisms for getting into pleasure and out of pain are often the most difficult to remove. Because these habits are so difficult to modify, they are often the very habits we are most desperate to change.

Think of your mind like a computer. Your computer does millions of calculations without input from the user. Some programs often require little or no input at all to function properly. Just like habits, these programs will often run completely without your awareness. Some of these programs are malicious and destructive, such as viruses and spyware. Like these nasty programs, destructive habits often run without our awareness of them.

Awareness Must Come First

Malicious programs usually must be detected by another piece of software, usually an anti-spyware/virus program, before they can be removed. Similarly, destructive or ineffective habits need to be recognized as such before any changes can be made. If you don't feel that drinking several times a day is not a good habit, you won't make any effort to change it. Awareness must always come first.

Chances are you already know a couple habits you have that you would like to change. Maybe it is something major like quitting smoking, alcohol or drugs. Perhaps it is a smaller change like avoiding the temptation to check your e-mail every ten minutes. If you already can think of some habits you would like to change, that's great. The real problem is all of the destructive habits you have that aren't so obvious. That is why we always need to keep a very keen eye on our own behaviors and be very conscious of the many patterns that we run without realizing it.

There are really two methods to becoming aware of habits that you need to improve. The first is through internal review and the second is external study. Use both of these methods simultaneously to get the best perspective on your own habits.

Internal Review - Basically this means self-reflection. Internal review is done by carefully analyzing your current behavior. While I am a big fan of the weekly review as a method for analysis, this process should really be done all the time. Whenever you see yourself doing something you don't feel is a good habit, recognize it as such in your mind. When you pick up that donut at work, even if you can't stop the habit, notice that this isn't good for your health.

Another method for internal review is through measurement. By using an objective measurement system, often times our true behaviors will come through. If you aren't sure whether you have some bad habits in an area, try measuring the habit. If you think you might have some bad eating habits, record what and how much you eat for an entire week. This kind of measurement allows you to uncover habits that you didn't know even existed.

External Study - As opposed to internal review, external study is using information outside of yourself to gain insight into your own habits. Reading books is probably one of the best ways to do this. As soon as you gain more knowledge about a subject, you will become more aware of the habits you have that could be improved. More knowledge really expands your opportunities to improve your habits.

I know that before I had read a lot of material on the benefits of adopting a vegetarian diet, I was ignorant to how the meat I was eating was affecting my health. After several months with the diet I can attest to how powerful a change it has been. If I hadn't pursued knowledge from outside sources, I likely would have never realized such a fantastic area for improvement.

Studying other successful people is another great way to find areas to improve your habits. By modeling the habits of success we can often recreate a lot of that success for ourselves. If we only look to our associates and peers for areas where we can improve ourselves and our habits, our potential for growth is going to be incredibly low. Conversely, studying people who have done very remarkable things can give us a lot of areas where we can improve our own habits.

Habits are processes that run in our subconscious. They are constructed as a way to free up our cognitive ability from common tasks. Habits are also used to form the quickest route out of pain and into pleasure. Because so many of these habits run without our conscious control, making habit changes has to start by recognizing the ones we already have. Keeping a keen eye on our behavior and having a voracious appetite for new information can always leave us with more opportunities for growth.

The next article in this series will uncover the methods to condition a habit. I'll explore some of the various techniques and methods I have used to make habit changes in my own life. I will also talk about the role of willpower, and how we can minimize its impact to make the changes we want without all the frustrations of failure.

Habitual Mastery - Conditioning

This is part two of five in a series devoted to taking control of our habits. Previously I described habits as being unconscious procedures that our brain uses as shortcuts to complex and routine problems. In order to take control our habits, we must first start with awareness. Awareness of our habits is the key to controlling and modifying them.

Habits are simply the processes that we've conditioned repeatedly. Do the same procedure enough, and our brain automatically continues with the pattern when it is triggered. Therefore, the way to change or modify a habit is simply to condition a new one. The goal for any conditioning technique should be to use a small amount of willpower to initialize the change. After that, the habit should run smoothly without added force.

Conditioning a new habit requires conscious focus. While habits generally run automatically once in place, creating a new habit means that you must direct your focus

to override your default behavior to establish a new one. One of the biggest mistakes I've made when trying to change habits, is simply in underestimating the amount of conscious focus keeping the habit will take. In many ways, making big changes for diet, exercise or sleep is easier than making a little change because it is too easy to undervalue exactly how much emphasis is required to make the change.

Now conscious focus is different than willpower. Willpower is needed when the old habit served a positive benefit and pain is created while transferring that benefit to the new habit. Most of our habits serve a purpose in some way, even if they are primarily destructive. In the articles on leverage and replacement I will discuss these habits in more depth. Conversely, conscious focus is needed regardless of the difficulty of the habit. Conscious focus simply means forcing your brain to do a different procedure than the one it would do naturally. So if your default habit is to watch television when you get home, and you want to replace that with reading, conscious focus is needed to override the default pattern of watching television.

Willpower and conscious focus are resources that can only be used for a short period of time. If you are having to rely on willpower to sustain a habit, the change will not last. Habit changes are like launching a space shuttle. If the shuttle went straight up,

when it ran out of fuel it would just fall back down again. However, once the shuttle leaves the atmosphere, it locks itself into an orbit, so that it can maintain its height without any added energy. Similarly, effective conditioning techniques try to get you into orbit as soon as possible, so you can reach the most dramatic heights with the least willpower.

Natural Conditioning Techniques

Most of my experience with conditioning new habits has been using what I will refer to from now on as “natural” conditioning techniques. Like their name implies, natural conditioning techniques condition the habit in the exact same way the habit would naturally be run. These techniques tend to be longer and require more patience, but they are also a lot easier to pull off.

My favorite natural conditioning technique is the 30 Day Trial, which was introduced to me from Steve Pavlina. Although I know that his method has been adapted from many other similar 21 Day programs, I’ve found it to be incredibly effective. The essence of this trial is that you intend to focus on the habit only for 30 days. Because the conditioning phase is usually a lot shorter than it first appears, this

technique gets you to focus your efforts really hard for the first burst so you can reach orbit quickly.

I've been told that the minimum amount of time needed to condition a habit is actually only 21 days, but I like 30. The extra nine days may be a little overkill, but I've always found that going a little overkill is always better than underestimating the requirements of a habit change. Furthermore, 30 days fits nicely into one month increments, so you can start and end on the same day of the month.

To conduct a 30 Day Trial, simply set a goal to live your habit for the next thirty days. The habit has to be run through a minimum of once per day. I made the mistake of trying to modify the strategy for a 4 week (28 days) trial for something that repeated once or twice a week. This method simply did not condition the habit enough and I didn't feel any further along then when I started. The idea here is the number of continuous repetitions, not just the timeframe.

Another important rule for the trial is that you must restart it whenever ANY exception is made. I put emphasis on 'any' for a reason. Even if your exception was justified, a break in your repetitions will still damage the conditioning process. If you have to quit

the trial because of a legitimate and temporary reason that is still better than pretending you completed the trial when you should have restarted.

Depending on the habit this is how I almost all of my thirty day trials go. The first few days are usually a difficult adjustment, but you are working on the willpower you've built up from your resolution to go through with the trial. After this initial kickback period things start to get a bit easier and you may start forgetting to apply conscious focus on your habit. Then it happens.

Usually after about 2-3 weeks into the trial, something will come up that will really test you. This has happened in virtually all of my habit trials and they were the reason I failed when I was just starting with this technique. Often these obstacles are completely unforeseen and they may even make quitting seem rational. Getting sick when you are in the middle of an exercise trial. Being stuck in a hotel room without anything to do, except the television sitting there that you've sworn off for a month. Starting a new diet when you are called out to a birthday at a restaurant.

These moments are the ones that make you want to cringe. Often you didn't intend for your habit to impact these areas, but you know you need to move forward. This is why I really like the thirty day trial. A little bit of pain is far easier to rationalize if you

are aware that you only have to hold on for a few more days. Standard New Year's Resolutions make the habit seem indefinite which makes it so easy to quit whenever there is a problem.

The real beauty of conditioning is that after you've made it through one of these moments, everything becomes a lot easier. You are also satisfied with your ability to persevere. Once you hit the thirty day mark, you might even wonder what was so difficult about the challenge at all? Now that it is a part of your life, it no longer takes any extended effort or willpower to sustain. If you continued that habit for a hundred days, likely it would be harder not to follow it than to revert backwards!

If you are new to making habit changes, the thirty day trial is probably the best technique to start with. Try starting with an easier, but still challenging habit change. Don't try overhauling your entire life in the first go. Select a habit that could definitely be improved but is also something you think you can do. As I said earlier, creating habitual changes is a skill which needs practice.

Simulated Conditioning Techniques

Natural conditioning techniques work by implementing the habit through running it continuously in your life. Those techniques work incredibly well when the habit is repeated often and the habit repeats itself in a similar fashion. Since most of the habits we want to change initially fall into this category, natural conditioning methods are probably the easiest way to achieve results.

Simulated conditioning techniques, on the other hand, are conditioned by simulating the experience where the habit would be run. Often simulated techniques can be run more rapidly and they can also handle experiences which you encounter infrequently. For example, if you have a habit of losing your temper when you get in an argument, simulated techniques can allow you to condition a more empowering habit without having to test the new habit every day for a month.

The easiest simulated conditioning technique I have found is simply by pretending to run your habit in a false setting. Several months ago when I started my habit to wake up early, I decided to enact my wake up ritual repeatedly when I was awake in the evening. Using this process I made myself wake up immediately after my alarm went

off. I even gave myself a big smile to associate positive emotions with waking up. A few months after I did this, Steve Pavlina detailed a very similar process that he used to become an early riser.

Another simulated conditioning technique is through visualization. This technique involves deeply visualizing the situation that involves your habit and conditioning your new one. Unlike the natural conditioning model, this technique requires that you be very careful about how you visualize the situation so that your nervous system will activate the habit upon the correct stimulus. I have had mixed success with the visualization technique. I believe it has a lot of potential to change habits that would be untouchable by natural conditioning methods, but I also believe it is on an order of magnitude more difficult to successfully condition.

Whether you choose to use a natural or simulated conditioning technique to change your habit remember the critical rule: “When in doubt, condition some more.” If you aren’t sure it is conditioned, then condition it some more. Having an incredibly reinforced new habit is far better than one that will cave upon any obstacle. Remember to keep your focus on changing one habit at a time. Running three 30 Day Trials at once may seem attractive, but trust me, you can’t multitask habit changes effectively.

Condition your habits successfully and you can have highly complex and optimal habits supporting your life. Don't let your habits control you, conditioning the solution!

I hope you enjoyed this look at conditioning habits. In the next article I will discuss ways to set up habits when conditioning simply isn't enough. By leveraging our habit changes we can utilize a very small amount of willpower to set in motion huge habit changes. I'll also discuss the incredibly potent concept of identity and how it can shape our habits, hindering or furthering any changes we try to make.

Habitual Mastery - Leverage

This is part three of five in my series on changing and taking control of our habits. In my introduction, I discussed what a habit is and some methods that can give us some insight into our own behaviors. Once you are aware of your habit, the way to make changes is simply to condition an alternative. Using both natural and simulated conditioning techniques, you can modify your habits so that they no longer require willpower or conscious effort to work.

What if you've tried making a habit change, but you simply didn't have enough willpower and self-discipline to see it through to the finish? Natural conditioning models can permanently install a habit with just some short-term work, but what are we supposed to do when we don't even have the willpower to make it through the conditioning phase? In these cases we have to understand and harness the power of leveraging.

To explain leverage, I want you to think about the root word of leverage, a lever. Like a see-saw a lever is a long inflexible object (like a stick) that pivots on a central

point or a fulcrum. If you push down on one end of the lever, the other goes up. If you can remember playing on a see-saw when you were a kid, chances are you understand this principle.

The key to the lever is that by shifting the position of the fulcrum you can increase or decrease the amount of force needed to move the other object. If you've ever leaned back when on a see-saw you understand how this seems to move you down faster even if your weight hasn't changed. Similarly, the idea behind leverage is that you are attempting to utilize a small initial amount of your willpower to set in motion huge changes.

Commitment as Leverage

You may have realized this already by now, but the a large part of goal setting is based on the principle of leverage. The key to setting written down, clearly defined goals is so that you will commit yourself to action even when you want to turn back. In essence, you are leveraging a small amount of initial willpower to commit to the goal in order to leverage your action in the future.

Commitment is a form of leverage. By writing down your goals and reminding yourself of your commitment, you are using leverage. This principle doesn't just apply to writing goals, however. There are many other ways to use leverage to commit yourself to action.

Publicly announcing your commitment is an excellent form of leverage. Announcing your habit change will make you accountable to other people if you fail. It can take a small burst of willpower to take this step, but ultimately this will reduce the long-term willpower necessary. Because you don't want to look like a fraud, hypocrite or failure, chances are this small act will make your success far more likely.

You can go to even more drastic examples as a method to gain incredible leverage. My favorite story about this details a Las Vegas casino boss who wanted to quit smoking. He had tried many methods but just couldn't seem to kick the habit. Knowing he needed to leverage himself to make his attempt successful, he had an idea. This idea was to put a large billboard up with his picture on it. Right next to his picture he wrote that he would pay anyone who caught him smoking \$100,000.00. Do you think he quit? Definitely. By leveraging a small amount of willpower (and money) to set up the billboard, he gained incredible control over his habit.

Getting a little more extreme in your leveraging techniques might mean the difference between success and failure. If you want to lose weight, try selling all of your clothes except one outfit and buy new clothes in your ideal size. Tell a friend you will pay him money if you don't go through with the habit. Put yourself on the line. Again, if you aren't sure whether you can go through with your conditioning phase, get massive leverage on yourself to ensure you will take action through the entire period.

Pain and Pleasure

Anthony Robbins frequently says that the reason people fail to take action is that they connect more pain to taking action than not taking action. I completely agree with this assessment. If you associate pain to changing a habit, then it is going to take an extremely high amount of willpower to create the change. Worse, if you believe that your habit change is going to cause lasting pain in your life, change will be impossible.

Leverage is all about connecting pain to the idea of staying where you are and creating pleasure with the idea of changing. Conditioning a new habit is still an essential part of changing, but utilizing leverage can greatly reduce the need for willpower. If you link pain, not just to conditioning your new habit, but the habit itself then don't even bother starting because you are doomed to fail.

If you need to lose weight but subconsciously you think healthy foods are boring, dull and unsatisfying and unhealthy foods are comforting and fun, you will never change your eating habits. Lasting change in this case requires that you switch what you connect pain and pleasure to. I have used this technique to leverage many of my habit changes and I can tell you that it makes installing permanent changes far easier.

Before I had started my vegetarian diet, I had read several books and many articles about diet and fitness. Initially I had thought that a vegetarian diet was a little extreme and perhaps a little unnecessary. After reading in-depth on the effects that the consumption of animal products was doing to my body, after reading about the incredibly inhumane treatment of livestock and the disgustingly toxic chemicals used to create these products, that changed around completely. Instead of being something that I should do, changing this pattern became something I absolutely had to do.

If you look at the difficult changes that many people have made, it was almost always the result of applying this principle. Difficult changes only occur when we finally cross the threshold from “I should do this,” to, “I must do this now!” Don’t wait for that threshold to cross itself naturally. Begin studying, visualizing and researching

about the effects of your habits. Make the need for change so real and so convincing that it is a must, not a should.

Identity

Changing behaviors is relatively easy, in the short term. Anyone can stop smoking for a few days, start a new diet or turn off the television for a week. The biggest hindrance to permanent habit change is often at a far deeper level than conditioning or even pain and pleasure reach. The fundamental obstacle in making a long-term change is identity.

Your identity is simply the answer to this question. Who are you?

The ego has a fundamental desire for self-preservation. Protecting what you believe is part of your identity is a basic human need, even if that identity is negative, destructive and inaccurate. If you feel that you are an overweight person, that is different than having a few extra pounds. A person who has just a few extra pounds can lose them fairly easily. Someone who sees himself as an overweight person never will.

Changing your identity may seem like a drastic step. This belief is also the reason so many people fail to create long-term change. Most people believe that it is far more difficult to change who you are deep down than it is to change a behavior. So as a result most people try to work on their behaviors without working on who they see themselves at the core. As a result, the need for an overweight person to be overweight subconsciously ruins all of their progress.

An shift in your self-image or identity isn't really as hard as it sounds. The fact is, you've been doing it all your life. Think about when you were little, chances are you saw yourself as a kid. Adults were the people who made the rules and were serious and boring about everything. As a child you defined your identity often in terms of your family and parents. Later when you became a teenager you began to see yourself as more independent. Suddenly you began shaping your definitions in terms of your friends, social groups or specific skills. As you got older and entered the workforce, chances are you started identifying yourself by your career. If someone asked "What are you?" you would respond with, "A lawyer," or, "doctor," or "business owner." If you have your own children now, chances are you identify yourself as being a father or mother. Your identity has been shifting constantly your entire life, so don't make it an excuse for preventing change!

In order to make a truly dramatic change with regards to your identity you need to redefine yourself. If you were previously a smoker, you need to define yourself as someone who wouldn't even consider cigarettes. You must be the embodiment of the change you are trying to make. To do this you need to reorganize all of the elements of your life that reinforce your past identity. Organize your house in the way that this new person would live. Disassociate yourself from friends who reinforced your old identity and start associating with people that will encourage your new identity.

Luckily, most habit changes don't require a complete rewrite of your identity. This method is only necessary when your core habits, beliefs and behaviors completely conflict with the process of changing. Although the subject of identity and identity changes could be an entire article series in itself, they are very important to mention in terms of changing habits. If you don't see yourself as the kind of person who can make the changes you desire, then you can't. In these cases a drastic readjustment of your identity may be necessary to effect the change you desire. I bring up identity because I don't want people to use that as an excuse. No matter who you are or who you believe you are, you can gain control.

Leverage is Uncomfortable

If you've been reading the series so far you may be wondering about my initial claim that changing habits is a skill that can become fun and even relatively easy with practice. You might have been reading this article and started to wonder why leverage sounds so difficult and painful?

Utilizing leverage is often painful. The whole idea behind leverage is to create enough polarization between the pain of not following through on your conditioning and enough pleasure through your conditioning process to move forward even when you lack willpower. The more difficult the change the more initially painful it can be, but also the more satisfying it is when you are successful. Successfully changing a difficult habit is a very encouraging experience I can tell you.

Changing habits can often require a little bit of pain initially. The fun comes from enjoying the challenge, however! When you start your first few habits (especially if they are big ones) this whole process may seem very difficult and not very fun. However, once you've applied these techniques to enough changes, and you have seen enough success, you will actually get pretty good at changing habits. As Kathy Sierra

says, you will have crossed the “suck threshold” and your skill at changing habits will give you an amazing degree of control over your life.

So, if you are having trouble sticking to your habit conditioning process, try creating some leverage on yourself. Make a public commitment, set yourself up so you absolutely have to take action and put yourself on the line. Begin to associate massive pain to your current patterns and massive pleasure to the new change. If these techniques still aren't enough, you may need to take steps to redefine the identity you have that is stopping you.

In my next article on replacement I will discuss how we can smoothly and effectively replace our habits. If you change a habit the way most people do it is like trying to perform delicate surgery with a baseball bat. Finding our scalpel involves recognizing the benefits and downsides of the habits we already have. Installing new habits that don't compensate for the function of the ones they were supposed to replace is a recipe for disaster. Using this process will help you identify unsustainable habit changes that won't work regardless of the conditioning involved and allow you to make permanent change easier and more effective.

Habitual Mastery - Replacement

This is part four of five in my series devoted to how we can take control of the habit patterns that run our lives. Habit control must first start with awareness of the habits we currently have and their positive and negative effects on our lives. Once you can recognize your habit patterns you can take control of them by conditioning alternative habits. Through both natural and simulated conditioning methods you can recreate what your brain uses as its default pattern of behavior, making highly optimal and effective patterns easy to sustain. Making it through a conditioning phase often requires more willpower than we have available. In these cases, harnessing the power of leverage to move us forward is really necessary to take the action we need.

Changing a habit is more than just leverage and conditioning. Just because you can make it through a temporary conditioning phase doesn't mean that your habit will stick. Launching a habit is like getting a spacecraft into orbit, but if the orbit you make is unsustainable you won't keep it, regardless of all the conditioning and leverage you use.

Habits cannot be removed or added, they can only be replaced. This is a critical point. Many times we try to give up an old habit but then we have nothing to replace the habit with. Other times we try to stack a new habit without trying to replace the habits that already existed. In both of these cases our habit changes will fail because they are unsustainable. Like our space shuttle with the unstable orbit, our habits will crash back to where they came from.

Every habit we have has a function. The function of these habits may be irrational and have destructive side-effects, but they are all used for something. A smoking habit may not make a lot of rational sense, but it does provide some benefits. Smoking may be your conditioned way to relieve stress, relieve boredom or relax. The reason our brain uses the habit is that, despite long-range consequences, the habit serves a function. What do some people refer to ice-cream and snacks, “comfort” food. In this sense, the foods purpose is to comfort them and to relieve stress.

A habit change can only become stable when we also come up with other ways to achieve the benefits provided by the original habit. It will be impossible to maintain a lasting diet change as long as your brains method for reducing stress, relaxation, or fun is to eat junk food. Just because you’ve conditioned yourself to eat healthy foods won’t

help you when you are feeling really stressed and the only thing your brain can think of doing is picking up that bag of potato chips.

In order to successfully make a habit change you need to identify all of the areas of your life that will be impacted by this new change. Even if you have one major benefit, you will still be unstable if there are a bunch of minor losses that are unaccounted for. Make a list of all of the benefits that were previously given by your old habit. So if your habit was overeating and eating unhealthy foods your list might look like:

- * Nourish - Eat when hungry
- * Socialize - Eat when with others
- * Flavor - Eat to experience great tasting foods
- * Comfort - Eat when depressed
- * Relax - Eat when stressed
- * Speed - Eat when there is little time

Now lets say using the techniques I identified in the last three parts of this series you wanted to go about changing your diet. As a result you may want to try conditioning a new habit to eat only bland, healthy foods. You think that this diet may

require a bit more willpower than you have so you even apply various leveraging techniques to commit yourself to the conditioning phase. But three months later your habit snaps and you go back to eating the way you used to. Why?

The reason is rather simple. Your dietary change wasn't a single habit change. You thought that because it was one category of behavior that it was one habit. But your brain stored the habits you were trying to change as the six separate habits in our list. Even though the pattern is the same for all of them they are seven distinct habits with distinct functions. As a result the list you were trying to condition was:

- * Nourish - Eat when hungry (healthier foods)
- * Socialize - ???
- * Flavor - ???
- * Comfort - ???
- * Relax - ???
- * Speed - ???

Even though you were able to recondition your habit for nourishing your body using healthier foods, you had no alternative for the other five habits. As a result you were surviving on willpower (and leverage) as your brain couldn't fill the roles required

by these missing habits. Eventually when your brain couldn't take the pain of being unable to fill these habitual functions it reverted back to its previous state. Because your habits were so closely related, it managed to undo the only habit change you actually made.

Being able to recognize, not just the major habits that are associated to the change you want to make, but all of the minor habits make the difference between effortless long-term change and continuous struggle. Armed with this new knowledge we can now reformat our list and insert new habits that will fill the void created by removing the first ones.

Now our list looks like:

- * Nourish - Eat when hungry (healthier foods)
- * Socialize - Don't meet with friends at restaurants that serve unhealthy foods.
- * Flavor - Try various spices and cooking styles for more variety and flavor.
- * Comfort - Watch a feel good movie, talk to a friend.
- * Relax - Take a bath, read a book, meditate
- * Speed - Prepare several meals in advance to be reheated when necessary.

Now there are no voids in our habits and the change will be sustainable. When you are doing this exercise with a change you want to make, try to brainstorm as large a list as possible of all of the possible positive alternatives to your old habit. This may seem a little involved and complicated, but perhaps now you can understand why most people fail to make long-term habit changes. If you aren't satisfied with the alternatives you have, don't move forward until you have concrete solutions to all of the inadequacies created by your habit change.

Willpower is what we expend when we consciously deprive the emotional part of the brain of what it wants. All conditioning phases require willpower simply because your brain wants to settle into its old pattern and you have to focus your attention on your new method. Without accounting for all of the minor changes you need to make, any habit will require long-term willpower to sustain because every day the void isn't being filled your brain is fighting back against you.

Understand that this phase of replacing minor habits takes place whether we plan it or not. Some authors and speakers simply suggest the conditioning approach without thinking about the replacement strategy. In these cases the author is assuming that during your conditioning phase you will automatically find ways to adapt your old

habits to the new change. I think this is dangerous and unnecessarily costly. Changing a habit becomes a lot harder if you don't actively take control of your replacement strategy.

Even with a successful replacement strategy, enough leverage and a proper conditioning phase, some habit changes will be unsuccessful. In these rare cases the reason is simple. The habit you are trying to change to is broken and is unusable or impractical in your life. Dr. T. Colin Campbell, a noted critic of the popular Atkins diet, says that the reason very few people can stay on the diet for a long period of time is simply because you aren't able to eat enough calories on the diet. An almost completely meat based diet ends up having far fewer calories from the simple fact that you can't eat as much meat as you can carbohydrates. As Dr. Campbell then explains, you simply can't stay on the diet because your body is starving itself on the amount of calories you are ingesting.

Many fad diets can't be adopted into a successful habit conditioning process simply because they are unstable, unhealthy and dangerous. If you look back at our old list of benefits produced by our overeating habit, you will see that the top habit is to nourish your body. If you are starving yourself on your new diet you cannot successfully fill this

role. It doesn't matter that a minor habit of looking attractive isn't being filled if your body can't sustain itself.

Instead of asking whether people lose weight on this new diet ask if you know many people that have kept with the diet. If you know a lot of people that lost weight but noone that stuck with the diet for the long haul, chances are it isn't sustainable. Even though my vegetarian diet change seemed a little drastic at first, I was aware that other people has successfully stuck with the diet for at least several years, so I knew that it was viable for the long-term.

Replacement is a critical factor in making any habit change. By carefully examining the impact any change will have on your life you can greatly increase the chances for long-term success. If you identify a void where your needs aren't being fulfilled by your new habit while conditioning, quickly come up with alternatives. Like a house of cards, habits are all interrelated. Replacing them in isolation requires a delicate surgery, so don't go about doing it with a baseball bat!

In the final article in my series on habit changes I am going to go over experimentation. The first four articles of the series have been dedicated to installing the new habit patterns you desire for yourself. The final article talks about some things

that you can do once you become proficient with the skill of changing habits. By conducting trials and testing various results you can begin to optimize in ways that greatly exceed what you previously thought was possible. Experimentation is where the real fun of habit changing starts.

Habitual Mastery - Experimentation

This is the last part in my series on how we can take control of our habits. Habit control first must start with awareness of your habits. Without being aware of how your habits are effecting your life, you are powerless to control them. Once you have identified habits that you would like to replace and what you would like to replace them with, the key to making that change is through conditioning. Using a variety of both natural and simulated techniques you can condition in new responses. If you don't have enough willpower to make it through your conditioning phase, leveraging yourself to take action can allow you to tackle those big problems you don't feel capable of. Finally, by understanding how habits are grouped and by carefully replacing old habits with new ones we can ensure this whole process will last.

Habitual Mastery

If you've read through the last four articles in my extensive series on how to change habits, then chances are you already have a lot of ideas for how you can take

control of your habits. By investing the time to practice these skills, making effective habit changes will become a lot easier. Fixing the habits that you are aware need obvious changes is the first step. Once you've reached this level, however, you can start taking your habits from good to great.

To someone who hasn't mastered the skills of changing habits, experimentation may seem like searching for problems that are not even there. But for those who have become skilled making habit changes in themselves, experimentation allows us to take our habits a lot further. Instead of just theorizing about whether a habit change will improve your life, you can actually go out and test it. Don't guess what you can test.

Research

Just as awareness is critical to identify your bad habits, awareness is critical to help you notice how you might be able to take your habits to the next level. By reading and researching from a large variety of subject areas, you can continually receive ideas for ways you can take your habits to a new level.

The main problem with getting a lot of information is that the information is largely useless unless you can invest it into your life. Reading about time management is

a waste of time unless you can adopt the techniques described for yourself. Reading about health and fitness is also a waste if you lack the skill to invest those abilities in the form of habits and behaviors in your life. This is why mastering the ability to control habits is so critical. Without the ability to effectively control your habits, self-help is just something interesting, not actually helpful.

Read from a large variety of fields, don't specialize. While reading for your career or passion can give you expertise in that field, running your life can't be specialized. You can't delegate your life functions to another person, so you have to be a Jack of all trades and master of none. Learn about diet, business, finances, time management, spirituality, relationships, psychology and science. Don't limit yourself to studying your favorite subject when it comes to yourself.

Maintain an open mind with whatever you are reading. There are many times when I'll be reading something, especially something where the author has a different view of spirituality than my own, where a little voice in my head wants to say, "Yeah, right..." During these times I have to consciously turn off the little voice in my head. Use this voice when you are deciding whether or not to take action, but so long as you are still gathering information make sure your skepticism doesn't rear its ugly head.

Conduct Your Experiment

With your new ability to change habits fairly easily, you now have the option of suspending your judgement on an idea until you have tested it in your own life. People who can't effectively change habits are stuck with using their narrowminded viewpoint to decide whether or not to go through the process of making a change. With the power to test, you have to learn to restrain your tendency to judge until after you've given it a thorough testing.

Weigh out the possible consequences for pursuing your habit change. In almost all cases the potential upside if the habit does work is far greater than the downside if it doesn't work. By taking intelligent risks with your experimentation you can maximize your benefit. Clearly starting a habit of doing drugs or excessive alcohol is something where the potential negative consequences greatly outweigh potential positive ones. Using commonsense to decide whether the habit warrants a trial is necessary to filter out potentially great habits from incredibly toxic ones.

A successful experiment usually requires a minimum of thirty days to conduct. This is because any less than that and you are still in the difficult part of the conditioning phase. Knowing whether a habit is more or less effective can only be determined once

you've reached a point where simply running the habit doesn't take a lot of your energy. Dietary changes may require even more time to effectively study simply because of the added stress of your body adapting to a new dietary pattern. Unless you feel that the habit may be dangerous to your health, I would recommend ninety days for a full dietary trial. Keep careful records up to 30 days and then check back in at the sixty and ninety day mark. This way your body will have ample time to adapt to the new diet and you will start to be feeling some of the long term effects of the new diet.

Once you've selected a habit and decided to test it, there are several ways that you can conduct the test to help make your evaluation. Spending a week or two using these techniques before you actually start the trial may be helpful in giving you some data to compare your results with.

Journaling

Journaling is a great way to test your habit changes. The process works very well even if you already know you want to keep the habit but you need to have a way to work around temporary problems that come up during your conditioning phase. By journaling your thoughts and feelings during the trial, you can get a written record of how the trial is progressing.

To set up a trial journal either open up a new word processor document or buy a small notebook for taking down your thoughts. Every day you should include at least one entry where you write down how you feel the trial is going. Write down all of your observations that relate to your habit. Include observations on your own internal feelings and emotions as well as objective analysis that demonstrates evidence your habit is working or failing.

Journaling is probably one of the easiest ways to conduct an experiment for a new habit and it can be very effective. The one flaw with this method is it really lacks the objectivity that you might want in determining whether the habit is actually effective or just a placebo. This method is probably ideal where much of the reason for changing the habit is emotionally involved. If you are emotionally neutral between one habit and your replacement, more objective means might be desired to actually see if there is a difference.

Subjective Ranking

Although this process is also fairly subjective, ranking the status of your habit is a more objective practice than simply journaling your thoughts. This process allows you to actually have somewhat reliable data so you can see trends in your behavior and

determine whether the system is actually working. By using a ranking system you will actually have some numbers to go along with your progress.

To use a ranking method, simply brainstorm a list of measurable categories you feel should change as a result of this habit. If your habit change is to try a new diet, your list might include energy level, physical endurance or alertness. Remember to include areas that might also be effected negatively by your habit as they need to be weighed into your results. Once you have a list of categories, narrow them down until you have 3-5 factors you expect to be influenced by the ranking.

Like your journaling method, make a ranking at least once per day. At this time take your short list of factors and rank them on a scale from one to ten. It might be helpful to decide exactly what each measurement means. If your category is energy level you might decide that a 1 indicates that you can barely make it through your day without sleeping, a five is feeling tired but okay and a ten means that you feel like running a marathon right now!

This ranking process can be combined with the journaling process to give an evaluation that is both holistic and has a degree of objectivity to it. I used that technique when I was conditioning my vegetarian habit and I found it very helpful so I could get

some ideas on how it was going both in terms of numbers and in general feelings and thoughts.

Objective Measuring

Forming an objective measuring procedure is very hard to do for many of the things that we find important. It is very difficult to measure things like happiness, emotional control or energy levels. However, when using a subjective ranking or journaling process just won't cut it, conducting your experiment using an external, objective measurement can work very well.

The first thing to do when using this technique is to decide exactly what you are going to measure. Just like the subjective ranking process, brainstorm a list of categories that you feel would be influenced by this new habit change. Once you have this in place, decide how you are going to effectively measure each of these categories using objective means. If your habit involved increasing or modifying your exercise routine, you might decide that endurance and strength are two categories that could use objective measuring. You might then decide that the speed you can run ten kilometers might be a good measurement of endurance and the amount of pushups you can do would be a good measurement of your strength.

Finding objective means to measure changes can give you a level of accuracy that subjective means can't afford. Be careful in choosing what and how you measure your change. Just because something is measurable, doesn't mean it is worth measuring. Measuring something that is either irrelevant or is unrelated to the true effect you want to create is often worse than no measurement at all.

Taking your habits to a new level of excellence can be a curious and exciting process. Try to gather as much new information as you can each day to foster ideas for how you can affect the changes you desire. Once you have some ideas, using a combination of journaling, ranking or measurement can allow you to actually test whether or not the habit made a positive effect. Don't be afraid to try out crazy ideas that might not work. Be creative in your experiments and you might be able to find out new ways to take excellence to a whole new level.

This concludes my five part series on making effective habit changes. Being able to control your habits is probably one of the most powerful tools you can use in your life. If you don't currently feel you have much control over them, start building that skill today. Just as walking, driving and reading were very difficult for you when you started, effective habit changes get easier as you gain more tools, skills and practice with them. Reach new heights and start taking that control today!

Double Your Reading Rate

Reading is an incredibly important skill to have. Just about any form of education will involve reading, sometimes almost exclusively. You can often make yourself an expert on an intellectual subject just by reading enough in that area. But despite the incredible importance of reading, most people are wildly inefficient at it. Like a child that never goes beyond a crawl, most people have enough reading skills to move around, but they are far from running.

Over a year ago I picked up the book, Breakthrough Rapid Reading by Peter Kump, an expert in the area of speed-reading. From that purchase I took the time and energy to study other ways to improve my reading skill. I recently got a chance to finish Eckhart Tolle's, The Power of Now, and I read the last half of the book in under forty minutes.

When I did the initial test at the start of the book, I could read at 450 words per minute. A little above the average of around 300, but nothing spectacular. By using the

techniques I'll describe in this article I was able to increase that rate to around 900 words per minute in average situations, at least doubling of my reading rate.

I believe there are six major keys to improving your reading skill. Like all skills, success only comes through practice, so just reading this article won't be enough. But if you are interested in how you might be able to make dramatic improvements in both speed and comprehension, I've found these six points to be the best start.

1) Remember, Reading is Not Linear

How do you read a book? Likely from start to finish, never going back and never skipping any sections. This is probably one of the most inefficient ways to read. The beauty of text is that it is non-linear. You can skip down to read only my main bullet points, or read them in practically any order. Although the pattern of start to finish might be a simple one, it isn't always the most effective.

For most books I do read in a roughly start to finish fashion. But I frequently re-read passages that I want to get a greater understanding of and completely skim over passages that I feel are redundant or unnecessary. Good writers generally add anecdotes or metaphors to improve understanding of a concept which you can skim over top of if

you already get their point. Similarly, bad writers often go short on explanation of complex details so re-reading can allow your brain the time to form the concepts.

Not only is reading non-linear but it doesn't have a set pace. Although I read some books at about 900 words per minute, I slow down to 200 if the passage I am reading is particularly information dense or complicated. Similarly I can skim at over 1500 words per minute if I'm reading mostly fluff. Saying I can read at 900 wpm is like saying I can drive at 100 km/h. Speed reading isn't just about faster but pacing yourself for the specific reading task you face.

Most people read a book as if it were given to them as a speech. They listen to the author and follow along with what he is saying in a purely sequential manner. In order to reach faster rates of comprehension you have to learn to abandon this tactic. You can start this by not subvocalizing.

2) Stop Subvocalizing

When you started to read you probably read out loud. Your elementary school teacher wanted you to read the book and say the words aloud. After you mastered this

skill, you were told to simply say the words inside your head and read quietly. This is where most reading education and skill levels end.

To move to a new level you need to stop sounding the words inside your head or subvocalizing. Subvocalizing takes time, more time than is necessary to comprehend the words you are reading. It is almost impossible to go much beyond 400 or 500 words while subvocalizing. Instead you need to train yourself to read without hearing the words in your head.

But for most people this has become such an ingrained reading habit that they don't realize that subvocalization is a distinct process to comprehension. If I read at around a thousand words per minute, there is no way I could hear the words in my head while trying to process them. Instead I simply see the word and my brain automatically constructs what has been written. I'll understand a line of text that I looked over in a second, even though it may have taken at least five just to say the words in my head.

Since most people currently can't separate the subvocalization from comprehension, they are locked in at a rate of about 400-500 words. Moving beyond that rate requires that you practice reading faster than you can actually read.

3) Practice Reading

Practice reading doesn't mean reading. Practice reading involves reading faster than you can actually read. Chances are you won't comprehend much of what you are reading because your brain is so used to going at a slower rate and subvocalizing. The point is simply to see the text faster than you can read so you can untie the habit of sounding the words as you comprehend them.

You can start doing this by taking out a timer or a stop watch and simply viewing as much text in a book as possible in one minute. Use a book you haven't read before to ensure your brain is actually practicing instead of relying on memory. Mark out where you started and stopped. Count the number of words per line (use a quick average) and then the number of lines you actually read in the book to compute your practice reading rate.

Once you get used to practice reading at a high rate that you can't comprehend, you should slowly be able to actually comprehend at a slightly slower rate but still faster than if you subvocalized. I would often practice read at between 1500 and 1800 words per minute, and although I lacked comprehension skill, I could maintain it at about 900-1000, over double what I had done when I subvocalized.

But how can you practice read faster than you can read? How do you follow the text but still go faster than you can read? The answer is another of speed reading tricks, using a pointer.

4) Use a Pointer

Your eyes don't stay fixed in one spot when reading. Eye tracking movements have shown that your eyes actually quiver and move around considerably. And every movement away from your position in text requires a few milliseconds to readjust. These little readjustments in locating your place in a book add up to be very costly if you want to go faster.

Use your index finger to mark where you are on the page at all times. It should follow along with the word you are currently reading, slowly scrolling across each line and then back down one. It may feel awkward at first and it may even temporarily slow your reading rate as you adjust, but using a pointer is critical if you want to improve your reading skill.

Using a pointer is also crucial if you want to practice read. By moving your finger faster than you can actually read, your eyes get used to viewing text faster than your

brain can process what is written down. This will break your subvocalization attachment and can easily let you double your reading rate with sufficient practice.

You should use your finger as a pointer all the time. When I first started with the habit I found it annoying to hold the book in a funny position so I could use my right hand to scroll the page. I thought it was silly and maybe even a waste of time. But now I find it hard to read without a pointer. Noticing how much it has helped me focus my reading efforts it is a priceless tool in reading.

5) Eliminate Distractions

As a university student living on campus I've noticed a few of my friends who "study" while watching television. Not surprisingly, these tend to be the same people who complain about how much studying they have to do. Reading can't happen in an environment where external distractions are overwhelming.

If you need a break, take a break. Taking a few minutes to watch a television show, listen to some music or just close your eyes can often improve your focus. But don't multitask with your reading or you'll lose any benefits speed reading can offer. Worse,

because you have stopped subvocalizing, you might even skim through several pages before you realize you haven't comprehended anything that was written.

Distractions will hamper regular reading but they will make speed reading impossible. Subvocalization creates enough mental noise that it can hold your attention, but without that it can often be difficult to stick with what you are reading.

External distractions may be a problem, but internal distractions are just as bad. They occur when in the midst of reading you start pondering that conversation you just had with a friend, the movie you want to see or whether you should do your laundry. The way to remove internal distractions comes from clearly identifying a purpose and a motivation.

6) Find Your Motivation

If there was one piece of advice I would offer to improve your reading rate it would be simply to engross yourself in the material you are studying. If you can connect what you are reading to a deeply held motivation, and determine your specific purpose for reading you can maintain a very alert and focused state.

Most people don't do this. Instead they force themselves to study the book they know they should and end up having to refocus themselves every thirty seconds when their mind decides that this book is boring and would like to be somewhere else.

First, find a general motivation. This is how what you are reading relates to your truly motivating goals and passions in life. When I read my psychology textbook I focus on the fact that many personal development principles come from an understanding of human psychology and that I may discover new ideas if I look carefully. When studying ancient Asian history I focused on the fact that studying a completely different culture could offer insights into how Western and Eastern value systems differed, giving me new thoughts on whether my values are as absolute as I once thought. I also focused on the fact that many great philosophers such as Buddha and Confucius lived during these times with a profound influence on the ideas of these nations.

The general motivation should make you want to read the book. If you don't genuinely want to read the book, come up with more reasons it is attached to your deepest interests or it is going to be a struggle to move through. You can find a general motivation for reading any book if you are creative enough, so don't tell me you can't figure out one.

The second portion is to determine your specific motivation for reading. What are you specifically looking for when reading the book. New ideas? A practical solution to a problem? An understanding of a concept? A chance to flex your mental muscles? Figure out what you want to get out of each reading session so your mind is primed to intake that knowledge.

If you are interested in improving your speed reading, I strongly suggest *Breakthrough Rapid Reading* by Peter Kump. The book goes from beginner concepts that I've detailed to even more advanced ones that I have yet to master (such as reading several lines at once and reading sentences backwards to save time on a pointer backstroke). Speed reading is definitely a worthwhile skill and at the very least your friends will be impressed.

How to Ace Your Finals Without Studying

I've never been that keen on studying before an exam. I rarely study for more than a half hour, even for big final exams worth more than half my grade. When I do study, I usually just skim over the material and do a few practice questions. For some of my math classes I have yet to do a single practice question for homework. Most people study by cramming in as much information before walking into the test room, whereas I consider studying to be no more than a light stretch before running.

Despite what some might point out as horrible studying habits, I've done very well for myself in school. I had the second highest marks in my high-school class with honors all four years. My first term university marks were two A+'s and an A, for calculus, computer science and ancient Asian history, all courses with high failure rates. I also won a national chemistry exam for a three province wide district that I didn't even realize I was writing until I was called in and told to get started.

It's very easy to look at my successes and apparent lack of effort and quickly deem that it is an innate gift, impossible to replicate. I think this is bullshit. I believe that myself and anyone else who can produce these results simply has a more effective strategy for learning new material. With my system of learning, you only have to hear or read something once to learn it. Best of all I believe it is a system that can be learned.

Webs and Boxes

The system I use for learning I'm going to call holistic learning. But in order to fully appreciate what holistic learning is, you need to take a look at its opposite – compartmentalized learning. Virtually all learning is done somewhere between completely holistic and completely compartmentalized learning. Although people rarely sit exactly on one extreme, people who are close towards learning through compartments will need to cram and study for hours just to hope for a pass where people who lean more to holistic learning can often breeze through heavy course loads.

People who learn through compartments, try to organize their mind like a filing cabinet. Learn a new chemical equation, these people will try to file that information. Hopefully they will file it near some other chemical equations so that they will stumble upon it when they need to on the exam. Compartmentalized learners make distinct file

drawers for science, math, history and language arts. Placing all the things they know into little boxes.

Holistic learning takes an opposite approach. Learning holistically is not done by trying to remember information by using repetition and force. Holistic learners instead organize their minds like spider webs. Every piece of information is a single point. That point is then consciously related to tons of other points on the web. There are no boxes with this form of learning. Science becomes literature which becomes economics. Subject distinctions may help when going to class, but a holistic learner never sees things in a box.

When it comes time for exams (or any practical application for your knowledge) compartmentalized learners have to hope that they pounded the information hard enough into their head so it might come up during the exam. Holistic learners do the opposite. Holistic learners only need to start at one point on their web, but they can use that web to feel around and find all the associated information they need.

The chemistry exam I won for three provinces I wasn't even taught over half the information on the test. Because my web was so heavily interrelated, even when a node on the web was missing I has a good chance at guessing at what it contained. This meant

that on a multiple choice test I could only understand a third of what the question asked and still be able to eliminate answers. Winning a test that you don't actually know half the information on it sounds impossible, but not to a holistic learner.

Compartmentalized learning is an exercise in insanity. A comparable strategy would be if the users of the web didn't hyperlink anything. So to find any information you just had to keep typing addresses into your browser, hoping that it would pop up. Studying for these learners is akin to setting up thousands of domain names that all lead to the same information, so that you will hopefully get to the right place by just guessing enough. Not only is it ineffective when exam time comes, it takes hours to put in place.

Very few people are purely compartmental learners. For most people they manage webs of information holistically to a certain degree. But unfortunately, their webs simply aren't interlinked enough. Each subject usually has a fairly distinct web and each unit of information has only one or two associations. Like trying to surf the net when each page only has one or two outgoing links. Possible, but far from effective.

If you look at the structure of your brain, it will become immediately obvious why compartmentalized learning, organized like a computers file folder system, doesn't

work. Your brain is itself a web of neurons. Creating hundreds of associations between ideas means that no matter where you start thinking, you can eventually get to the piece of information you need. If a road is closed for some reason, you can take one of the hundreds of other side streets.

Maximizing Your Holistic Learning

Understanding holistic learning is one thing, putting it into practice is another. I've been learning very close to the extreme of complete holistic learning for so long that my web is pretty well interconnected. But if you haven't been really interweaving your web, then the best way to improve your ability to learn is to start now.

Here are a few suggestions for how you can better interlink your web:

1) Ask Questions

When you are learning something, you can make associations simply by asking yourself questions. How does this information relate to what we've been studying? How does this information relate to other things I've already learned? How does it relate to other subjects, stories or observations?

Be creative and try to find several different points of reference for every idea you learn. Figure out not only what things are similar too, but why they are what they are. As this becomes a habit, you'll find that you automatically remember information because it fits into your web of understanding. Ask yourself after you hear something whether you "get it". If you don't go back and ask yourself more questions for how it fits it.

2) Visualize and Diagram

One of the best ways to begin practicing holistic learning is to start drawing a diagram that associates the information you have learned. Better than taking notes during a lecture is drawing a picture for how what you are learning relates to anything else you have already learned. Once you get good at this you will be able to visualize the diagram before it is drawn, but start drawing to get practice.

When I try to understand economics it often helps me to visualize the relationship between different factors. I view cycles of money, GDP or price levels as a structure that combines all the different elements. If you can't immediately create vivid pictures of the information, try drawing them first.

3) Use Metaphors

Anything you are learning should be immediately translated into a metaphor you already understand. When reading Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince*, I understood his writings by relating all the examples of statecraft and war he offered to areas of business and social relationships which I already understood.

While visualization creates tight webs that interlink within a subject, metaphors create broad webs that link completely different ideas. You might not realize how that blog article on fitness you read two weeks ago relates to math, but through making metaphors you have a huge reserve of information available to you when you need it.

4) Feel It

Another technique I've experimented with to improve my holistic learning is feeling through ideas. This one is a little more difficult to explain, but the basic idea is that instead of associating an idea to a picture or another metaphor, you associate it with a feeling. I'm a visual learner, so I've found it to be ineffective for large pieces of data, but it is really helpful for data that is otherwise hard to relate.

I used this process to easily remember the process of getting the determinant of a matrix. For you math buffs, you probably already know that the determinant of a 2×2 matrix is basically the left diagonal minus the right diagonal. I was able to associate this information into my web through a feeling by imagining what it would be like to move my hands through each diagonal on the matrix. This is an incredibly simplified example, but feeling ideas can be very useful.

5) When in Doubt, Link or Peg It

Questions, visualization, metaphors and feeling should cover about 99% of the information you need to learn. They are the most effective ways to interlink ideas. But if you still need to memorize some information that you can't understand or relate, your fall-back can be the link and peg system.

Explaining these memory systems is out of the scope of this article, but the basic idea of the link system is to create a wacky, vivid picture relating two seemingly unrelated ideas so that a connection between them is forced. The peg system takes it a step further creating a simple phonetic system for storing numbers and dates. You can learn more about these systems [here](#).

Dirt Roads and Superhighways

An effective web should heavily interlink between ideas of a similar subject, but it should also have links that extend between completely different ideas. I like to think of these two approaches like comparing dirt roads and superhighways. You need lots of cheap dirt roads to interconnect closely related areas and a few superhighways to connect distant cities.

When I was learning history I would make dirt roads connecting the aspects of one particular time period and culture to itself. Linking the artistic achievements of the Song Dynasty with their political situation. But I would also make highways and superhighways. I would compare Song China to India and to the politics in the United States.

Some people build a lot of dirt roads but forget the highways. They understand things well within a subject, but they can't relate that subject outside of the classroom. Hamlet is one of my favorite literary works because in the classroom where I learned it, our teacher went to great lengths to help build superhighways. We would discuss how

aspects of Hamlet related to our own life, politics and completely different areas. As a result I remember more from that play than almost any other piece of literature I studied.

The End of Studying

Studying should be like stretching before a big race. It isn't a time to get in shape. I lied a bit when I wrote the title of this article. I do study. But I don't do it for the same reasons that other people do. I study to ensure my web is functioning, not to start building it. Even when I do study, it is just a quick review, never an all-night cramming session.

Some of you may read this article and start thinking that going to the trouble of drawing out diagrams and thinking hard about metaphors to practice holistic learning is going to take too much time. I believe the opposite is true. I have saved a lot of time using these techniques so that school has become just a minor time investment in the overall work I do each day. Practice holistic learning and you can spend less time cramming and more time actually learning.

Balancing Today and Tomorrow

How is it possible to balance living in each moment and the concept of personal growth and improvement? Doesn't personal development imply a certain dissatisfaction with where you are in life? At the very least, doesn't an obsession with personal growth indicate that you are constantly living in the future, rather than enjoying each moment? How can we remove this apparent dichotomy and get the improvement we desire along with satisfaction now? In other words, how can we live for today and still strive for tomorrow?

I would say outsiders tend to view those with a keen interest in personal development as falling into one of two categories. The first category is those who are unhappy with their current lives. These people use the pain of their current situation to drive them forward to take the action necessary to change it. The second category is those who are ambitious martyrs. These people are incredibly driven by dreams, goals and success. Often this obsessive goal setting can get away from them as they are never satisfied with what they currently have. These people use the pleasure they associate with their new life to drive them forward.

If you currently feel that you are in one of these two groups, I'm not trying to make you feel bad. Ambition and the desire to improve your life are not negative qualities, even if their focus seems shifted a lot more towards the future rather than the present. If you want more than what you are experiencing right now, then go out and get it!

There is, however, a secret third category of people who pursue personal development. These are the people that pursue growth in all its forms irrespective of their current position in life. At the same time, these people don't seem to suffer from the sense of emptiness that comes from constantly pursuing what is better without appreciating what you have. You get the feeling that these people would be just as happy living on a park bench under some newspapers as they would governing thousands of employees from the pinnacle of a metropolis skyscraper.

Driven by a secret internal motivation, these people can easily shake off massive failures. When a turn of bad luck hits them and they lose everything, they seem to be just as happy picking up the pieces as they were when they sat at the top. These people seem unusually happy, as if their happiness was a completely separate idea from the things they spent so much time and energy pursuing. These people are also fulfilled. You can just sense that they are comfortable with the idea that their life might end today and that they would be satisfied with the journey their life has taken.

These remarkable few individuals seem to have balanced today with tomorrow very well, wouldn't you say? It seems that, paradoxically, they can have their cake and eat it to. Something about them seems to allow them to live each and every moment they have to the fullest, and at the same time enjoy continuous increases in the quality of the life around them. How do these people balance today with tomorrow?

A New Paradigm

A 'paradigm change' is just about one of the most cliched words used in marketing, business and self-help. So I'm going to have to apologize to my more cynical readers for using it once again. For those who haven't seen the word used so liberally, what does a paradigm change even mean?

A paradigm is a way of looking at reality. In essence, your paradigm is your beliefs and attitudes, your perception, that governs how you feel and interpret the world around you. Therefore, a paradigm change represents a fundamental shift in your perception of reality. The best example of a paradigm would be the old saying, "Do you see the glass as half-full or half-empty." There are two ways you can see that glass of water, or rather two different paradigms, both equally correct, yet vastly different interpretations.

Balancing today with tomorrow requires a paradigm change. Resolving this apparent conflict cannot come within the mindset you are currently using. Just like trying to see the color blue while wearing red glasses, you will not be able to see the solution to this problem with the current beliefs and perceptions you have about reality. To understand this, let's look at what perceptions created this problem in the first place.

What is the purpose of setting goals, achieving and improvement? The answer would have to be to get a better quality of life for yourself. What is the purpose of living in the moment? Is it not to appreciate the quality of life you already enjoy? These ideas are both correct, to an extent, but since they are virtually the opposite of one another, how can you possibly integrate them both to their maximum?

I want you to think a little bit more by what we are describing by choosing each route. Personal growth says, "Get what you want." Living in the moment says, "Want what you have." If you look closely, you can see that we are putting our focus on our position in life. Personal growth is really saying, "I want a greater position in life" Living in the moment is really saying, "I am content with the position I am already at in life."

This is what I am going to refer to from now on as a position based paradigm, or positional thinking. This is the paradigm that says we should focus on our current or

future positions in life. If they are excellent positions then we can be happy, if they are not excellent positions then we will be depressed.

Now I'm going to tell you something that might surprise you, this paradigm is broken. This lens, from which you view life, has a flaw in it. This flaw obstructs your ability to live each moment and improve your future. I'm going to go even further than that, however, I'm going to argue that this flaw will greatly limit you in the true happiness, satisfaction and fulfillment you can draw from life. I'm even going to tell you that a position based paradigm does not represent reality. Like the color blue, true happiness and fulfillment cannot exist while you wear this lens.

A Velocity Based Paradigm

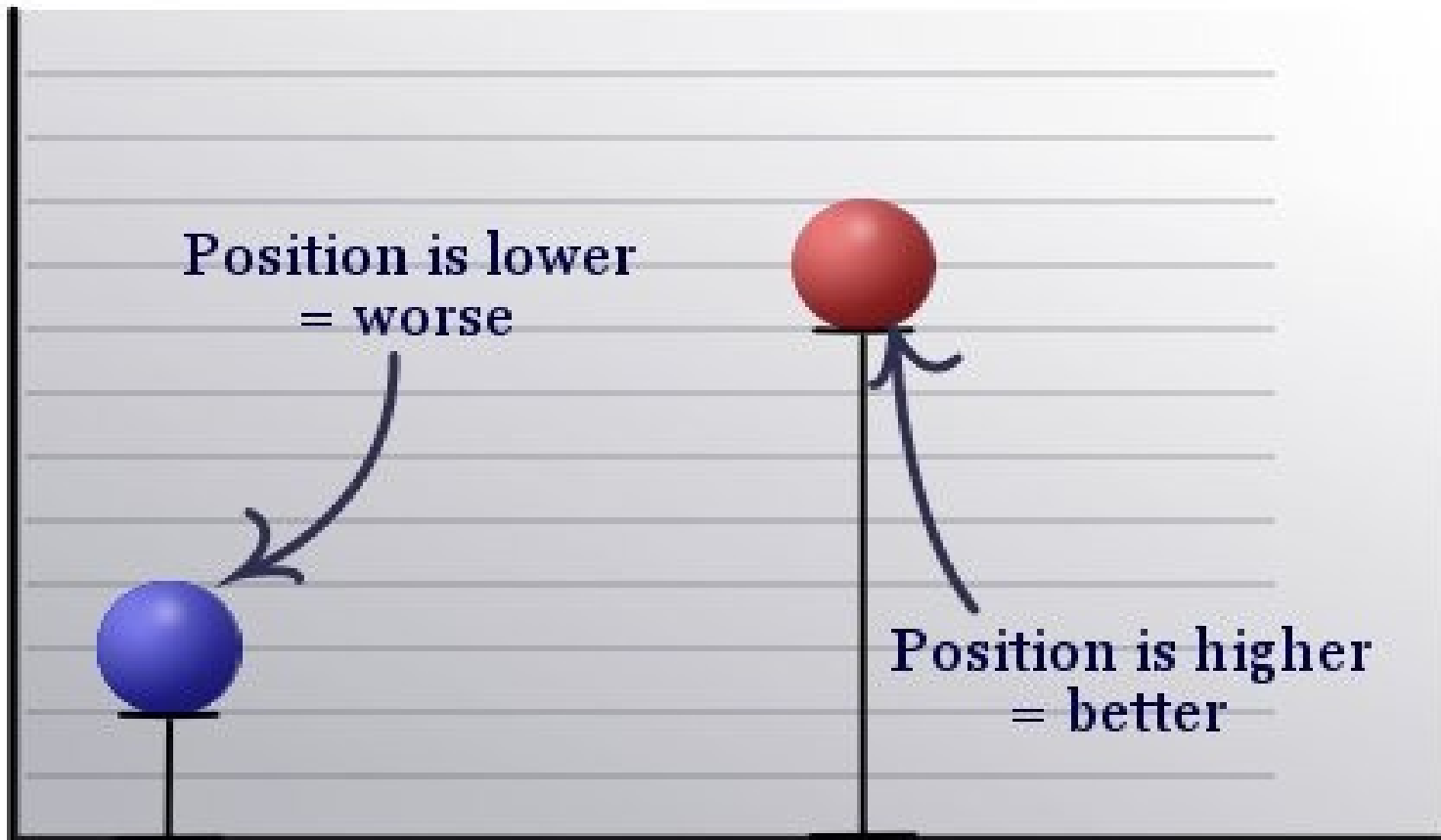
Physics has come up with many terms to describe placement, movement and speed. Position is used to describe how far something has traveled. The term, velocity, is used to describe how fast something is traveling. A Japanese bullet train going several hundred kilometers per hour has a far greater velocity than the bicycle you ride. The distinction between position and velocity is a near perfect analogy for finding to the solution of our own problem.

The old position based paradigm told us to focus on where we are in life. If we have a big house, a nice family and are in good health, then we can be happy. If we are poor, miserable and alone then we are depressed. Pretty simple. In this paradigm, our main focus is on our current position.

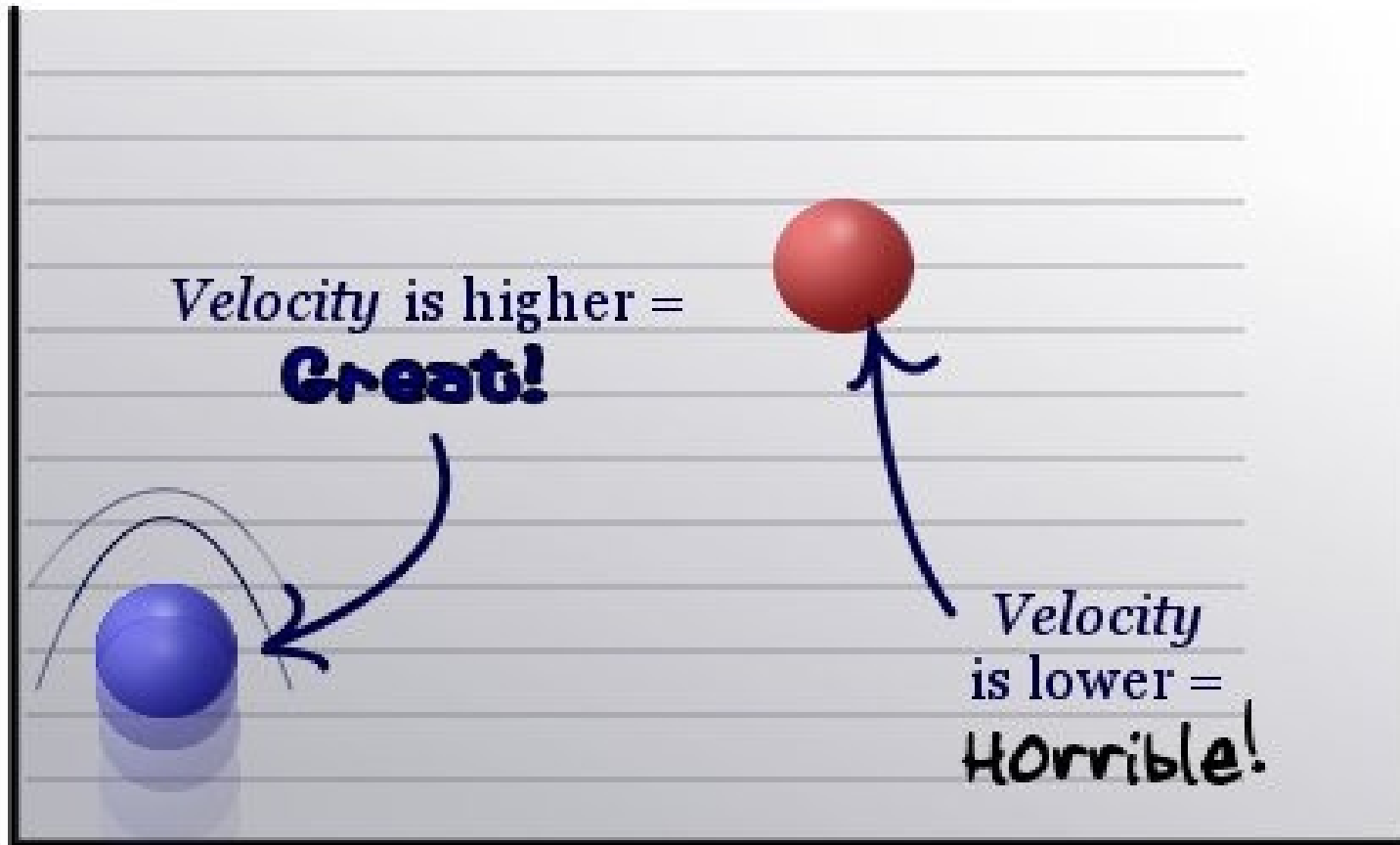
Some take this position based thinking to a slightly higher level when they don't think about where they are but where they are going. Instead these people draw their level of happiness from the position they feel they will be in the future. Although this is an improvement, the cost of being unsatisfied with today is simply too high a price to pay for this paradigm.

There is an alternative paradigm, however. This is a velocity based paradigm. In this paradigm, where you are doesn't matter. It doesn't even matter where you are going to end up. From this perspective, our focus not where we are going, but rather, the rate we are getting there. This perspective tells us that being homeless or a millionaire makes no difference. It is only the rate at which they are improving that distinguishes them.

If you look at the diagram of our position based paradigm, you would have to say that the red ball is better than the blue ball. The red ball is certainly in a higher position than the blue one. Therefore the red ball is better.



Now look at our diagram of a velocity based paradigm. Look at how fast that blue ball is moving! Using our velocity based paradigm we can see that, even though the blue ball is well below the red one, it is much better.



At this point you may be able to understand the benefits of a velocity based paradigm, but you might argue that it isn't accurate either. A focus on velocity might resolve the conflict between today and tomorrow, but surely you can't be saying that it represents reality? You might say, "I am happier now that I have more than I used to, despite the fact that my velocity has not changed all that much." Why would focusing on the velocity be any better than focusing on the position in the long run?

To answer this I'm going to need to delve past what some of you might consider your comfort zone of thought. I've already challenged your perceptions by suggesting an alternative to the rather ubiquitous position-based lens, but in order to show you that my alternative is actually the accurate way to view reality, we are going to have to go even deeper. Are you ready to take the red pill?

Implications of a Velocity-Based Paradigm

Time to think about your life. You were born some time ago and you will die some time in the future. During this life you will achieve a lot of things. You will probably get a house, earn an income, and collect a variety of things that can be categorized as material wealth. When you die, these things will cease any meaning. Whatever lies beyond our own death we can be sure that it doesn't take American Express.

A realization of this makes some people argue that the collection of material wealth is meaningless. If you cannot take all the money and wealth you have collected in this life to wherever you go after you are dead, then clearly achieving a lot of material wealth has no significance in the long run, right?

What about people, friends and relationships? People will come into and out of your life all the time. Sometimes this is because people simply fade away from us and the relationship goes from close friends to acquaintances and the relationship slowly weakens. Sometimes the relationship is brought to an abrupt end when someone moves, gets divorced or passes away. You don't need to think to the afterlife to know that human relationships are impermanent.

Like the wandering traveler, people will come into and out of your lives. Since the members of the living don't accompany the dead, it could be argued that even relationships don't make it into the afterlife. Although we can often draw more meaning from people than things, they too are impermanent facets of life.

What about skills, knowledge and identity? As humans we don't have a lot of experience in losing skills or knowledge. Some would say that it is our fundamental identity as human beings that we should place our reliance on. Often called a soul, this permanent unit of human consciousness is eternal and unchanging.

The problem is that nobody knows on a truly esoteric level whether this is correct. We could be eternal souls in the vast dream of the universe. We could also just be incredibly complex machinery of trillions of neurological connections that ceases to exist the moment our machinery is destroyed. Although it is more comfortable to believe in a soul, since we can't deny the possibility that it is an illusion, we can't truly rely on it.

Twenty six hundred years ago there lived a prince in northern India (present-day Nepal) named Gautama. Growing up in a sheltered life, tucked away from the miseries of the world, Gautama had not even heard of death until a servant had to explain it to

him. Upon seeing all of the suffering in the world, Gautama began his personal quest to understand and remove himself and others from the universal despair he saw around him. After meditating and traveling for six years, this man achieved enlightenment and would from then on be referred to as Buddha or “the awakened one.”

Buddha’s realization of enlightenment was that we only have this moment in our life. The only thing that is real is our experiences right now, in this moment. We can’t know for certain what will happen when we die just as we can’t know what it was like before we were born. The past has already occurred and only exists as a fuzzy memory. The future hasn’t yet happened and lies only in the realm of speculation.

This is the perspective that creates a velocity based paradigm. If position is rendered irrelevant because of the incredible impermanence of life, all we have is this moment. Velocity is the only thing that we have direct control over. Position is going to change and is unstable. As a result, focusing only on how much growth we are experiencing at any given moment is the only true indicator of success.

Velocity Based Goal Setting

Where does this leave goal setting? I mean, isn't the practice of goal setting the process of isolating a position and working towards achieving it? Wouldn't goal setting be the very epitome of positional thinking?

The answer to this question relies in looking at goal setting in a very different way. Velocity based goal setting, when done correctly, is actually a far better method for reaching goals and experiencing growth than its position based alternative. With velocity based goal setting concepts many of the common ailments associated with goal setting are completely removed from the picture.

A velocity-based goal looks exactly like your typical position based ones. It is written down, has a deadline and is described in objective terms. If you are unfamiliar on goal setting I suggest you read this article to make sense of this.

The major distinction between a velocity based goal and a position based one is mostly in how you view the goal. Positional goals are usually viewed as a means to achieve something. If I set a goal to lose x pounds in three months, then what I am

pursuing is the goal itself. Velocity based goals take a completely different approach. The purpose of a velocity based goal is to serve to direct, focus and amplify the growth you are experiencing right now.

Imagine life is like climbing an infinitely large cliff side. Positional thinking tells you to try and get as high up the cliff as you can. Positional goals are used to reach new plateaus on the cliff. Velocity based thinking tells us that getting really high up on the cliff is irrelevant given its infinite nature. Instead velocity based thinking tells us that the true experience of life has to come from the rate at which we are climbing the cliff. Sitting at one notch of the cliff for too long is boring and unsatisfying regardless of your height. Velocity based goals in this sense are not used to reach the plateaus themselves, these goals are used to encourage, push and measure the rate at which you are climbing.

The key difference between positional goals and velocity based goals is simple. If you fail to achieve a positional goal, this is usually very demotivating. This is often why so many new goal setters fail to continue with the practice. The pain of failing to achieve when you've tried your best is often too great. Velocity based goals remove this problem entirely. Because the goal was simply a servant of directing and pushing your own growth, as long as you know you were trying your best (maximum velocity

possible) then the goal was successful regardless of whether you underestimated the deadline necessary.

Aspects of position based goal setting can still be useful. In some cases, the object of your pursuit can serve as an accelerant for your own growth. Earning a certain income might allow you more resources to invest in your future growth. This aspect of positional goals can still fit into a velocity based scheme. Your goals will only cannibalize you when you start making the object of your pursuit, the primary reason to set the goal rather than the growth provided by working towards it.

Workaholism

Doesn't a velocity-based paradigm imply a workaholic attitude? Even if you are satisfied with your progress for today and for your future, doesn't this mean that you can't ever sit down? Even though you are no longer waiting to be happy and satisfied in the future, it seems like an awful race to be in where you are constantly trying to go faster and faster.

This is another problem that happens when most people view growth. Most people think growth is only goal-setting, courage, dream-big-and-sacrifice thinking. I like to classify two distinct forms of personal growth. They are vertical and lateral growth.

Vertical growth is the reach for the skies, dream big and set goals kind of thinking. This is the kind of growth that has an element of stretching and pushing associated. Goal setting and discipline are usually the key tools for success in this area of growth. This kind of growth is usually marked by difficulty and challenge. The primary effect of vertical growth is a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment. Like our cliffside analogy, vertical growth is like climbing higher and higher on the cliff.

Lateral growth is a completely different, yet equally valid, form of growth. This kind of growth has more to do with broadening our opportunities, exploring and being curious. If you say someone is very worldly then you are implying they have developed a high-degree of lateral growth in their life. The primary tools of lateral growth are creativity, spontaneity and courage. With this type of growth you are not climbing up the cliff but rather going sideways.

Using both forms of growth allows you to see as much of the cliff as possible before you have stop climbing. By integrating the distinction of vertical and lateral growth into

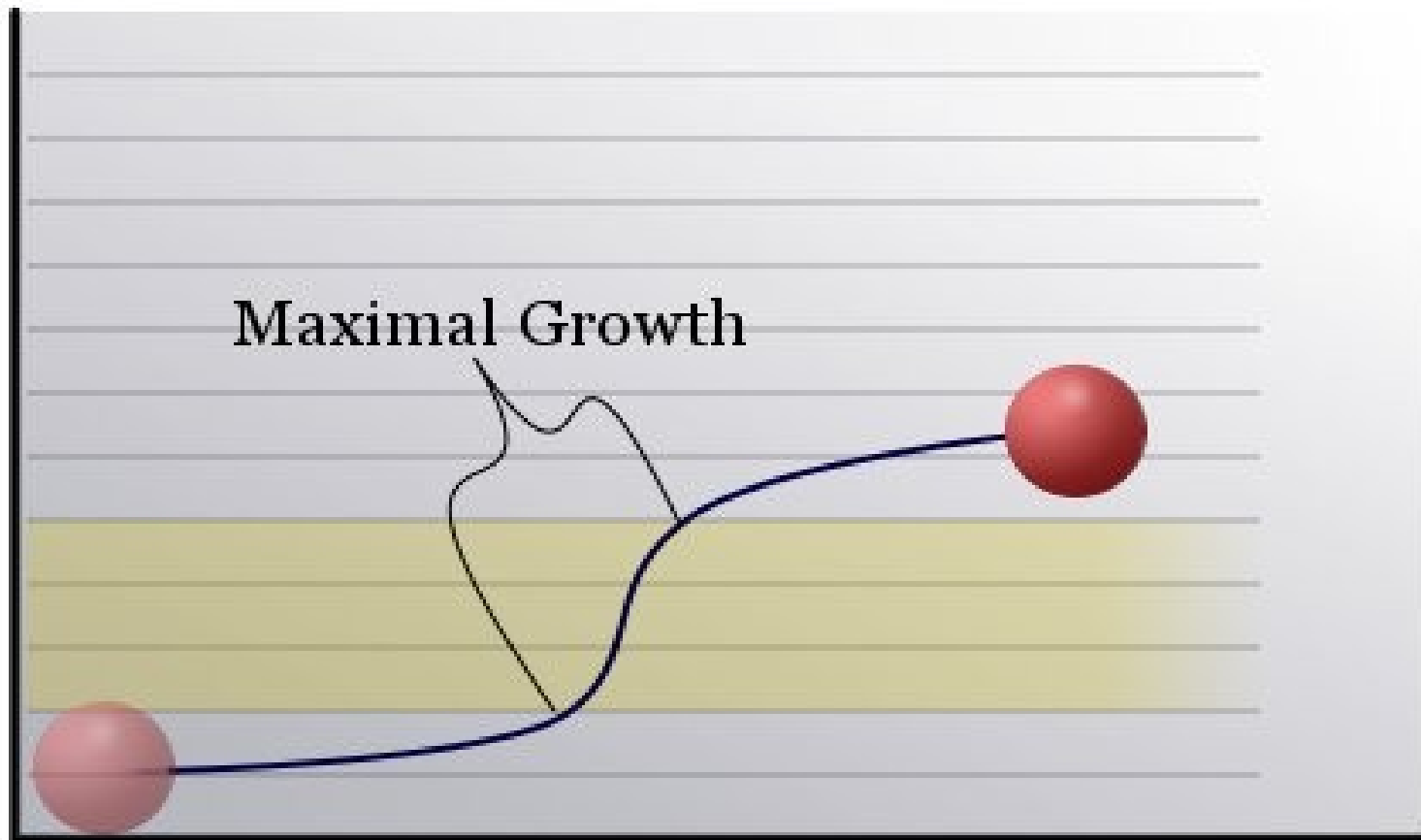
our velocity based paradigm, virtually all of the common excuses for not pursuing any growth at all seem completely irrelevant. If you would like more information on vertical and lateral growth, check out my introduction and follow-up article.

Velocity Based Thinking is Actually Better for Position?

Although we have already said that thinking about our position in life is a flawed paradigm, you might be surprised to find out that this form of thinking isn't actually the most successful way to achieve a high position anyways. A velocity based paradigm is actually far more effective in improving our position.

The reason is actually rather simple. Positional based thinking is built on the notion of competition. As a result, we strive to make leaps ahead in our position based on where we are compared to others. If we are on the top then we slow down, for what is the point of trying really hard when you are already in the lead? If we are on the bottom, negativity and pessimism often cripple our growth. Position based thinkers tend to only achieve a maximum velocity when they feel they need to increase their position, yet that positional increase is achievable.

This is a diagram representing our model of our positional thinking red ball. As you can see, the red ball is only really moving when they are within a certain height of the graph. Too low and the ball is too depressed to really push themselves. Too high and the ball is complacent and stagnant.



Velocity based thinking doesn't have this weakness. People who truly live this ideal are at a maximal velocity all of the time. Being at the top or bottom holds no distinction to these people. Rich or poor, strong or weak, healthy or ill these people are always traveling at a speed which is the most they can possibly achieve.

This diagram represents our velocity based thinker. The blue ball shows us that the velocity is at a maximum regardless of the balls position. As you can see, this means that, in the long run, the velocity based thinker is actually much further than the position based thinker.



Living a life through a velocity based mindset is far easier said than done. It takes work, discipline and practice. Practicing this new paradigm is the key to installing it. Hopefully this article has helped some positional thinkers realize what steps they need to take and has reinforced the ideas for you current velocity based masters.

If you are currently setting very positional based goals and are feeling dissatisfied with the results, maybe it is time to reevaluate them. Often getting this new perspective can allow you to use goals in a much more effective manner. Instead of making your goals a terrific sacrifice for the future, your goals become an accelerant of your own growth today.

Whoever said, “Life is a journey, not a destination,” certainly knew what they were talking about. Life isn’t a destination. And, if we follow Buddha’s thoughts, the destination is completely illusory. All we have is this moment in our journey. As a result, we need to make our moment in the journey the best it can be. Do this and the problem of balancing today and tomorrow is solved. In fact, look at the problem this way and chances are you will realize that the problem never even existed.

Why Atheism?

“Isn’t it enough to see that a garden is beautiful without having to believe that there are fairies at the bottom of it too.” - Douglas Adams

I’m an atheist. I’d like to tell you why. Most of the arguments for being an atheist point to how it is more scientific or probable. I’m sure you’ve heard those before, so I’m not going to touch them. Instead, I’d like to focus on the reasons atheism can lead to a greater quality of life.

That said, I’m not here to convert anyone, just expose people to different ideas. I’m not on a crusade against religion. I’ve read many different books on various world religions. Even if I disagree with some of the founding points, the exposure to those ideas improved my philosophy towards life.

Common Arguments Against Atheism

I'd like to start by giving my rebuttal to many of the common arguments against atheism. I'm not even going to touch the circular logic of going to Hell or blasphemy. But here are some of the supposedly sensible objections to denying the existence of a god:

Morality

Morality doesn't need to come from the threat of divine punishment. Religion can do much good, but it can be twisted to do evil as well. I believe ethics come from society. It comes from the basic principles of respecting the rights of others, service and altruism. You don't need a god to explain morality anymore than you need Zeus to explain lightning bolts.

Afterlife

Another common objection is that in not believing in a god, you believe death creates infinite nothingness. I don't have space to fully explain different theories on the

life and death, but this doesn't need to be so. Atheism only suggests that death is a current unknown.

Scott Adams suggested another possibility in his book *God's Debris*. Your consciousness is based on a pattern stored on neurons in your brain. If this is the case, dying would simply pause the pattern and it would resume sometime in the future. With no delay being seen from the observer this would essentially mean you couldn't experience death.

I'm not arguing that this theory is the way reality works, just that atheism isn't surrendering to a nihilistic view of life. Instead, it is opening yourself to many different possibilities.

Meaning

This is an argument I've never quite understood. It basically goes that if you don't believe in God, isn't life meaningless? I think this is a rather weak argument since it assumes that meaning can't be self-determined. It also assumes that without an invisible spirit watching you, life doesn't have a purpose.

I pick a meaning for my life and I believe it is just as satisfying without conjuring a notion of a god. I believe a god can actually become a distraction from meaning since it causes you to focus on a divine overlord instead of what really matters - the other people and beings you share the world with.

Atheism for a Greater Quality of Life

Aside from being an atheist, I'm also a vegetarian. Beyond putting myself in two self-selected minorities, many of the arguments I've seen against vegetarianism are similar to those against atheism. A common cited reason people I know don't want to eat meat is because they enjoy it too much. They don't want to sacrifice.

This is hard to explain until you've tried both sides, but I don't see avoiding meat as a sacrifice. Instead I see it as an opportunity to live a healthier life, reducing my chances of many chronic diseases and giving me more energy to do what I love. I also see it as removing the environmental and ethical discomfort in supporting an industry with questionable practices.

Similarly, I think a lot of believers don't rationally believe in a god. But they don't want to sacrifice the comforting notion that a being greater than themselves is watching down on them and helping them out.

But in focusing on that one benefit, you miss on the potential benefits of not believing in a deity:

* **Freedom** - The mental freedom to explore your world, learn and challenge your own assumptions. Instead of rejecting evidence that doesn't fit your notion of a god, you can embrace everything with curiosity.

* **Self-Reliance** - Temporarily focusing on a god may keep you happy, but what about the long-term? Instead of expecting divine intervention to let everything work out, I focus on my own abilities and reasoning to improve my experience of life.

* **Beauty** - I believe beauty lies in the unknown. It lies in the things you can't explain. That is what atheism really means. Instead of resorting to weak explanations of a deity creating the world, you see all the beautiful aspects of nature you currently don't understand. Why tarnish evidence that the universe is larger and more magnificent than we ever realized by placing an invisible man in front of it?

Pantheism and Rational Spirituality

So far my arguments have been against the traditional notion of a god. That is an invisible, all-powerful being that not only created the universe but also, through conscious force, interrupts the rules of nature, that he himself created, to perform miracles for the benefit of one planet amidst billions of billions of stars.

The alternative to that doesn't need to be a cold, hyper-rational, if-I-don't-see-it-it-doesn't-exist mindset. Pantheism (or as Richard Dawkins refers to it as “sexed up atheism”) is another choice.

Pantheism literally means “God is all.” It is the belief that the universe itself is god. That nature, humanity, science and truth are the reflection of god. In the most basic sense, this isn't any different from atheism or science. But while atheism emphasizes what the atheist doesn't believe in, pantheism presents the alternative.

I'm a follower of rational spirituality. Although it may sound like an oxymoron, rational spirituality means that truth, and your understanding of the world, enhance your appreciation of it. Instead of supplementing an unemotional scientific perspective with superstition, you find the emotional beauty in science and reason.

Read a book on evolutionary biology or quantum physics and it you soon realize how mind-blowingly amazing the universe actually is. The wonders of the New Testament, in my opinion, pale in comparison to how evolution works, the possibilities of string theory or quantum entanglement.

Appealing to a Higher Motive

God can serve a purpose in causing us to aspire towards something greater. But I don't believe a theistic god is the only (or even the best) possibility here either.

Even beyond just appreciating nature and the world for beauty, you need an ideal to strive towards. A motivation that gives your life purpose and your broader actions meaning. An answer to the question, "What does it all mean?"

Finding your higher ideal is an incredibly personal task. It is a task that can't be delegated or avoided by reading a holy book. I can't tell you what your higher ideal should be. All I can show you is what mine is.

My higher motive is based on three separate principles:

* **Truth** - Complete understanding is the first part of my higher ideal. This means that there is intrinsic purpose in seeking the truth. And that faith or any suspension of the rational mind I possess is an inherent evil towards this goal. I don't believe a lie at the most basic level can ever be superior to what reality actually is.

* **Service** - The second aspect of my higher ideal is service and morality. This means that there is intrinsic purpose in serving the greatest good and respecting the rights of others. Any act that harms the greatest good or infringes on the personal rights of another conscious being is inherently evil.

* **Challenge** - The final aspect of my higher ideal is that the pursuit of both truth and service is supposed to be challenging. Pain and struggle are not goals in themselves, but moving through challenges has intrinsic meaning if it moves you to greater truth and service. This means that no matter what happens to myself, there is a meaning in it if I choose to find it.

The two elements of rational spirituality and appealing to a higher motive do a far more elegant job of fulfilling me than adopting a specific religion and worshiping a god. Better yet, my beliefs are self-correcting. By placing the highest emphasis on truth, I am always willing to change my beliefs if evidence shows them to have errors.

Should You Become an Atheist?

I didn't write this article to convert you. I fully expect not to have converted anyone who was already set in their beliefs. But just as I read religious and spiritual books to enhance my philosophy, hopefully this could do the same for you.

The diverse comments and discussion generated by this post is probably more interesting than the article itself. I suggest you take a look at some of the responses, both from theists and atheists like myself:

<http://www.scotthyong.com/blog/2007/08/21/why-atheism/>

Energy Management

My first contact with fellow blogger, Phil Gerbyshak was when I posted a fairly in-depth comment about how I felt that energy management and time management were independent of each other and that both should be used fully. I also hinted towards my bias that time management was a superior philosophy for peak productivity rather than energy management.

I was wrong. I admit it. I must say I used to fall into the camp that believed that essential organization of time and priorities was the critical factor to overall productivity and performance. Time management has been an increasingly popular subject with many different techniques designed to help you organize your time in a manner that confers the greatest possible productive capacity. By carefully organizing your goals, objectives and priorities you could plan out the day for maximum efficiency.

Unfortunately, reality doesn't quite work that way. Although carefully organizing my priorities and planning out my time did have a powerful effect, I was still nagged by

the feeling that my actual day never quite lived up its imagined greatness the night before. There seemed to be some particular influence or effect that I couldn't quite recognize that manipulated my day ahead. I now recognize what that influence was, energy.

I recently read the book, *The Power of Full Engagement* by Tony Schwartz and Jim Loehr. This fantastic book really pointed out the missing variable that was preventing me from having my days realize their possible potential. In the book, the two authors point out that most people are expected to maintain peak levels of mental and creative performance for eight hours each day when they realize it simply can't be done. As a result people are continuously burnt out, stressed and functioning far below what their peak capacity is.

The book combined with some of my own experiments and research has given me a lot of new ideas for achieving peak performance and maximum productivity. The key point realized in the book is that energy, not time, is the fundamental currency of production. The authors also point out that cycles of maximal productivity and deep recovery allow for consistent and continuous usage of our full capacity.

I always knew energy played an important role in productivity. Being a health fanatic, I have been pursuing ways to increase the level and quality of energy in my

days through exercise, motivational programs and careful diet control. This process of maximizing my general energy has allowed me to steadily build up more and more energy to greater productivity. After some of my recent research, I know believe that there were a few key areas I could use to ensure maximum productivity.

Cycle of Energy

My first mistake was that I didn't truly understand that energy management, unlike time management, is a cyclical process, not a linear one. Time management, being linear, is simply the process of organizing and prioritizing your day so that you can get the more value in a shorter unit of time. In other words, your goal with time management is to effectively compress, organize and prioritize activities for maximum efficiency.

Energy management doesn't work that way. Energy works in a similar system as a currency like money. In other words, after you've spent it, you need to regain some more before you try to spend again. Otherwise you end up going into a deficit. Energy deficits aren't pretty. You know you are in an energy deficit when you are tired, irritable, stressed, frustrated and generally unenthusiastic. Ultimately a check and

balance must be made. When your body, mind, emotions and spirit finally declare bankruptcy, you crash and burn out as the eventual price of poor energy management is.

The cycle of perfect energy management is one where you are fully engaged and using all of your resources for maximum productivity, followed by a period of intensive recovery where you regain all of your energy for the task ahead. Is this what most people do? No, of course not. Most people in today's fast-paced world think that they can short-change the energy recovery process. Going further and further into energy deficit, they somehow believe that these rules of energy management don't apply to them.

So the first key to effective energy management is to install habits into your life that promote cycles of deep engagement followed by recovery. Without this balance in the cycle, the system becomes unstable. Creating these habits means developing a ritual for recovering your energy. This could be as simple as sitting back and relaxing for fifteen minutes or doing some light exercise. I have talked before about how I take one day off per week. Although I didn't realize it at the time, this is an essential tool for creating that positive cycle of energy management.

Stress and Conditioning

The key to energy management is more than just managing the energy you currently have, it is in increasing your supply of energy. Being able to devote more energy, concentration and flow to an activity is the primary goal of energy management. To increase your energy, you must stretch it beyond its current capacity, and then recover it. This stretching of capacity is what most people refer to as stress.

You mean stress is a good thing? Yes, I mean exactly that, but only in a temporary situation. Temporary stress, followed by recovery builds muscles. Most people, however, go into a state of constant stress. Constant stress does not build muscles, it kills you. Prolonged stress has been medically connected with suppressing autoimmune functions of the body which increases the chances of illness and disease.

I recently read a fitness article where the author stated that many people who fail to build muscle might be working out too much, rather than not enough. By ignoring the recovery phase their body couldn't adapt to the process and couldn't improve. A similar thing happens to people who do not use a cycle of progressive conditioning to handle their stress. The increased energy capacity doesn't come from the stress, it comes from the recovery after the stress.

By operating with this progressive conditioning you can slowly, but surely, increase your capacity for energy. Start by finding what your current capacity for energy is and then push yourself to a little above this level. So if you find it difficult to maintain complete concentration for more than thirty minutes, make your goal thirty-five. Just remember to recover after this period to reap the benefits of this stretching.

Energy is More Than Just Physical

The final point that really hit on me from reading this book and doing further research was one that I already knew but couldn't really articulate. Energy is more than just the physical energy you use from exercising. There are other levels of energy that work in similar fashion but are equally important. Tony Schwartz and Jim Loehr point to four main characteristics of energy: physical, mental, emotional, spiritual. I disagree somewhat with their exact classification of what each of them means, so I will substitute my own interpretation for some.

Physical - This is the primary and most fundamental source of energy. Physical energy is regulated by diet, exercise and sleep. This energy is tapped regardless of whether the task is physical. Most of us do not do particularly physically demanding

jobs, but physical energy is still incredibly important. Physical energy describes the capacity for energy.

Mental - Mental energy is your ability to concentrate, analyze and be creative. These higher level faculties basically describe the quality and clarity of your thinking. Mental energy is necessary for all of us, despite our career or hobbies. I believe that mental energy is essential the focus or direction of the energy we have. Mental energy can be increased through the stress and conditioning method, through challenging mental study and tasks, deep learning and creative activities.

Emotional - Emotional energy is your ability to control and maintain your emotions. People with a high amount of emotional energy will be positive, enthusiastic and happy. Low amounts of this energy are the manifestations of anger, despair and frustration. If physical energy represents capacity, mental represents direction, then emotional represents quality. A high degree of energy that is directed in a negative manner with hateful or angry emotions is incredibly draining and destructive.

Spiritual - I really like Tony and Jim's definition of spiritual energy. Here they bring up spiritual energies not as being a religious or metaphysical type of energy but the energy we get when we are associated with purpose. I have previously mentioned

how important I feel purpose is to our lives. Regardless of your spiritual beliefs, purpose seems to be a necessary ingredient to live successfully. As the two authors point out, purpose and spiritual energy is the most important and most powerful form of energy. With a strong sense of purpose, energy can be created even when there is barely any physical, mental or emotional capacity. Spiritual energy represents the power or force of energy.

The distinction between viewing energy as a simple manner of physical capacity, to a complex, multi-dimensional quality gives us a lot more power to control it. Surely improving your health and physical vitality can give enormous energy, but that energy cannot be utilized unless the other three aspects are put into full effect.

With this knowledge in hand, I think there are a great number of opportunities for getting more energy and therefore more production and value out of life. I will probably be exploring some of these ideas by conditioning some new habits in the upcoming months. I have already started a morning run to energize my mornings, but there are so many other ideas to consider.

A few simple ideas I have been thinking of to maximize this new information would be:

* **Constructive Disengagement** - Full engagement is using all of your resources and can only be maintained for a short burst. By experimenting with some constructive disengagement techniques, it may be possible to speed up the energy recovery process. This could mean completely involving your mind or body in a pursuit that has no relationship with the task you expended energy on. I know many people use similar techniques in reading fiction, painting or meditating. The one tricky property of energy is sometimes that it is best regained not by doing nothing, but by doing something completely different.

* **Shorter Work Cycles** - Although with school and various activities I rarely could work longer than ninety minutes at a time, I had planned on working about eight hours each day during the summer (mostly on this website). Now I am questioning whether a method that would have a ninety minute period of work followed by fifteen to thirty minutes of rest may be more productive in the long run.

* **Goal Breaks** - I am a constant and habitual goal setter. Goal setting is a powerful tool for achieving focus and results but I also notice that it does require a lot of energy. It may be beneficial to go through a long term cycle of goal setting followed by curious

exploration and wandering. I have mentioned previously how I felt straying away from goal setting for periods could improve lateral growth, but I am now also questioning whether it could also increase the long term sources of energy.

I tend to write in a very authoritative tone which is somewhat misleading. I think this sometimes makes it sound as if I believe I have all the answers. This is far from the truth. I do believe that my abundance of research and experimentation (which is actually fairly rare...) have given me some insights into personal development that I like to share, but I am also aware of the sheer amount of new information I am finding every single day. I have added a new category for energy management in this blog as I hope to keep you updated on what I find.

I think if you wanted to know how to use this information, I would start by working on your physical energy. Most people in the West are currently overweight and very sickly. Clearly there is incredible room for improving, what is likely the most important aspect in your energy levels. If you are already in fairly good condition, this might be a time at looking how you can improve many of the other aspects of your own energy levels from stimulating your mind, controlling your emotions and creating a compelling purpose.

Energy management continues to be a subject that fascinates me, especially with the recent addition of this new information. By understanding the cycles of energy we can stay filled with energy and avoid burnout. Undertaking conditioning and progressive increments of stress followed by deep restoration we can even expand our capacity for energy. Finally, by recognizing the multi-dimensional aspects of energy you can really take control of a force that guides your life.

Overcoming Discouragement

Life is full of failures, rejection and more than a fair share of discouragement. I believe that the difference in how persistent people are often comes down to how they handle the discouragement that comes from the same situation. While some people can immediately brush themselves off, others can enter a negative cycle of thoughts that persists for weeks, months or even years.

How you handle discouragement affects your ability to take new risks and chances that could have huge benefits. The root word of discouragement is courage so it should only make sense that the feelings associated with failure and rejection often try to deal a blow to your inner source of courage. Unfortunately, these emotions can cripple you to the point where you avoid taking small risks that have huge potential rewards.

Negative thought cycles, whether it is in the form of depression, discouragement, hatred or self-loathing tend to spiral out of control so what was originally only a minor trigger becomes inflated into a major upset. Quickly correcting this negative thought

cycle before it gets out of hand is critical to ensure you can rebound back to success. So how can you handle discouragement so it doesn't consume you?

Don't Analyze

The time to analyze what has just happened is never when you are in a negative state. Most people falsely assume that rational analysis is the same whether you are in a good or bad mood. Logic is logic, right? This error in judgement is why most people have so much trouble escaping that negative cycle of thoughts. Rational judgement gets corrupted by emotion very easily, so what seems like a logical flow of thought is completely ridiculous from an outside perspective. Emotion and rational thought are too intertwined to be completely separated.

When you get turned down for a date, promotion or business opportunity it can be very tempting to start trying to analyze what went wrong. This of course spins into self talk that seems rational but is purely emotional. Immediately after a discouraging failure is not the time to devote self-talk to it. Analysis is important but it must come from a neutral viewpoint that can't be attained while you still have negative feelings.

Create an Immediate Success

What do you tend to do when you feel down? Sit in front of the television? Eat ice-cream and watch movies? Go to bed? Although these are all viable strategies for handling stress, they often just temporarily bring you up to a neutral point of view. A better tactic is to find something you know you can be successful at and do it right away. By creating a tiny, even superficial, success you can balance out the negative feelings associated with your discouragement.

My favorite strategy is to immediately exercise after a discouraging event. Not only does exercising increase energy and release endorphin which makes you feel better, but by successfully completing my workout I can stop negative cycles of thought quickly. Exercising is a good strategy, but you can use any activity that you feel you can be successful at.

After you create the immediate success, you need to continue this approach until you feel you have stabilized the negative thought cycle. If you start feeling negative about your discouraging situation a few hours after your situation, redo this step to regain your balance.

Only once you feel fairly positive and stable about your self image and you can look back at the discouraging event from an emotionally neutral standpoint should you try to analyze what went wrong and how to improve it for next time. Analysis and review is important but it is completely worthless if it just another means for self-pity and negative thoughts. Keep in mind that the time necessary to recover from a discouraging situation varies for each person and for each event. Some people who aren't used to discouragement will require longer periods to recover as will certain events that are particularly demoralizing.

Reward Attempts

Whenever you make strives outside your comfort zone and past barriers you need to reward yourself regardless of whether the external environment does so. If you are just starting out as a salesman and you have to make a few cold calls, reward yourself for mustering up the confidence to make the attempt even if they completely reject your offer. If you are shy and you ask someone for a date and they give you the cold shoulder, you need to reward yourself for making the attempt.

Whenever you take steps outside your past limitations, either in conquering your fears, improving your skills or increasing your own willpower you must recognize and reward that victory even if the rest of the world won't. Ultimately, inner qualities such as courage, discipline and skill will create a greater impact on your life than the success or failure of one encounter. Even if this encounter is big like the failure of a business, you need to recognize that failure as a positive step in your own growth and celebrate it like you would any external success. Your partners may think you crazy for breaking out the champagne when your company doesn't make it, but you need to reward yourself for making the attempt.

Above all these other strategies the most important thing in improving your ability to handle disappointment and discouragement is to face more of it. Taking more risks and getting yourself a little bruised from all of life's stumbles is the only way you can build the emotional muscle to handle more of them. When you reward attempts even when they aren't successful you are signaling to your brain that taking there is value in attempting something that isn't attached to a particular outcome.

Whether it is struggling to make sales, asking for a date or even the daily disappointment from the outside world, everyone faces discouragement. How you handle that discouragement will ultimately make the difference between a life of broken dreams and misery and one where every discouraging attempt makes you stronger.

The Critical 7 Rules to Understand People

My headline might sound overreaching. Clearly a rule can't define something as complex as human behavior. But despite this, I've found most people tend to make the same mistakes. These mistakes are frequent enough that they create conflicts later. Remembering these seven rules will help you avoid these mistakes.

People Skills is About Being Nice, Friendly and Interesting, Duh!

Most the books I've read on dealing with people either make two claims:

- * Incredibly obvious stuff that most sensible people understand; even if they haven't always mastered it. Things like be nice, be considerate, etc.

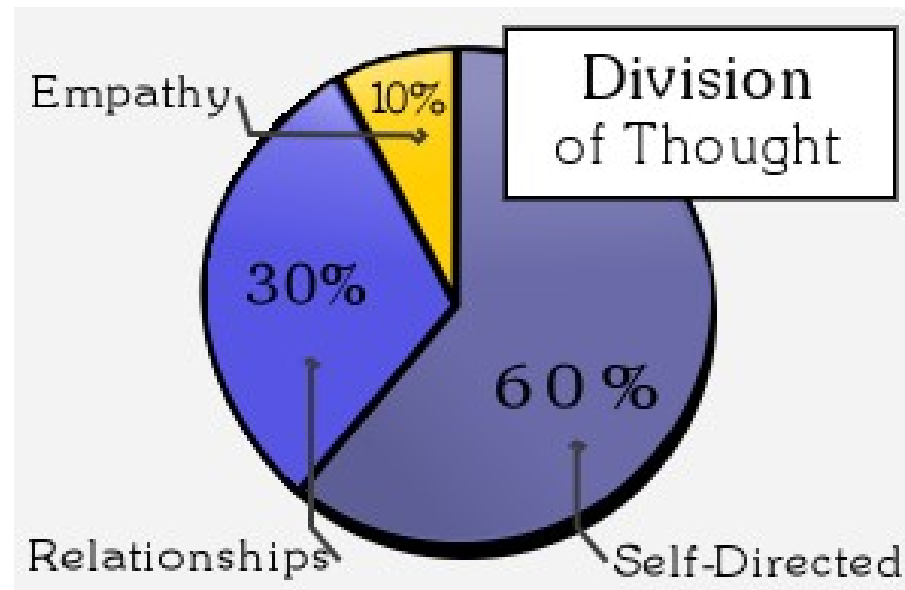
- * Bizarre and complex theories that may explain some behavior, but is difficult to generalize.

Between these two I've found there seems to be a gap of information that is can be applied generally, but isn't always obvious. These frequent mistakes tend to cause most people conflicts, social errors and emotional upsets.

The Seven

Rule One: Never blame malice for what can be explained by conceit.

People don't care about you. This isn't because people are mean or hurtful, but simply because they are mostly focused on themselves. Consider this hypothetical pie-chart showing the variety of thoughts a typical person has:



In this example, 60% of thoughts are self-directed. My goals. My problems. My feelings. Another 30% are directed towards relationships, but how they affect me. What does Julie think of me? How will boss evaluate my performance in the next review? Do my friends like me or see me as irritating?

Only 10% in this model is time spent in empathy. Empathy is the rare event where one person actually feels the emotions, problems and perspective of another person. Instead of asking what Julie thinks of me, I ask what is Julie thinking.

Within that 10%, most people then divide attention between hundreds of other people they know. As a result, you would occupy a fraction of a percentage in most peoples minds, and only a couple percentage points in a deeply bonded relationship. Even if you are in another persons thoughts, it is how your relationship affects them, not you.

What does this mean?

* **Embarrassment doesn't make a lot of sense.** Since others are only focusing a small portion of there thoughts onto judging you, your self-judgement is overwhelmingly larger.

* **People who appear to be mean or hurtful don't usually do it intentionally.** There are exceptions to this, but generally the hurt you feel is a side-effect, not the principle cause.

* **Relationships are your job to maintain.** Don't wait to be invited to parties or for people to approach you.

Rule Two: Few Social Behaviors are Explicit

Basically this rule means that most the intentions behind our actions are hidden. If a person is feeling depressed or angry, usually the resulting behaviors distort their true feelings. If I feel you snubbed me, I might hold my tongue but ignore you later.

The old joke is that women use words like, "fine," and, "go ahead," when they really feel the opposite. But I've noticed men do this too in polite situations, although often not in the same way.

The application of this rule is that you need to focus on empathy, not just hearing a person. Demonstrate trust, build rapport and learn to probe a bit. By focusing on empathy you can usually break away these subversions and get to the heart of the issue faster.

The other application of this rule is that most the time you feel something, nobody else knows about it. So don't get angry when people aren't responding to you. If you deceive your thoughts with your actions, don't get angry when you fool people.

Rule Three: Behavior is Largely Dictated by Selfish Altruism

To say everyone is completely selfish is a gross exaggeration. That ignores all the acts of kindness, sacrifice and love that make the world work. But I would argue that most (not all, but most) behavior does work from the principles of selfish altruism.

Selfish altruism is basically win/win. It is where helping you directly or indirectly helps me. There are a couple main categories where this applies:

1. **Transactions** - If I purchase a car, both myself and the dealer benefit. I get a vehicle, which I want. The dealer gets money to improve his lifestyle. This is the predominant form of selfish altruism between people who don't have emotional bonds.
2. **Familial** - Blood is thicker than water. We are designed to protect people who share our genes. This can sometimes shift towards extremely close friends and loved ones.
3. **Status** - Helping someone is a sign of power. Many species of primates will offer

assistance as a sign of dominance. People act similarly, offering aid to boost their self-esteem and reputation.

4. **Implied Reciprocity** - Many relationships are based on the idea that if I help you, one day you will help me as well.

Occasionally behavior falls outside this group. Nameless heroes dying for causes that don't help their bloodline. Volunteers devoting their time towards humanitarian missions. But these are the minority, whereas most actions can be explained by some form of selfish altruism.

How do you apply this rule? You understand the motives of people and appeal to them as if they were selfish. Find ways to help people within these four categories. Don't expect people to offer aid outside of selfish altruism, it isn't impossible, but it isn't likely.

Rule Four: People Have Poor Memories

Ever been told someone's name at a party and then forgot it later? Another rule of human behavior is that people have trouble remembering things. Especially information (as you'll recall in rule one) that doesn't apply to themselves. People are more likely to

remember your similarities than your differences (unless they were emotionally incensed by them).

Recently I broke this rule. I made arrangements to talk to a person I hadn't met before on the phone. Even with my normally foolproof system of calendars and to-do lists, a few spontaneous schedule changes caused me to miss the call. I quickly apologized and made a new arrangement.

But the fact is most people don't have organized GTD systems. People are forgetful by nature, so once again, don't assume malice or disinterest if something is forgotten. The other side of this rule is that you can demonstrate reliability by having a good memory or system (if it doesn't fail you).

Rule Five: Everyone is Emotional

Perhaps this is an exaggeration. But the core of the message is that people tend to have stronger feelings about something than they let on. People who regularly have outbursts of anger, depression or flamboyant enthusiasm are generally frowned upon in most cultures. This especially applies to men (for women trying to figure us out).

The application of this rule is to not assume everything is fine just because someone isn't having a nervous breakdown. We all have our individual problems, angst and upsets that are normally contained. You don't need to call people out on their private deception, but being sensitive to those underlying currents gives you an advantage in trying to help.

The alternate application of this rule is similar to rule two. People generally assume everything is fine unless you just had a blowup.

Rule Six: People are Lonely

This is another broad generalization. But it is amazing how many people who seem to have it all, suffer from bouts of loneliness. As social animals, I believe people are especially sensitive to any threats to becoming ostracized. In Neanderthal times, exile meant death, so loneliness and the desire to be with other people is a strong one.

The application of this rule is that loneliness is fairly common, so in that sense, you really aren't alone. I used to be bothered when I felt alone or an outsider in a social

group. Although I'm still human, I've found recognizing this feeling to be fairly common as a way to minimize it.

Rule Seven: Did I Mention People Are Self-Absorbed?

This may sound like a reiteration of rule one, but I believe the applications extend beyond relationships and your emotional state. The fact that people tend to be too concerned about themselves to give you much attention, that people tend to be lonelier, more emotional and feel differently than they let on applies to how you view the world. If anything this perspective should make you more proactive and independent. Once I started really learning these rules, it made far more sense that I needed to take charge. By placing your individual happiness in the hands of another person (or people), you ignore all these rules and do so at your own peril.

I like to take an optimistic, but realistic view of people. People who are generally try their best, but make mistakes and suffer from unintended self-absorption. In other words, they are basically like you.

Twenty Unique Ways to Use the 80/20 Rule Today

I'm sure most people are familiar with Pareto's principle, developed by an Italian economist and most commonly known as the 80/20 Rule. While Pareto originally used the rule noticing that 80% of the wealth was owned by 20% of the population, the rule has applications in almost every area of life.

There are many ways you can use this rule. Here's twenty:

1. **Work Tasks** - Write down all the broad categories of tasks you do at your job. You can make a little table that shows the amount of hours spent at each category (say, 1 hr for E-mail, 1 hr for contacting clients, etc.) and on another column write down a value estimate for what percentage you believe it contributes to your productivity. Eliminate, simplify or delegate low %'s and focus on high %'s.
2. **Food** - Record your eating habits for a week. Calculate up the calories of the

different items of food. I've done this before and I've found it surprising how some treats contribute a high percentage of your calorie pie for no nutritional value, when other vices consumed in smaller portions take up only a sliver but still offer a tasty treat.

3. **Daily Time Log** - Do a time log on your activities for an entire day. Record the stop and start point for any activity. Then broadly shuffle the different activities into categories. Figure out what parts of your day aren't contributing to either productivity, entertainment or personal happiness and cut them out.

4. **Reading** - Look at the last few dozen books you've read. Rate them according to the amount of useful info or entertainment value. Look for trends and use that info to skim or skip future books to save time.

5. **Relationships** - Look at your social circle and friends. Do a rough estimate of the amount of time and energy you invest in each relationship. Compare that to the amount of stress or satisfaction. You might find that certain relationships are toxic and others are valuable and should be invested in more.

6. **RSS Feeds** - Look through your feed list. Write down the percentage of articles you enjoyed out of the last ten in the feed. Eliminate the lowest %'s. You may want to take into account article length or posting rate, but quality is probably the best measurement of all.

7. **E-Mail** - Group the types of e-mails you answer into basic categories. Consider developing a template for the most common e-mail responses that contribute the least potential value for answering personally.

8. Magazine Subscriptions - Same as RSS feeds. Go through all your subscriptions and give a percentage scale of what you perceive to be the value of the last several editions. Cancel subscriptions to the bottom and leave the top.

9. Television Shows - Record your television watching habits for a week or two. After watching give a subjective rating of the television show. After your done, total up the amount spent on different shows or channels. If you have a special subscription service, cancel the channels that you don't watch or have little value. Otherwise, consider eliminating live television entirely and recording the shows you feel are valuable to watch later. I've done this before and it can be a big time saver while still allowing you to enjoy some passive entertainment.

10. Web Surfing - Record your web usage for a day or two. Write down the sites you visited or tools you used to get there (StumbleUpon, Digg, etc.) Figure out sites took up the most time and which had the least value. You'd be surprised how often they are the same thing.

11. Spring Cleaning - Although it's only a few weeks from summer, you can use this on any organization attempt. Go through your items and trash all the items that you haven't used recently (except for important documents). Just because you have storage space, doesn't mean it should be filled with garbage. Eliminate clutter and it becomes far easier to find and use the things you actually need.

12. **Clients/Customers** - This one comes from Tim Ferriss, in the Four Hour Workweek. Figure out which customers contribute the most complaints and the least revenue. Notify them that things will need to change and set down some guidelines. Then fire the ones that don't comply. Goes against the doctrine that the customer is always right, but some people just aren't worth the trouble they cause.

13. **Hard Drive** - Sort through your computer documents, comparing the last modified date for various major folders. Create a separate folder system where you can move these rarely used files. This will eliminate your computer clutter and make it far easier and faster to find the stuff you actually use.

14. **Desktop** - Same thing as the hard-drive, but I do it every week or two. Just go through your desktop and delete any short-cuts or move documents that haven't been used in the last two weeks. You don't have to completely eliminate everything, but it will make your desktop a more efficient workspace.

15. **Applications** - Go through all your computer applications. Figure out which ones are distracting and are either rarely used or contribute little value. Uninstall those. If this seems like too much work, a complete computer reformat can get rid of the trash.

16. **Home Appliances** - Determine which appliances cause the most frustration, stress and break down the most. Once you've done this you have three options: learn to use the tool better to understand it and prevent stress, buy a new one or find a substitute that is less damage prone. Save yourself the headache and 80/20 your lawnmower.

17. **Budget** - Calculate all your discretionary expenses (after taxes, food and necessities). Now compare the money value of each expense with the utility of the purchase. If you wanted to compare different entertainment items in your budget, you could value each expense on the pleasure it brought you. If you wanted to compare different investments or tools you could compare return rates or productivity gained.

18. **Blogging** - Classify the types of posts you write into different categories. I've done this grouping by, post length, subject, format, style, images, etc. Multiply each by the amount of time to write each type of post. Then compare that data to your estimate of traffic gained from each. Use this as a guide for future writing.

19. **Habits** - Figure out which behaviors (or lack thereof) contribute the most to your life. Exercise? Rising Early? Family Dinners? Use this as a basis for making new habits.

20. **Goals** - It doesn't matter whether you have them written down or just in your head. Look at all your goals and compare the resources required to accomplish each (time, money, energy, etc.) with the benefits gained. Benefits could be physical rewards, purposeful work or emotional quality. Pursue the goals with the highest value.

7 Tips for Morning Alertness Without the Caffeine

The slower you build up energy in the morning, the more painful waking up will be. What's better, spending thirty minutes wrestling with the snooze button followed by an hour ramp up to normal mental functioning or quickly starting the day with energy?

In my recent article on morning rituals, I mentioned how I wake up at 5:30 each morning. A few readers asked how I deal with the initial grogginess that comes with waking up so early. As someone who isn't a natural early-riser (I could easily sleep in until noon) getting over the early-morning sleepiness wasn't easy. However, by using some of the tips I'll describe, you can be more alert in your morning hours without having to inject yourself with a pot of coffee.

Why Go Without Caffeine?

I never drink coffee and I only occasionally drink caffeinated teas. While caffeine can be a temporary chemical solution to your drowsiness, I don't believe it is the best strategy overall. I've found caffeine offers more energy, but it comes with side-effects. A few I've noticed:

- * Post-caffeine crashes.
- * Disrupting normal sleep.
- * Withdrawal symptoms and addiction.
- * Difficulty focusing. (Although some research suggests otherwise)

Whether caffeine is a miracle drug or junk is hard to say. However, given the side-effects, if you can boost morning alertness without the artificial stimulants, why bother drinking the stuff?

How to Build Energy Into Your Mornings

Here are a few things I've found helpful to reduce the transition period from being

asleep to becoming fully alert. Not only does speeding up this wake-up process save time, it makes waking up less of a struggle. A few tips:

1. **Light.** Your body's natural clock is tuned to the amount of light. Turn on all the lights in your room right after waking up. Getting bright lights can help trick your body into thinking it is time to get out of bed.

2. **Exercise.** Put something physical right at the start of your morning. In the summer, I did a quick morning run and found it helpful in shaking off any sleepiness. Considering the outside temperature hovers around -30 C, I've stuck to doing a few pushups in my room. The exercise gets your heart pumping and snaps you out of a groggy state.

3. **The 10-Minute Rule.** If you want to stick with a consistent wake-up time, practice the ten-minute rule. This means you commit to staying awake for at least the next ten minutes. Once you get over that initial period, the temptation to go back to bed is usually gone.

4. **Active Work.** Start your day with work that actively uses your mind. Creative activities like writing, drawing, programming or designing work better than passive activities like reading. By focusing your mind early you can stay focused and brush off any unwanted drowsiness.

5. **Don't Skip Breakfast.** Wake up early enough to get something to eat. Skipping meals throw your metabolism out of balance, causing you to gain fat and lose energy.

Skipping breakfast also means your blood sugar will be low in the morning and energy levels down.

6. Commit to a Sleep Schedule. The obvious solution to combat sleepiness is to get more rest at night. Carrying a sleep debt throughout the week with the hopes of paying it off on the weekend is a bad strategy. Instead, compress your work into the morning hours so you can get the 6-8 hours you need each night.

7. Turn Up the Volume. I've found listening to music or audio books helpful in keeping myself awake during the morning. Best of all, if you put on an audio book from your favorite speaker, you can get some encouragement to start your day.

What Do You Want to Do With Your Life?

What do you want to do with your life? It's a question almost everyone asks themselves. It's also a question I don't believe you should bother asking in the first place.

"I don't know what I want to do in life, all I know is that it isn't this."

That was the sentiment a friend reflected to me. She's in her mid-twenties, smart, savvy and hard working. But she is still stuck working jobs that don't hover much beyond minimum wage. Every year, she tells me, that she applies for Universities, but never goes through with it. Why? Because she can't answer that question.

Passion Evolves

I worry a lot of people fall into the same trap. The trap of believing that they need to make big life decisions before they can start doing anything. The trap that you need to be born with a passion. And the lie that being able to combine your interests with a profession is easy.

When people ask me what I'm going to be doing in five or ten years, I usually tell them I'm going to be an entrepreneur. "Oh. What's your business going to be?" I have reason to believe this internet business could be it. Between revenues and freelance work I'm expecting to make about ten thousand dollars this year. Concentrated effort for the next four or five years could definitely make this a livable income.

But I don't usually say that. Because it isn't the point. In all honesty, I have no idea where I am going to be in a decade. My track record shows that my passions have evolved considerably, even over the last couple years.

Ben Casnocha, the 19-year old CEO of Comcate, shows how his passion didn't start with a flash of insight, in the book *My Start Up Life*:

“It didn't start with a dream. It didn't start with in a garage. It didn't even start with an innovative epiphany, which are perhaps entrepreneurs' most overplayed recollections.” He continues, relating the story of Jerry Kaplan's epiphany moment in Kaplan's book, *Start Up*. To which Ben adds, “***I wish my epiphany were as primal. It wasn't, and most aren't.***” [emphasis mine]

As Ben shares his story of being a teenage CEO, it becomes clear that his passion evolved. There were interests in entrepreneurship and making a difference. But from these interests, he made smaller steps, each building a passion. I don't believe his journey ever started with deciding what he wanted to do with his life.

Replace Decision with Curiosity

Instead of making definite decisions about a career path, I believe you should get curious. Get curious about the way the world works. Notice your own interests and find

small ways you can exercise passion in something. Even if you can't find a way to make money off of it yet.

The bridge from passion to money-maker can't be made hastily. Interests often get discarded because they cannot be immediately relayed into a source of income. And therefore aren't as important as work that does.

Blogging is a great example. I know many bloggers who want to go pro. They want to take the interest they have and turn it into a passionate source of income. But blogging isn't easy. Even the most rapid successes I've seen, took over a year before the author could claim blogging as more than a hobby. And those were due to writing talent, luck and an incredible amount of work.

Patience is a necessary ingredient in evolving a passion. But even more, you need to be open to other possibilities.

Interest to Income Isn't a Straight Path

80% of new businesses fail in the first five years. But more interesting, is that of the 20% that succeeded, most didn't do so in the way they had expected to.

Before setting up his immensely popular website, Steve Pavlina believed he would make most his revenue through products and workshops. But close to five years later, he makes all of it from advertising and affiliate sales. A revenue prospect he downplayed when making his business plan.

Similarly, I don't believe that most people's passions follow a straight path. Scott Adams began with a degree in economics and a position in a bank and now he is the successful cartoonist who created Dilbert.

Seven Steps to Evolving a Passion... and Making it Work

Step One - Gather Sparks of Curiosity

Don't have an inferno of passion driving your actions yet? Don't worry about it. Most people I know don't. And if you are under thirty, you are probably in the overwhelming majority.

The first steps is to simply invest your energy into whims. Those little sparks of interest where you don't know enough to make them a passion. Ben Casnocha calls this

seeking randomness. For me, it has been a process of finding my intuition and using it to make small investments in things that are potentially interesting.

This means reading different books, taking on different activities and meeting different people. Broad associations gives a lot of chances to stumble on a passion that can work.

Step Two: Fan the Flames of Interest

After exposing yourself to a lot of randomness, you need to cultivate the successes. Build upon the little sparks of interest that come by your life. If you read a book about physics and like the subject, try taking a physics class. If you enjoy some basic programming try a small software project.

Step Three: Cut Out Distractions

Cultivating whims and exploring new passions requires time. One of the reasons I've placed such an emphasis on productivity with myself, is that without it I couldn't explore these options.

If your interests are genuine and worth exploring, it shouldn't be too difficult to eliminate the non-essentials. Distractions such as television, excess internet usage and video games only take a bit of conditioning to free up. The hard part is reallocating time you don't believe is yours.

Step Four: Living Minimally

If you already have a job you aren't passionate about, work only as much as you need to keep going. Valid passions need time to grow into income generating skills.

I don't suggest becoming a starving artist and racking up huge debts. But avoid expanding your life to fit a bigger and bigger paycheck if you aren't living your passion. Otherwise you simply trap yourself into a life that is comfortable, but otherwise dead.

Leo Babauta, author of ZenHabits is a great example of this. With six kids, freelancing work and another job to help support his family he found ways to cut expenses and focus on his passion. His website has quickly grown to become incredibly popular, and I wouldn't be surprised if it was a stable source of income for him in a few years. Live minimally, and avoid getting trapped into a comfortable, but unsatisfying, life.

Step Five: Make a Passion that Creates Value

If you have a skill that has creates social value, you can make money through almost any medium. Monetizing a passion takes skill, as any entrepreneur can tell you, but without providing legitimate value it is impossible.

You need to transform your developing passions into a skill that can fill human needs. Some passions are easy to translate. An interest in computers could allow you to become a software designer. Others are more difficult. A passion for poetry, may be more difficult to meet a specific human need.

Step Six: Find a Way to Monetize That Value

Once you have the ability to create social value, you need to turn that into a repeatable process for gaining income. This could be in the form of a job. As a programmer you could get hired by Google. Or, it could lead to becoming a freelancer or an entrepreneur.

Monetizing value isn't easy. It requires that you learn how to market, sell yourself, and find ways to connect human needs. Whether you intend to work in a job or own a

business makes no difference. You are the CEO of your life, so you need to know how to connect your passions with serving other people.

Step Seven: Go Back to Step One

Describing this process in steps is misleading. It implies that there is a destination. There is no destination. The process of following whims, cultivating passions, turning them into valuable skills and then finally earning revenue from them is lifelong. I have some passions that are in steps one and two. This blog is in the midst of step six. In ten years I may have gone through them all with a completely different passion.

Not all your passions will or can finish the sixth step. But as persistent as the myth you need to decide what you want to do with your life, is the myth you can only have one passion. I'm at a point where cultivating passions has meant I have too many options. Too many possible paths that could lead to enjoyable and fulfilling careers. Don't obsess over one failed attempt.

What do you want to do with your life?

Your life doesn't need to go through a predictable story arc. It doesn't have to start with a dream, follow through hard work and end up in a nice home with four bedrooms. Instead it can twist and travel. You don't have to know the final answer, you just need to act on the next step.

9 Tips to Stay Productive in a Spontaneous Life

You don't need to be a robot to be productive. You can make spontaneous decisions and pursue new opportunities without sacrificing your work ethic. I'd like to argue that having more fun outside your work can actually lead to more work being done.

Combining varied activities while structuring your life for maximum engagement is the key to get more done while offering more time for fun.

Productive Partying

I learned the lesson that spontaneity and productivity aren't opposites at University. My high school career had been ordered and disciplined. It was during this time I managed to cut out television, reduce internet usage and wake up earlier to hopefully carve out a bigger slice of the time to be productive.

This approach worked, or at least I thought it did. When I went to University, I decided to take a different tact. Focus on new experiences and less on work. The result? My life was completely different. One day I might be waking up at 6 am and another sleeping in after a spontaneous decision to see a concert until 4 am.

What happened to my productivity? The surprising answer, not much. I still managed to write an e-book, publish about five articles a week, complete about a dozen speaking projects through Toastmasters and double the traffic of this blog.

Time Management's Dirty Secret

Time management doesn't work. At a minor level it may appear to. Switching a few hours here and there can get more done. But at a larger level, the more you try to force yourself to become a human factory, the more it fights against you.

Energy management isn't the complete answer, either. Simply taking time out of your day to relax or rest after work doesn't make you more productive.

Instead of complex management principles, I've found the key really lies in combining varied activities along with complete engagement in them.

Combining Activities

Energy management isn't complete. You don't have an internal battery that can be drained and recharged. A better metaphor is to say you have many muscles, each can be strained and rested. When you are working on a project you are using different muscles than when you are socializing with friends.

This means that if you put in varied activities, that use different muscles, you can stay engaged in your tasks. The truth is that sometimes the best way to relax one group of muscles is to stress a completely different group. Work and fun isn't a balance then, but a synergy. Getting the right mixture of fun and work results in more productivity than completely working.

Complete Engagement

Mixing fun and work isn't enough. We all know people who struggle to get their work done because they spend too much time partying, relaxing and socializing. My findings have been that the lack of productivity isn't a result of their other activities, but a lack of engagement in their work.

Work needs to be as engaging as fun activities. If you aren't passionate about the work you are doing, then time spent having fun will easily overwhelm it. Engagement in work really comes from only two things:

1. You like what you're doing.
2. You find it meaningful.

I enjoy writing. I also enjoy learning new things at University and I enjoyed working on many of the essays and projects I had to tackle. I found the challenge itself to be interesting. That is the first key to engagement, to actually enjoy the task you are working on.

The second is that you have to find the work meaningful. Every project and piece of work I did, I first became aware of why I was doing it. If I couldn't satisfactorily answer that question I didn't bother.

Varied Activities and Engagement Creates Energy

By utilizing different "muscles" as part of my schedule and having a high engagement in my work I got far more done even though I spent less time working and

more time having fun. This is the kind of thinking espoused in the 4-Hour Workweek, where you focus on engagement and a varied lifestyle to do more.

But how do you actually do it?

This philosophy of getting more done by focusing on work less is harder to implement. How do you know it will work and you won't just end up wasting your time? Here are some practical suggestions for injecting productivity into a spontaneous life:

1. **Know Thy Results** - Keep track of how much you are actually getting done. It's easy to feel guilty for having a lot of fun if you also have work that needs to be done. Proving to yourself that this new method actually is more productive will keep you objective.

Know your current output and then track your future output.

2. **Sign Up for New Experiences** - This formula can easily become a recipe for laziness. Instead, sign up for new experiences. Take new classes, join new organizations, find new challenges. This will mean that even if spontaneous opportunities don't come, you still have a varied schedule.

3. **Know the Motivation** - I have a personal rule that says if I don't know the motivation for doing something I don't do it. Although sometimes the motivation will be escaping punishment (finishing an assignment to pass my class) that is a weak

motivation. Try to find better ones. Finding a higher purpose in what you do is the key to engagement.

4. **Realize the Law of Diminishing Returns** - Each hour of work contributes a lower degree of productivity. Working one hour a day has a very high rate of productivity for that hour. Working eight is much less. Working fifteen may be even less than eight. Utilize this principle to sit on the maximum while investing your leftover time in other activities.

5. **Use Daily Goals** - Writing down my goals for each day helps me balance opportunities with work. If I've finished most of my goals, I'll be willing to take up new activities. If I still have a lot of work to do, I focus on that first.

6. **Work First** - Pick out one or two elements of your work that are extremely important. Those elements must be complete before any other activities get in the mix. Once you complete those few tasks, divide up the rest of your time between extra work, varied activities and new opportunities.

7. **Watch Your Muscles** - Pay attention to which of your muscles are drained and which are in need of a good workout. Are your social muscles exerted or in need of exercise? What about your creativity muscles, work muscles or learning muscles? Use this as a basis for making changes in activities to stay engaged.

8. **Get Your Priorities Straight** - Figure out what your priorities are. This will be your standard for judging spontaneous decisions. Does the new opportunity fit into my

existing priorities? If you are focused on wealth, that will give you different decisions than if you are focusing on adventure, relationships or health.

9. **Kill Boredom** - Boredom is the enemy. It lacks both productivity and fun so it is the biggest evil you will face in your day. Every moment that you aren't resting needs to be completely engaged in something. Whether you spend your boredom time seeking an adventure or finishing work depends entirely on your daily goals and which muscles you need to rest.

The Myth of Talent

Talent is a myth. At some point in your life you noticed that some people were unusually good at certain things. The brainiac who aced all his exams. The star jock who scored both on and off the court. The person who oozed charisma and everyone loved. Why were they successful? Some people probably told you it was because they had talent, a natural affinity for greatness. I think they are full of crap.

This lie of talent, of gifted-ness has to be one of the most poisonous lies people have deceived themselves into believing. The belief that certain people, maybe even us, were born with abilities that you lack the power to replicate. Unfortunately, if you tell a big enough lie enough times, people start to believe it.

Long ago people used to believe that the earth was flat, the sun revolved around us and lightning was hurled from the top of a mountain by a guy who gave birth to one of his daughters from his forehead. Just because something can explain an observation, doesn't mean it is correct. The same is true for the myth of talent.

With researchers like Dr. K. Anders Ericsson beginning to say that talents are developed from huge amounts of conscious training, rather than gift, we are starting to see more scientific evidence toppling this myth. Michael Jordan may have been born slightly better suited for basketball, but without all the years of training, nobody would take a second look at his 'talent'.

Discrepancy of Skill

Genetic factors between human beings are minor fluctuations. I would argue that if you are of at least normal intelligence, almost nobody in the population would be more than twice as smart as you are, maybe even less than that, depending on how you measure it. Yet, there are people that earn hundreds of times more money than you, have effectiveness in skills hundreds of times greater than you.

Inborn talent isn't enough to explain this vast discrepancy of skill. Bill Gates might only be 5% smarter than you (or even less), but his paycheck is considerably more than 5% of yours. If that doesn't explain success then what does?

I believe at some point every person who develops a high degree of skill stumbles onto the right formula for success. Inborn talent might be able to explain small differences in skill, but it can hardly account for the huge differences present in society.

Conscious Practice

The process of developing a skill seems to be largely the same, no matter what area you look at. That's the process of practice followed by reliable feedback. If you want to get better at something fast, practice it lots and practice it right.

A few weeks ago I decided to take up some Latin dancing classes on a whim. But I was accidentally enrolled in the intermediate class. By focusing carefully on everything the instructor said and by getting immediate feedback from a helpful dance partner I was able to keep up with the class and had about ten hours worth of learning compressed into just one.

I made huge leaps in my public speaking skills because after each speech I did, I was evaluated and used those evaluations to pick out points of improvement. This iterative process meant that with just an hour of investment each week for a few months and I've had a few people think I had been practicing for years.

In my public speaking skills, I have had people tell me I was a natural. But looking back at my younger days I don't really believe this to be the case. I improved fast because I practiced a lot (I believe I've missed fewer meetings and done more speeches than anyone in our club) and when I did practice I focused ruthlessly on making iterative improvements each time.

Let go of the belief that others have a talent you can't learn. Success is a skill. Skills come from an intention to work and the formula for doing so. Don't fall into believing the myth of talent.

The 7 Bad Email Habits that Make People Want to Kill You

E-mail is a shallow way to communicate. It's easy, fast and lacks the depth of understanding most people have face-to-face. Unfortunately, many people don't realize just how much of this understanding is lost. As a result, they pick up bad habits and start driving coworkers, bosses and friends crazy.

Here are seven particularly bad habits, and how you can fix them so people don't want to kill you:

1) Hanging Questions

Any e-mail that involves a request or question requires a follow-up. Even something as short as, "K." However some people seemed to have missed this point, and

leave requests or small questions completely unanswered. The problem here is that the sender has no idea whether you even read the message yet.

Here's the fix:

1. **For small questions, answer them immediately after reading.** Get an auto-responder or simply shorten e-mails to a few words if you're facing a time-crunch.
2. **For questions you can't answer yet, tell them that.** If you won't know until the 15th, don't wait until the 16th to reply.
3. **For difficult or long-winded answers, tell them you aren't sure/don't have time to answer right now.** If the message is important add writing a response to your to-do list. If it isn't, just leave it there. Any response is better than silence.

2) Buried Requests

A buried request is where the question or actionable information is sandwiched between unimportant info. Consider the difference between these two e-mails:

Hi Bob, I've been considering your new proposal for adjusting the customer service policy. I think we should meet up and talk about it. Your proposal seems actionable, but I have a few concerns.

Compare to...

Hi Bob, I've been considering your new proposal for adjusting the customer service policy. I think we should meet up and talk about it. Your proposal seems actionable, but I have a few concerns.

When do you want to meet up?

In the first e-mail, the request is in the second sentence, buried away. In the second it is repeated and given a new paragraph. Which one do you think is easier to read?

3) Wrong Medium

E-mail works best for direct and non-time sensitive information. Conversations, discussions and anything that requires a heavy amount of back-and-forth should be

done on the phone or in person. Trying to use e-mail to have these conversations can be slow, time-consuming and painful.

The solution is to bridge the e-mail gap when you recognize you're wasting time with it. Ask the person if you can discuss the issues in person or on the phone at a specific time and date.

4) Trying to Be Clever

Don't try to be witty or sarcastic in an e-mail and pretend as if everything you say will be taken literally. Although a few metaphors can come across well in an e-mail, most don't. The person on the other side can't tell with what intensity or emphasis you typed the words. If anything can be ambiguous, reword it and leave it out.

And don't think using emoticons gives you the green-light to be clever and charming. A symbol can't replace the hundreds of different varieties in voice, tone and gestures you normally use to communicate intentions.

5) Sending Urgent Requests Through E-Mail

My guideline is that I shouldn't send an e-mail if I need a response in less than five days. Not only do some people take days to respond to e-mails, you won't be able to convey urgency in text. When you are on the phone or in person, you can transmit the impending need of your request, while in text you can only resort to using CAPITAL LETTERS or exclamation marks!

6) Bulky Paragraphs

People don't read e-mails, they skim. So don't write an eight sentence paragraph in one chunk. Here's some guidelines:

- * More than six lines? Split it up.
- * Important information? Make it a one-line paragraph.
- * Multiple pieces of important information? Make a quick bulleted list. (Like this one)

7) Playing E-Mail Tag

This probably won't bother other people, but it might make you stressed enough to take it out on yourself. Don't try to keep your inbox open to receive e-mails immediately as they arrive. Set times each day to answer and keep yourself by those limits. It will reduce distractions and force people who want to banter to pick up the phone and call you.

Budget Your Time: How to Use Deadlines

I have forty minutes to write this article. Do I need to limit my time? Probably not, but I'd like to illustrate a point: Deadlines are useful tools.

Deadlines are a budget for your time. It makes sense that budgeting your money would be more efficient than spending whatever you feel like. A budget forces you to prioritize. Give yourself a limited amount of money and you will use the resources more efficiently than if you buy on impulse.

The same applies when budgeting time. Since time is limited, giving yourself a deadline forces you to prioritize what is most important and cut away what is least.

Ways to Misuse Deadlines

* **Deadlines won't make you more creative.** Creativity is randomness. Just because you want to be a millionaire by the end of the year doesn't mean setting a deadline will miraculously show you the means to doing so. Deadlines are powerful, but they aren't magic.

* **Deadlines won't make you faster.** In the short-term, a difficult deadline might speed you up. But this is an illusion. Long periods of that kind of pressure will only result in burnout and stress.

* **Deadlines can slow progress.** In some cases, setting a deadline can actually cut you off of solutions that are easier. Deciding that you will finish a website design in two months may cut you off of possibilities for using templates to do it in a few days. Or hiring designers within your budget to do the job for you.

If deadlines won't make you a genius or dynamo and can actually cut off faster solutions what good are they?

When to Use Deadlines

It's taken me a bit of practice to know when I should set deadlines for myself and when I should allow results to come naturally. These aren't specific rules, but they are guidelines I use to make the decision:

- * **Feature Creep** - Expansive goals need deadlines. I always set deadlines for bigger projects where I could add one feature or twenty.
- * **Distractions** - Deadlines keep you focused on the objective and away from minutia. If your goal is likely to slip out of your thoughts, use a deadline to force it back in.
- * **Fear** - What's the best way to remove a band-aid? Right off! Fear can keep you held hostage for a long time. Setting a deadline forces you through the temporary struggles.
- * **Constraints** - Some deadlines are natural. If you want to run a marathon and your city holds one in four months, that deadline makes perfect sense.
- * **Push** - Are you slowing down? Setting a new deadline can rebuild falling motivation.

Attributes of a Good Deadline

* **Objective** - Have you reached your goal? If the answer can't be answered with either yes or no, you need to rephrase it. Vague goals are useless candidates for deadlines.

* **Possible** - Does your deadline fit your plan or is it wishful thinking? Don't buy groceries on an empty stomach or don't set deadlines when drunk with motivation.

* **Elimination** - Can you eliminate parts of your plan if there isn't time? You need to know what to abandon if you run out of time.

* **Chunked** - Break your deadline into components. For this article, I've given myself forty minutes to write and ten to do an image.

Be thrifty with your time because you can't save it or buy any more.

The Zen of Folding Laundry and Other Thoughts on Happiness

I hate folding laundry. So, when I recently had to fold some laundry, I was feeling impatient and irritated. The laundry wasn't going to fold itself, and I was running out of clothes. Despite my internal protests, it would have to get done. I figured it would only take a few minutes and then I could get back to the more enjoyable parts of my day.

Then it hit me. I was resisting folding the laundry. The whole time I was rolling socks and sorting shirts my mind was elsewhere. Instead of simply accepting that the laundry needed to be done and experiencing that, I was resisting it.

Then I began to wonder. How many other things in life am I resisting instead of accepting and experiencing them?

Resistance is Futile

What do I mean by resistance? I don't like a lot of spiritual authors because they are unable to break down words into a core concept. Instead they resort to fancy wordplay to dance around an idea that they can't communicate. I'd like to try to avoid that error here.

Resistance means denying where you are right now. Struggle and challenge to meet a higher goal is an important and honorable part of life. But I'm not talking about resistance against challenges but deceiving yourself at what is happening right now.

Let's say you want to travel to Paris. You go to book a ticket online. You enter in Paris as the destination, but when it asks for the location of departure, you freeze. You can't admit to yourself you are where you are. Instead of simply accepting your current location and entering it, you resist.

It sounds silly to think of resisting a physical location. But what about your life situation? I think a lot of people are caught between resisting their current location and seeking out a new one.

A Battle of Paradigms: Be Happy VS Be Successful

Why does this happen? Why should we resist what is, especially when it impairs our ability to go forward? I think the answer lies in a clash between the obligations to be happy and be successful.

Be Happy. To most, depression is a sign of weakness. Same goes for other negative emotions. Being frustrated, sad or angry are signs you can't properly deal with the world. Although this isn't the truth, it is a pervasive belief. Therefore people do their best to hide and avoid negative feelings. Both out of a desire to be happy and because they feel it would be shameful not to.

Be Successful. The conflicting paradigm is that you should be successful. This means you shouldn't just have emotional success in maintaining happiness but you should have wealth, health and status.

These two ideas create resistance. Be happy causes resistance of emotions and be successful causes resistance of circumstance. This wouldn't be such a large problem if the two didn't overlap.

The clash occurs when evaluating the success in your life it isn't enough. This causes feelings of unhappiness, creating resistance with the expectation to be happy. The other clash occurs when you have success but you feel unhappy thoughts. This can cause you to see your success as diminished, creating more resistance.

No matter where you go there is resistance. Denying the truth of your feelings and circumstances.

How to Accept

The opposite of resistance is acceptance. This is complete honesty with yourself about how you feel, what you are doing and where you are in life. It doesn't mean you need to like it, just that you fully accept that it is true.

* **Resisting Activity** - Here is the Zen of folding laundry. Chores can be a source of resistance if you are actively trying to deny that you are doing them. Acceptance here means admitting to yourself that, right now, you are folding laundry and not doing anything else.

* **Resisting Circumstances** - Like everyone, I've had periods of loneliness where I'm in relative isolation. When this happens, I've learned to completely accept my temporary solitude, even though I dislike it.

* **Resisting Emotion** - If you feel depressed, admit that to yourself. Accept that you are depressed right now. Accept your emotions as if they were the color of your shirt rather than a symbol of your character. Not something to resist or feel ashamed of but just a fact.

Acceptance Isn't Giving Up

In fact it is often the complete opposite. Acceptance is like our trip to Paris, knowing our location of departure. Without knowing where you are now, you can't possibly reach your destination.

Giving up means taking acceptance ("this is what is, right now.") and moving it a step further ("this is what will be forever.") You can accept current depression with both the optimism to see a happier future and the willingness to work towards it. You can accept a life you dislike and set goals to improve it.

Resistance's Mild Deception

Most failures to accept the current situation aren't complete lies. They aren't entire frauds, completely disregarding the truth. Instead they are distractions and oversights. Mild deceptions that don't remove the truth but resist it nonetheless, pushing it into an area of slight disbelief.

Lost Socks and Folded Laundry

As I finished folding my laundry, I got a chance to reflect on my current position. To move out of my head for a few seconds. To accept everything around me, without bias or judgment. Then I just noticed how I felt without censoring or distortion. Some of it made me happy, some didn't. I accepted that too.

With the clothes in the drawers I can hear the birds outside. They make me smile and give me the strange feeling that I hadn't heard them before.

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