

Peaceful Living

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Section One

Letting Go

1: Introduction

For some of us, the ultimate goal in life is to live in peace and find happiness.

Whether we see fulfillment in our work, contentment in our relationships, passion in our hobbies ... we strive to find peace.

“Happiness is the meaning and the purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence.” – **Aristotle**

And yet, this search for peace can be a lifelong search, especially if we look at peace as something that will come once we achieve certain goals — a nice home, a perfect spouse, the ultimate promotion ... and when we get these goals, instead of being peaceful, we often are looking forward to having peace when we meet our next goals.

Peace shouldn't be something that happens to us in the future, maybe someday, if things go well. Peace should be here and now, who we are now, with the people we're with now, doing the things we're doing now.

That's the simple formula for living a peaceful life. Take action to do the things that make your life peaceful, with the people who make you happy, and to be at peace with the person you are now.

This eBook shows you how to start on the road to that peaceful lifestyle.

A change of mindset is all you need because the quality of your mind determines the quality of your life.

In this book, you learn to treat your mind as a precious resource, protect it from negative influences feed it quality input, because the better you consciously manage your mind, the better the quality of your life will be.

Even better it show you how to change your habits to create a more peaceful lifestyle.

2: The Illusion of Control

When you think you control something, you're wrong. It's amazing how often we think we're in control of something when really we aren't. Control is an illusion. We constantly make plans that never actually turn out the way we envisioned.

“If you want to make God laugh, make plans,” an old saying goes. We have been trained to set goals, and then work on the actions that lead to those goals . . . and yet how often do we fail to meet those goals? How often are we trying to control a future that we cannot predict? Did you know five years ago that the world would turn out as it has? Of course not.

We don't know the future, much less are able to control it. We like to think we do, but that never turns out to be true. And yet we continue to believe in the illusion of control.

We face a chaotic and complex world and seek to control it in whatever way we can. Our attempts to control the world can be seen by these methods:

- Trying to control how our children turn out, as if we can shape them like blocks of clay, as if humans aren't more complex than we can possibly understand.
- Tracking every little thing, from spending to exercise to what we eat to what tasks we do to how many visitors are on our site to how many steps we've taken today and how many miles we've run. As if our selective tracking can possibly include the many complex factors that influence outcomes.
- Trying to control employees—again, complex human beings with many motivations and whims and habits that we don't understand.
- Obsessively planning projects, trips, days, parties, as if the outcomes of events are things that we can control with our powers of manipulation of the world. If we can let go of this illusion, what are we left with? How can we live among this chaos? Consider the fish. A fish swims in a chaotic sea that it cannot possibly control—much as we all do. The fish, unlike us, is under no illusion that it controls the sea, or other fish in the sea. The fish doesn't even try to control where it ends up—it just swims, either going with the flow, or dealing with the flow as it comes. It eats and hides and mates, but does not try to control a thing. We are no better than that fish, yet our thinking creates the need for an illusion. Let go of that thinking. Learn to be the fish. When we are in the midst of chaos, let go of the need to control it. Be awash in it, experience it in that moment; try not to control the outcome but deal with the flow as it comes. How do we live our lives like this? It's a completely different way of living, once we let go of the illusion:
- We stop trying to control others, and focus instead on being kind to them and showing love.

- We learn that trusting our values is more important to taking action than desiring and striving for certain outcomes.
- We take each step lightly, with balance, in the moment, guided by those values and that which we are passionate about . . . rather than trying to plan the next 1,000 steps and where we'll end up.
- We learn to accept the world as it is, rather than being annoyed with it, stressed by it, mad at it, despaired by it, or trying to change it into what we want it to be.
- We are never disappointed with how things turn out, because we never expected anything—we just accept what comes. This might seem like a passive way of living to some, and it's against our aggressive, productive, goal-oriented cultural nature. If you can't accept this way of living, that's OK—many people live their lives with the illusion of control. Being ignorant about what it is that makes them unhappy or frustrated isn't the worst thing ever. But if you can learn to live this way . . . it's the most freeing and peaceful thing in the world.

3: Let Go of Expectations

‘Act without expectation.’ ~Lao Tzu

How much of your stress, frustration, disappointment, anger, irritation, foul mood stems from one little thing?

Almost all of it comes from your expectations, and, when things (inevitably) don’t turn out as we expect, from wishing things were different.

We build these expectations in our heads of what other people should do, what our lives should be like or look like, how other drivers should behave . . . and yet it’s all fantasy. It’s not real.

And when reality doesn’t meet our fantasy, we wish the world were different.

Here’s a simple solution:

Take your expectations and throw them in the ocean.

Picture all the expectations you have for yourself, your life, your spouse, your kids, your coworkers, your job, the world. Take them from inside of you and toss them in the ocean. A river or lake will also do.

What happens to them? They float. They’re carried around by waves. The current takes them out, and they drift away. Let them be washed away by the cleansing waters, and let them go. Now live your life without them.

What’s a life without expectations like? You accept reality as it is, and people as they are, without trying to force people into the containers that you have created for them. You see things as they are. You don’t need to be disappointed or frustrated or angry—or if you are, you accept it, and then let it go.

That’s not to say that you never act—you can act in a way that’s in accordance with your values and influence the world, but never have an expectation of how the world will react to your actions. If you do something good, you won’t expect praise or appreciation.

Let those expectations of reward and praise float away with the waves. Do good because you love doing good, and expect nothing beyond that.

Pay attention to your thoughts. Don't beat yourself up if you have expectations. Just see them. Then toss them in the ocean. Notice if you start to wish things weren't the way they are. If you wish someone else didn't do something, notice that. You have expectations, and you wish people or the world could meet them instead of doing what they actually do. Toss those wishes in the ocean too. Now accept things, and move on.

Let the waters of the world cleanse us, and let us walk lightly in a world that is already wonderful without our fantasies

Go With The Flow

“Life is a series of natural and spontaneous changes. Don't resist them – that only creates sorrow. Let reality be reality. Let things flow naturally forward in whatever way they like.” – Lao-Tzu

No matter how much structure we create in our lives, no matter how many good habits we build, there will always be things that we cannot control — and if we let them, these things can be a huge source of anger, frustration and stress.

The simple solution: learn to go with the flow.

“Smile, breathe and go slowly.” – Thich Nhat Hanh

For example, let's say you've created the perfect peaceful morning routine. You've structured your mornings so that you do things that bring you calm and happiness. And then a water pipe bursts in your bathroom and you spend a stressful morning trying to clean up the mess and get the pipe fixed.

You get angry. You are disappointed, because you didn't get to do your morning routine. You are stressed from all these changes to what you're used to. It ruins your day because you are frustrated for the rest of the day.

Not the best way to handle things, is it? And yet if we are honest, most of us have problems like this, with things that disrupt how we like things, with people who change what we are used to, with life when it doesn't go the way we want it to go.

Go with the flow.

What is going with the flow? It's rolling with the punches. It's accepting change without getting angry or frustrated. It's taking what life gives you, rather than trying to mold life to be exactly as you want it to be.

“Flow with whatever is happening and let your mind be free. Stay centered by accepting whatever you are doing. This is the ultimate.” – Chuang Tzu

4: Let Go of Struggles

Our lives aren't peaceful because we struggle through so much.

But the struggle is entirely invented, lives entirely in our minds.

We invent this struggle for many reasons: to give our lives meaning, to give ourselves a feeling of accomplishment, to dramatize our story (even if only in our own heads), or simply because this is the mode of thinking we've become used to.

Giving up the struggle isn't always easy, but it is liberating. When you realize you don't have to struggle with everything, life becomes so much more peaceful.

Take the example of struggling with your young child when she won't eat her vegetables. This struggle is unnecessary — forcing her to eat the vegetables accomplishes nothing. The child won't like vegetables more because she's forced to eat them.

Instead, set the example of eating vegetables yourself, and find ways to make eating healthy foods fun for her. By making it fun, and letting go of the need to force her to eat veggies, you've let go of the unnecessary struggle.

The same applies to any struggle where we have expectations of others — let go of those expectations, and stop trying to force people to conform to the expectations.

Those are an imagined ideal anyway. Instead, motivate through inspiration, make things fun, and focus on what's important: the relationship. The struggle is never as important as the relationship.

Struggle comes when we try to force things down a certain path. Instead, flow around the obstacle like water, finding an alternate path, letting go of the fixed path. Adapt, be fluid, and accept the changing course.

5: Let Go of the Need for Approval

Don't waste a moment of your precious life worrying about what other people think of you. No good can come of it.

The truth is that you'll waste far more energy imagining what people think of you than those people will ever invest in it themselves. Most people are far too preoccupied with their own lives to devote considerable attention to what you're doing. While you're worrying about what they think of you, they're worrying about what you think of them. Just worrying your lives away...

Instead of being concerned with what people think, become concerned with what you think of yourself. Your opinion of yourself matters far more than the opinions of others, no matter how wise, intelligent, or well-meaning you think they are.

Realize that other people's opinions of you are theirs alone and have very little to do with you. No one else really knows what you're capable of. When you allow others to have their reaction without taking ownership of it yourself, you empower yourself.

Don't fear that you'll turn into some kind of inconsiderate, anti-social jerk if you stop being concerned with what others think of you. Even as you meet with resistance from others, you'll be serving as a role model to help them overcome their own fears.

In all honesty which is more important to you: the approval of others, or your own happiness? If you aren't happy, you don't approve of yourself, and hence no one can approve of you anyway. They will recognize plainly that your priorities have produced a failure of your life. If you place approval above your own happiness, you ultimately end up with neither. You'll be unhappy, and you cannot expect anyone to truly approve of you for that. Whatever approval you do receive will be as fake as the contentment you pretend to harbor.

The approval of others is inconsequential, but if you successfully create a happy life for yourself, you will have your own self-approval, and that is worth something.

6: Don't Create False Needs

Our lives are filled with things that we need to do. Until we look a little more closely at those needs.

Think about what needs you might have: the need to check your email every 15 minutes, or empty your inbox, or read all your blogs, or keep something perfectly neat, or dress for work in the latest fashion. The need to constantly badger your kids about things, or control your coworkers, or meet with anyone who wants a meeting, or have more and more money, or own a nice car.

Where do these types of needs come from? They're completely made up.

Sometimes the needs are created by society: the industry you're in requires you to work until 9 p.m. or dress in flawless suits. Your neighborhood has certain standards and if you don't have an impeccable lawn and two BMWs in the driveway, you'll be judged. If you don't have the latest iPhone, you won't have your geek cred or status symbol, and you'll be jealous of those who do.

Sometimes the needs are invented by ourselves: we feel the urge to check our emails or RSS feeds or news websites or text messages or Twitter accounts constantly, even though there are no negative societal or work consequences if we don't keep up with them. We want a perfectly made-up bed even if no one else cares. We want to create a list of goals in life, or for the year, and achieve every one of them, even if nothing bad will happen if we don't achieve most of

them.

Any of these made-up needs can be eliminated. All it takes is the willingness to let go.

Examine one of your made-up needs, and ask yourself why it's such an important need. Ask what would happen if you dropped it. What good would it do? Would you have more free time and more space to concentrate and create, or less stress and fewer things to check off each day? What bad things would happen—or might happen? And how likely is it that these things would happen? And how could you counteract them?

These needs are created by fears, and the more honest we are about these fears, the better. Face the fears, and give yourself a little trial period—allow yourself to let go of the need, but just for an hour, or a day. Just for a week. If nothing bad happens, extend the trial, and, slowly in this manner, you'll find that the need wasn't a need at all.

It can feel good to let go, and by letting go, you are freeing yourself.

7: Let Go of Competition

“Enjoy your own life without comparing it with that of another.” – **Marquis de Condorcet**

Life isn't a competition. It's a journey. If you spend that journey always trying to impress others, to outdo others, you're wasting your journey. Instead, learn to enjoy the journey. Make it a journey of happiness, of constant learning, of continual improvement, of love.

Don't worry about having a nicer car or house or anything material, or even a better-paying job. None of that matters a whit, and none of it will make you happier. You'll acquire these things and then only want more.

If you took the strengths of others, and compared them to your weaknesses, how do you think you'd size up? And do you think this would make you feel good?

The funny thing is, this is what most of us do at one time or another — and some of us do pretty often.

It's a sure-fire recipe for a drop in self-confidence and for unhappiness. It's also not that useful.

Let's say I take a look at someone who creates amazing artwork and really top-notch podcasts on their website ... and I look at my art and video skills, and realize that I don't come close to measuring up. In fact, I look pretty pitiful (I'm a lousy drawer and don't know anything about video).

But wait a minute: it's not a fair comparison. Just because I don't measure up doesn't mean I should get out of the blogging business, or that I should get depressed or jealous or resentful. Instead, if I looked at my strengths — writing useful and honest posts — I can see that I have a lot to offer, a lot to be happy about.

And that's so important — being able to look at your own strengths, and see your true value. It's actually one of the keys to finding peace and success, because without this ability, you will be unmotivated, and won't believe in yourself.

I think it's natural to compare ourselves to others, it often makes us unhappy even if we have enough and should be happy with what we have.

My quick advice: try to be aware of when you start comparing yourself to others ... once you've developed this awareness, try this trick: stop yourself. Tell yourself, “Stop that!” And then start thinking about all the things you DO have, the things you love, the people you have, the blessings that life has given you. Make this a regular practice, and you'll start to be more peaceful and happier with your life.

The Effects of Social Comparisons

But let's take a look for a moment at what's wrong with comparing yourself with others:

- Like I said, it's usually an unfair comparison to start with. As a result, you'll always come off bad if you look at someone's strengths (including what they have, like houses and cars) and your weaknesses.
- Even if you compare strength to strength, there will always be those who are better, and those who are worse. Where you are on the ladder of accomplishments or purchases has nothing to do with what you want to do.
- Even if you do well in comparison with others, you may be artificially inflated from this comparison. It's a short-lived boost of ego if you win the comparison — easily knocked down.
- You end up resenting others for doing well, without really knowing the true person. You can see this if you've ever resented someone upon first meeting them, and then later realized you got the wrong idea.
- You might end up talking about your own accomplishments more than is necessary. No one appreciates that.
- You might criticize someone in public, trying to knock them down, often unfairly.

These aren't good things. Let's look at how to stop this phenomenon.

Breaking the Habit of Comparing Yourself With Others

So how do you break this cycle of comparing yourself with others? Here are some tips I've found useful:

- **Awareness.** Most often we do these social comparisons without realizing we're doing it. It's a natural act, I suppose, and as a result it's something that is done without consciousness. So the solution is to become conscious — bring these thoughts to the forefront of your consciousness by being on the lookout for them. If you focus on these thoughts for a few days, it gets much easier with practice, and soon it'll be hard not to notice.
- **Stop yourself.** Once you realize you're doing these comparisons, give yourself a pause. Don't berate yourself or feel bad — just acknowledge the thought, and gently change focus.
- **Count your blessings.** A better focus is on what you do have, on what you are already blessed with. Count what you have, not what you don't. Think about how lucky you are to have what you have, to have the people in your life who care about you, to be alive at all.
- **Focus on your strengths.** Instead of looking at your weaknesses, ask yourself what your strengths are. Celebrate them! Be proud of them. Don't brag, but feel good about them and work on using them to your best advantage.
- **Be OK with imperfection.** No one is perfect — intellectually, we all know that, but emotionally we seem to feel bad when we don't reach perfection. You aren't perfect and you never will be. I certainly am not, and I've learned to be OK with that. Sure, keep trying to improve, but don't think you'll ever be the “perfect person”. If you look at it in a different way, that imperfection is what makes you who you are, you already are perfect.
- **Don't knock others down.** Sometimes we try to criticize others just to make ourselves look or feel better. Taking someone else down for your benefit is destructive. It forms an enemy when you could be forming a friend. In the end, that hurts you as well. Instead, try to support others in their success — that will lead to more success on your part.
- **Focus on the journey.** Don't focus on how you rank in comparison to others — life is not a competition. It's a journey. We are all on a journey, to find something, to become something, to

learn, to create. That journey has nothing to do with how well other people are doing, or what they have. It has everything to do with what we want to do, and where we want to go. That's all you need to worry about.

- **Learn to love enough.** If you always want what others have, you will never have enough. You will always want more. That's an endless cycle, and it will never lead to peace. No matter how many clothes you buy, no matter how many houses you own (seven, in the case of one famous candidate), no matter how many fancy cars you acquire ... you'll never have enough. Instead, learn to realize that what you have is already enough. If you have shelter over your head, food on the table, clothes on your back, and people who love you, you are blessed. You have enough. Anything you have over and above that — and let's admit that all of us reading this book have more than that — is more than enough. Be good with that, and you'll find contentment.

“To love is to stop comparing.” – **Bernard Grasset**

Don't Tear Others Down

So if boosting others can help you, what about the converse? What does tearing others down do for you?

Well, tearing others down might make you feel better. I doubt it, but it might. It might also stop a competitor from succeeding, and maybe in the short term that'll help you. I also doubt that, but it might.

The truth is, no one likes a person who tears others down. If you are bad-mouthing someone, it might make you feel better, but others won't like it. You will gain a bad reputation, and your bad-mouthing will come back to hurt you. If you are sabotaging others, that's even worse.

If you become an obstacle to others' success, they will despise you for it. They will try to get around you, and failing that, will try to go through you. Your energies and time will be spent trying to stop others, and defending yourself against their attacks.

What a waste of precious time and energy! Couldn't you spend that better on building things yourself? On creating something beautiful and truly useful? On helping others to succeed? Of course you can!

Tearing others down is destructive. It hurts other people, and in the long run, it'll hurt you. Don't waste your time and energy on it.

Instead, build others up. Praise their success. Learn to be truly happy for the successes of others, rather than envious. Be a part of their success, rather than an obstacle. Participating in something great, including the successes of others, is a wonderful way to find peace.

8: Let Go of the Need to be Perfect

When you make a mistake, big or small, cherish it like it's the most precious thing in the world. Because in some ways, it is.

Most of us feel bad when we make mistakes, beat ourselves up about it, feel like failures, get mad at ourselves.

And that's only natural: most of us have been taught from a young age that mistakes are bad, that we should try to avoid mistakes. We've been scolded when we make mistakes — at home, school and work. Maybe not always, but probably enough times to make feeling bad about mistakes an unconscious reaction.

Yet without mistakes, we could not learn or grow.

If you think about it that way, mistakes should be cherished and celebrated for being one of the most amazing things in the world: they make learning possible, they make growth and improvement possible.

By trial and error — trying things, making mistakes, and learning from those mistakes — we have figured out how to make electric light, to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, to fly.

Mistakes make walking possible for the smallest toddler, make speech possible, make works of genius possible.

Think about how we learn: we don't just consume information about something and instantly know it or know how to do it. You don't just read about painting, or writing, or computer programming, or baking, or playing the piano, and know how to do them right away.

Instead, you get information about something, from reading or from another person or from observing usually ... then you construct a model in your mind ... then you test it out by trying it in the real world ... then you make mistakes ... then you revise the model based on the results of your real-world experimentation ... and repeat, making mistakes, learning from those mistakes, until you've pretty much learned how to do something.

That's how we learn as babies and toddlers, and how we learn as adults. Trial and error, learning something new from each error.

Mistakes are how we learn to do something new — because if you succeed at something, it's probably something you already knew how to do. You haven't really grown much from that success — at most it's the last step on your journey, not the whole journey. Most of the journey was made up of mistakes, if it's a good journey.

So if you value learning, if you value growing and improving, then you should value mistakes. They are amazing things that make a world of brilliance possible.

Celebrate your mistakes. Cherish them. Smile.

9 Forgive and Find Peace

We've all been hurt by another person at some time or another — we were treated badly, trust was broken, hearts were hurt.

And while this pain is normal, sometimes that pain lingers for too long. We relive the pain over and over, and have a hard time letting go.

This causes problems. It not only causes us to be unhappy, but can strain or ruin relationships, distract us from work and family and other important things, make us reluctant to open up to new things and people. We get trapped in a cycle of anger and hurt, and miss out on the beauty of life as it happens.

We need to learn to let go. We need to be able to forgive, so we can move on and live in peace.

This is something I learned the hard way — after years of holding onto anger at a loved one that stemmed from my childhood and teen-age years, I finally let go of this anger (about 8 years ago or so). I forgave, and not only has it improved my relationship with this loved one tremendously, it has also helped me to be happier.

Forgiveness can change your life.

Forgiveness does not mean you erase the past, or forget what has happened. It doesn't even mean the other person will change his behavior — you cannot control that. All it means is that you are letting go of the anger and pain, and moving on to a better place.

It's not easy. But you can learn to do it.

If you're holding onto pain, reliving it, and can't let go and forgive, read on for some things I've learned.

Commit to letting go. You aren't going to do it in a second or maybe not even in a day. It can take time to get over something. So commit to changing, because you recognize that the pain is hurting you.

Think about the pros and cons. What problems does this pain cause you? Does it affect your relationship with this person? With others? Does it affect work or family? Does it stop you from pursuing your dreams, or becoming a better person? Does it cause you unhappiness? Think of all these problems, and realize you need to change. Then think of the benefits of forgiveness — how it will make you happier, free you from the past and the pain, improve things with your relationships and life in general.

Realize you have a choice. You cannot control the actions of others, and shouldn't try. But you can control not only your actions, but your thoughts. You can stop reliving the hurt, and can choose to move on. You have this power. You just need to learn how to exercise it.

Empathize. Try this: put yourself in that person's shoes. Try to understand why the person did what he did. Start from the assumption that the person isn't a bad person, but just did something wrong. What could he have been thinking, what could have happened to him in the past to make him do what he did? What could he have felt as he did it, and what did he feel afterward? How does he feel now? You aren't saying what he did is right, but are instead trying to understand and empathize.

Understand your responsibility. Try to figure out how you could have been partially responsible for what happened. What could you have done to prevent it, and how can you prevent it from happening next time? This isn't to say you're taking all the blame, or taking responsibility away from the other person, but to realize that we are not victims but participants in life.

Focus on the present. Now that you've reflected on the past, realize that the past is over. It isn't happening anymore, except in your mind. And that causes problems — unhappiness and stress. Instead, bring your focus back to the present moment. What are you doing now? What joy can you find in what is happening right now? Find the joy in life now, as it happens, and stop reliving the past. Btw, you will inevitably start thinking about the past, but just acknowledge that, and gently bring yourself back to the present moment.

Allow peace to enter your life. As you focus on the present, try focusing on your breathing. Imagine each breath going out is the pain and the past, being released from your body and mind. And imagine each breath coming in is peace, entering you and filling you up. Release the pain and the past. Let peace enter your life. And go forward, thinking no longer of the past, but of peace and the present.

Feel compassion. Finally, forgive the person and realize that in forgiveness, you are allowing yourself to be happy and move on. Feel empathy for the person and wish happiness on them. Let love for them, and life in general, grow in your heart. It may take time, but if you're stuck on this point, repeat some of the ones above until you can get here.

10: Prefer Subtraction

We seem to have a natural instinct to add things to our lives.

We want to achieve more, do more, find new hobbies, make new friends, acquire more.

But every single thing added to our lives requires new efforts.

One by one we add new things and don't account for all the maintenance required for each new thing, friend, hobby and goal. Soon we become overwhelmed, and we don't know how to cut back.

A general guideline is to be very careful about adding new things to your life, and, in general, favor the subtraction of things.

When a new online social network comes out, be careful in your choice to add, and prefer the removal of online activities instead.

Be careful about adding new friends, new projects, new commitments.

Prefer to get out of commitments that aren't enhancing your life, but rather complicating it.

Subtraction is a careful process and it takes time. Addition tends to be mindless—it's easy to say yes without fully scrutinizing all the ramifications it will have on our lives. So take care when considering something new, and slowly remove things when possible.

Be a curator of your life. Slowly cut things out until you're left only with what you love, with what's necessary, with what makes you happy.

When we fix on one path or goal, we lose flexibility and adaptability, because we want to go to one specific place using one specific path. But what if things change? It's hard to adapt if we're

fixed and rigid; but if we have nothing fixed in stone, we can adapt to the changes easily.

What happens when your plans get messed up? Do you get upset?

If you learn to give up expected outcomes, and let go of wishing that things were different, you won't get upset. You'll adapt.

You'll flow.

This opens us up to possibility. With no fixed path, we are free to take any turn, any opportunity, any whim, any door that opens up when we least expect it. It's impossible to predict the future accurately, so how can we know how things will unfold? If we don't know how things will unfold, how can we set a fixed path in advance?

By leaving yourself fluid, you allow yourself to see things as they change, adapt with balance, learn as things happen, and use this new information to change your course intelligently and intuitively.

- Many of us stress over clean houses and clean rooms. What if we gave up expectations of our kids' rooms, and instead just tried to set a good example and forgot about whether our kids are actually learning from that example? We'd be less stressed.

- Many of us are worried about our kids' success, and so we do so much to give them the best foundation for success. But what if we gave up expectations and hopes for what our kids might do, how they might turn out? And instead, what if we just accepted whatever they decide to do with their lives?

- We often expect our kids to be ideal kids, on their best behavior, and they almost never live up to that (or they get incredibly

stressed out trying to live up to that). We spend a lot of our time trying to get our kids to conform to the standards we set for them. What if we gave up our expectations of our kids and how they should behave, and instead accepted them for who they are?

- We have a set idea for what our kids should learn, and how they should be educated. I've found that most of my old ideas about school were wrong. The less we do as parents, the better. That doesn't mean you ignore them. Not at all: instead, spend time with them, but it's unstructured time with no expectations of the kids. Set an example, with no expectation that they'll act exactly as you do or as you hope. Love them, unconditionally, no matter how they behave. Let them grow and learn on their own, with little intervention or desired outcomes.

11: Squash Negative Thinking

Negative thinking, in all its many-splendored forms, has a way of creeping into conversations and our thinking without our noticing them. The key to success, in my humble opinion, is learning to spot these thoughts and squash them like little bugs. Then replace them with positive ones. You'll notice a huge difference in everything you do.

As the Dalai Lama said, "The way to overcome negative thoughts and destructive emotions is to develop opposing, positive emotions that are stronger and more powerful."

Let's take a look at some common ways that negative thinking emerges (there are many more, of course) — get good at spotting these patterns, and practice replacing them with positive thinking patterns.

Common ways that negative thinking emerges

I will be happy once I have _____ (or once I earn \$X).

Problem: If you think you can't be happy until you reach a certain point, or until you reach a certain income, or have a certain type of house or car or computer setup, you'll never be happy. That elusive goal is always just out of reach. Once we reach those goals, we are not satisfied — we want more.

Solution: Learn to be happy with what you have, where you are, and who you are, right at this moment. Happiness doesn't have to be some state that we want to get to eventually — it can be found right now. Learn to count your blessings, and see the positive in your situation. This might sound simplistic, but it works.

I wish I were as _____ as (a celebrity, friend, co-worker).

Problem: We'll never be as pretty, as talented, as rich, as sculpted, as cool, as everyone else. There will always be someone better, if you look hard enough. Therefore, if we compare ourselves to others like this, we will always pale, and will always fail, and will always feel bad about ourselves. This is no way to be happy.

Solution: Stop comparing yourself to others, and look instead at yourself — what are your strengths, your accomplishments, your successes, however small? What do you love about yourself? Learn to love who you are, right now, not who you want to become. There is good in each of us, love in each of us, and a wonderful human spirit in every one of us.

Seeing others becoming successful makes me jealous and resentful.

Problem: First, this assumes that only a small number of people can be successful. In truth, many, many people can be successful — in different ways.

Solution: Learn to admire the success of others, and learn from it, and be happy for them, by empathizing with them and understanding what it must be like to be them. And then turn away from them, and look at yourself — you can be successful too, in whatever you choose to do. And even more, you already are successful. Look not at those above you in the social ladder, but those below you — there are always millions of people worse off than you, people who couldn't even read this book or afford a computer. In that light, you are a huge success.

I am a miserable failure — I can't seem to do anything right.

Problem: Everyone is a failure, if you look at it in certain ways. Everyone has failed, many times, at different things. I have certainly failed so many times I cannot count them — and I continue to fail, daily. However, looking at your failures as failures only makes you feel bad about yourself. By thinking in this way, we will have a negative self-image and never move on from here.

Solution: See your successes and ignore your failures. Look back on your life, in the last month, or year, or 5 years. And try to remember your successes. If you have trouble with this, start documenting them — keep a success journal, either in a notebook or online. Document your success each day, or each week. When you look back at what you've accomplished, over a year, you will be amazed. It's an incredibly positive feeling.

I'm going to beat so-and-so no matter what — I'm better than him. And there's no way I'll help him succeed — he might beat me.

Problem: Competitiveness assumes that there is a small amount of gold to be had, and I need to get it before he does. It makes us into greedy, back-stabbing, hurtful people. We try to claw our way over people to get to success, because of our competitive feelings. For example, if a blogger wants to have more subscribers than another blogger, he may never link to or mention that other blogger. However, who is to say that my subscribers can't also be yours? People can read and subscribe to more than one blog.

Solution: Learn to see success as something that can be shared, and learn that if we help each other out, we can each have a better chance to be successful. Two people working towards a common goal are better than two people trying to beat each other up to get to that goal. There is more than enough success to go around. Learn to think in terms of abundance rather than scarcity.

Dammit! Why do these bad things always happen to me?

Problem: Bad things happen to everybody. If we dwell on them, they will frustrate us and bring us down.

Solution: See bad things as a part of the ebb and flow of life. Suffering is a part of the human condition — but it passes. All pain goes away, eventually. Meanwhile, don't let it hold you back. Don't dwell on bad things, but look forward towards something good in your future. And learn to take the bad things in stride, and learn from them. Bad things are actually opportunities to grow and learn and get stronger, in disguise.

You can't do anything right! Why can't you be like Johnny?

Problem: This can be said to your child or your subordinate or your sibling. The problem? Comparing two people, first of all, is always a fallacy. People are different, with different ways of doing things, different strengths and weaknesses, different human characteristics. If we were all the same, we'd be robots. Second, saying negative things like this to another person never helps the situation. It might make you feel better, and more powerful, but in truth, it hurts your relationship, it will actually make you feel negative, and it will certainly make the other person feel negative and more likely to continue negative behavior. Everyone loses.

Solution: Take the mistakes or bad behavior of others as an opportunity to teach. Show them how to do something. Second, praise them for their positive behavior, and encourage their success. Last, and most important, love them for who they are, and celebrate their differences.

Oh yeah? Well up yours too!

Problem: If someone insults you or angers you in some way, insulting them back and continuing your anger only transfers their problem to you. This person was probably having a bad day (or a bad year) and took it out on you for some reason. If you reciprocate, you are now having a bad day too. His problem has become yours. Not only that, but the cycle of insults can get worse and worse until it results in violence or other negative consequences — for both of you.

Solution: Let the insults or negative comments of others slide off you like Teflon. Don't let their problem become yours. In fact, try to understand their problem more — why would someone say something like that? What problems are they going through? Having a little empathy for someone not only makes you understand that their comment is not about you, but it can make you feel and act in a positive manner towards them — and make you feel better about yourself in the process.

12: Peaceful Relationships

Relationships are possibly the most complicated things in our lives. From long-standing battles with co-workers to the history of scars and joys we have with our

significant others to the frustrations and miracles of parenting, every relationship becomes a multitude of layers of meaning and past actions and the emotions that result from those actions.

How can we simplify those relationships? By learning to be present, and forget about past injustices. By giving up our complicated expectations of the people we live and work with, and simply accepting them for who they are. You can wake up and still be mad at your wife for an imagined slight from the night before, or you can wake up and see her beautiful face and appreciate her for the wonder she is. Those past injustices only live on if we dwell in the past. If we learn to live in the present moment, they disappear, because all we have is what is happening right now: another person, breathing like we are, wanting to be loved like we do.

Practice being present in your next interaction with a friend or loved one. Don't worry about what has happened before, or what will happen later. Just enjoy being with that person, pay full attention to that person, and be grateful you are in their presence. Practice letting go of expectations of other people. It's these expectations that cause us to be frustrated and angry and disappointed. When your co-worker pisses you off, it's because you expect them to be better, to be different. They aren't. They're exactly how they are, and wishing they were different will get you nothing but frustration. So accept how they are, and work within that reality. That doesn't mean you have to take crap from everybody. It means that in your mind, you don't wish people were different and weren't rude. Instead, you deal with that rudeness evenly and appropriately, and perhaps even learn about humanity in the process. Letting go of expectations can be extremely difficult. It first entails mindfulness — the realization that we have expectations of people, and that these expectations are causing frustration. That's a tough first step, but letting go of the expectations is even tougher. It means taking a deep breath, and saying, "This is the way the world is right now, and it is perfect." And those expectations, and resulting

frustrations, are everywhere. When we get mad at other drivers in traffic, it's because we expect them to drive a certain way, when the reality is, there will always be rude drivers. Expecting different is useless. When we're in line and the person serving the line is slow, we expect them to be faster, and it makes us angry. When our child misbehaves, we expect them to act perfectly. When our friend doesn't show up for a date, we expect them to be better. Those expectations serve no purpose but to cause us grief. Letting go of them simplifies every relationship.

An Opportunity to Practice

Many times there are large parts of your life you can't control — teenagers must live with the rules of their parents, for example, and many employees don't control their work flow or work environment.

This can be extremely frustrating if you're trying to change, to live a more peaceful life.

If you have others who try to control you, or who won't cooperate, or who make your life difficult, try a simple but powerful method:

Look at every interaction with those people as an opportunity.

- An opportunity to practice patience.
- An opportunity to empathize and find compassion for others.
- An opportunity to let go of your expectations of what others should do.
- An opportunity to stop wishing things were other than they are.
- An opportunity to be grateful in the face of frustrations.

When you see these difficult situations as an opportunity to practice these skills, you can see that these people in your life are a blessing.

13: Make it Happen

A person living a complicated life full of struggle and difficult people might find this book a bit overwhelming, though it's meant to be fairly simple.

You might not know where to start, or feel like it's too difficult to make these kinds of fundamental changes.

It doesn't have to be a struggle, or overwhelming. Finding peace doesn't have to require great effort.

Start simply, and effortlessly. Practice one little thing, in small bursts throughout the day.

One step at a time, putting one foot in front of the other, is how you start the journey. It's how the entire journey is made.

Practice letting go of expectations of others. Practice being mindful of when you wish things were different. Practice turning complaints into gratitude. Practice stepping back when you start to struggle, and letting go of that struggle. Practice going through life with fluidity, with no fixed plans or expected outcomes, and being adaptable to the inevitable change that comes every day.

Practice each of these things separately, one at a time, and you'll get better with every practice. Soon you'll be a master.

Some of the ideas in this book won't apply to your life, and that's OK. You don't have to follow this as a manual of life, but more a collection of loose guidelines meant to help. They work for me, but no two people are the same, and you'll want to test them

for yourself. Let me stress that: pick the ideas that work best for you -- if some of them are objectionable to you, try others.

You might also find that if you come back to this book and these ideas later, more of them will apply to your life then. I've found that to be true myself: sometimes I reject an idea as being impractical, only to come back to it later and find it to be perfect. Be flexible. Be forgiving of yourself. Allow yourself to practice, every day, and make lots of mistakes. It's those mistakes that will help you learn, as they've helped me. I hope to make many mistakes as I continue to learn these ideas.

Section Two

Gratitude

1: Gratitude can change your Life

“If the only prayer you said in your whole life was, “thank you,” that would suffice.” – **Meister Eckhart**

It’s amazing how one simple, easy, positive action can change so much in a person’s life.

One of the things that has had the biggest effect on my life is the realization of the power of gratitude. Simply giving thanks.

It has affected everything. It has made me a more positive person. A more productive person. A better achiever.). A happier person. I’m not perfect, but gratitude has made me better.

Can it change your life as well? I can guarantee it. You might not get the exact same benefits as I have, but there’s no doubt in my mind that the simple act of gratitude on a regular basis will change anyone’s life, positively and immediately. How many other changes can claim to be that quick, that easy, and that profound?

Let’s take a look at some of the ways you can incorporate gratitude into your life, and how it will change your life. These are just some examples, based on my experience and the experiences of others I’ve talked with, and not all will apply to your life. But pick and choose the ones you think will work for you.

Have a morning gratitude session. Take one minute in the morning (make it a daily ritual) to think of the people who have done something nice for you, to think of all the things in your life you’re grateful for. You won’t get to everything in one minute, but it’s enough. And it will instantly make your day better, and help you start your day off right. Can you think of a better use of one minute?

When you’re having a hard day ... make a gratitude list. We all have those bad days sometimes. We are stressed out from work. We get yelled at by someone. We lose a loved one. We hurt a loved one. We lose a contract or do poorly on a project. One of the things that can make a bad day much better is making a list of all the things you’re thankful for. There are always things to be thankful for — loved ones, health, having a job, having a roof over your head and clothes on your back, life itself.

Instead of getting mad at someone, show gratitude. That’s a major switching of attitudes — actually a complete flip. And so this isn’t always easy to do. But I can promise you that it’s a great thing to do. If you get mad at your co-worker, for example, because of something he or she did ... bite your tongue and don’t react in anger. Instead, take some deep breaths, calm down, and try to think of reasons you’re grateful for that person. Has that person done anything nice for

you? Has that person ever done a good job? Find something, anything, even if it's difficult. Focus on those things that make you grateful. It will slowly change your mood. And if you get in a good enough mood, show your gratitude to that person. It will improve your mood, your relationship, and help make things better. After showing gratitude, you can ask for a favor — can he please refrain from shredding your important documents in the future? And in the context of your gratitude, such a favor isn't such a hard thing for the co-worker to grant.

Instead of criticising your significant other, show gratitude. This is basically the same as the above tactic, but I wanted to point out how gratitude can transform a marriage or relationship. If you constantly criticize your spouse, your marriage will slowly deteriorate — I promise you. It's important to be able to talk out problems, but no one likes to be criticized all the time. Instead, when you find yourself feeling the urge to criticize, stop and take a deep breath. Calm down, and think about all the reasons you're grateful for your spouse. Then share that gratitude, as soon as possible. Your relationship will become stronger. Your spouse will learn from your example — especially if you do this all the time. Your love will grow, and all will be right in the world.

Instead of complaining about your kids, be grateful for them. Many parents get frustrated with their children. They are too slow to do things, they have a bad attitude, they can't clean up after themselves, and they pick their nose too much. Unfortunately, sometimes parents will communicate that frustration to their children too often, and the kids will begin to feel bad about themselves. Many parents have done this, and while it's not perfect, it's a part of parenthood. But there's a better way: follow the method above of calming down when you're frustrated, and thinking of reasons you're grateful to your child. Share these reasons with your child. And then take the opportunity to teach them, instead of criticizing them.

When you face a major challenge, be grateful for it. Many people will see something difficult as a bad thing. If something goes wrong, it's a reason to complain, it's a time of self-pity. That won't get you anywhere. Instead, learn to be grateful for the challenge — it's an opportunity to grow, to learn, to get better at something. This will transform you from a complainer into a positive person who only continues to improve. People will like you better and you'll improve your career. Not too shabby.

When you suffer a tragedy, be grateful for the life you still have. Tragedies can be crippling if you let them overcome you. And while I'm not saying you shouldn't grieve — of course you should — you can also take away something even greater from these tragedies: gratitude for the life you still have. Appreciation for the fleeting beauty of life itself. Love for the people who are still in your life. Take this opportunity to show appreciation to these people, and to enjoy life while you can.

Instead of looking at what you don't have, look at what you do have. Have you ever looked around you and bemoaned how little you have? How the place you live isn't your dream house, or the car you drive isn't as nice as you'd like, or your peers have cooler gadgets or better jobs? If so, that's an opportunity to be grateful for what you already have. It's easy to forget that there are billions of people worse off than you — who don't have much in the way of shelter or clothes, who don't own a car and never will, who don't own a gadget or even know what one is, who don't have a job at all or only have very menial, miserable jobs in sweatshop conditions.

Compare your life to these people's lives, and be grateful for the life you have. And realize that it's already more than enough, that happiness is not a destination — it's already here.

“Every day, think as you wake up, today I am fortunate to be alive, I have a precious human life, I am not going to waste it. I am going to use all my energies to develop myself, to expand my heart out to others; to achieve enlightenment for the benefit of all beings. I am going to have kind thoughts towards others, I am not going to get angry or think badly about others. I am going to benefit others as much as I can.” – **Dalai Lama**

2: Turning Complaints into Gratitude

A life full of complaints isn't peaceful. It's a constant struggle, because everything in life is horrible. But a simple switch in mindset can change everything.

Take your biggest complaint today. Now try to find a way to be grateful for that complaint.

A few examples:

- I hurt my elbow playing basketball. But how lucky I am to be able to lead such an active life!
- My boss has been obnoxious all day. I'm thankful for the opportunity to practice patience, to be present, to learn about humanity, to be alive.
- I lost my job today. And thus I'm free to explore all the scary job paths I've never had the time to pursue before.

It's transformative. You go from hating the world to loving it.

You stop wishing you had things you don't, and start appreciating what you do have.

Turning a complaint into gratitude is a simple process:

You have to first notice that you're complaining. Be mindful of your thoughts, of your negative self-talk.

Notice also that you're wishing things were different than they are. Which is a futile activity, if you think about it.

Now accept things as they are. Be OK that the world has turned out exactly as it is. And note that the world will go on, whether you're OK with it or not.

Now be grateful you have the opportunity to even make a complaint. Being alive is a miracle. Find a way to see the silver lining, because everything has a positive side if you look hard

enough.

Doing this once is a great pick-me-up. But doing it daily, even all day long, can change your life. Soon you'll have no complaints, and go through life happier than ever.

3: Accept what is

“There is nothing either good or bad,
but thinking makes it so.”

– **William Shakespeare, “Hamlet”**

One of the greatest sources of unhappiness, in my experience, is the difficulty we have in accepting things as they are.

Without judgment, without wishing for otherwise.

When we see something we don’t like, we wish it could be different — we cry out for something better. That may be human nature, or perhaps it’s something that’s ingrained in our culture.

The root of the unhappiness isn’t necessarily that we want things to be different, however: it’s that we decided we didn’t like it in the first place. We’ve judged it as bad, rather than saying, “It’s not bad or good, it just is.”

This can be applied to whatever you do: whether it be how other people act at work, how politics works and how depressing the news media can be. Accept these things as they are, and try to understand why they’re that way.

It’ll save you a lot of grief, because you’ll no longer say, “Oh, I wish things didn’t suck!”

Does it mean you can never change things? Not at all. But change things not because you can’t accept things as they are, but because you enjoy the process of change, of learning and growing.

Can we make this world a better place? Again, that’s assuming that it’s a bad place right now. But instead, you could say the world is just what it is — and that’s neither good nor bad. You can say that you’ll continue to try to do things to help others, to grow as a person, to make a difference in this world — not because you’re such a bad person now, or the world sucks, but because that’s the path you choose to take, because you enjoy that path.

As you catch yourself judging, and wishing for different — and we all do it — try a different approach: accept, and understand. It might lead to some interesting results.

“Be Content with what you have; rejoice in the way things are. When you realize there is nothing lacking, the whole world belongs to you.” – **Lao Tzu**

4: Love Life not Stuff

We're in love with stuff — with shopping, with acquiring, with owning, with collecting.

Let's lust after life instead.

Our obsession with stuff has become unhealthy. When we have a void in our lives, we buy things. When we have problems, we buy things. And these things are becoming more and more expensive, bigger, shinier ... more wasteful.

This obsession with stuff leads to owning a lot, having a lot of clutter ... and yet this stuff doesn't fill our lives with meaning.

It leads to deep debt, from buying so much, and needing bigger houses and storage spaces to contain everything. Financially, we're worse off than ever, because of this obsession with stuff.

We buy things when we're depressed, we buy things for others to show how much we love them ... and in this way, stuff has separated us from actually dealing with our emotions, blocked us from truly connecting with others.

Let's replace that lust for stuff with a lust for life

Some ideas:

- Rediscover a passion for life. Get outside and feel nature, appreciate the beauty of the world around you. Get active, do some gardening or yardwork, play a sport, go for a walk, take a hike, go for a swim, ride a bike. Feel the life coursing through you. Breathe it in.
- Give experiences as gifts, not stuff. Instead of shopping for someone come birthdays or Christmas, think of an experience you can give them instead. A date with you, doing something fun, hanging out, cooking, playing, talking, exploring. A fun time at a park or beach. Something other than everyday. An experience is much more meaningful than an object.
- Connect with others. In real life. If you haven't hung out with a friend recently, give him a call and go hang out. Get your kid away from the TV or video game player and take her outside to do something. Go on a date with your partner. Visit your mom or grandparents. And be present while you're with them — really listen, really be there.
- Deal with your emotions. If you have a need to buy things, to shop when you are having emotional issues, be more aware of this. Then deal with the underlying emotions, rather than

using shopping as a way to forget about them. If you're depressed, or anxious, or lonely, deal with those. Find solutions, figure out what's causing them. Good news: experiencing life, getting active, and connecting with others all help you deal with those emotional issues.

- Disconnect your attachment to stuff. Sometimes I find myself reluctant to give something up, even if I don't really use it. And that's when I ask myself, "Why?" What is holding me back from getting rid of this possession? Sometimes, the item has an emotional connection, but then I realize that it's just an object, it's not the emotion or the actual source of the emotion. Then I'll take a picture of the item, upload it to my computer, and get rid of the object. I feel liberated, because I've broken an attachment to a physical object (but saved the memory). If you are attached to an object, figure out why — it's not healthy in the long run.
- Realize that life, not stuff, is what matters. Objects are just objects — if you lose them, if they get stolen or destroyed ... it's not a big deal. They're just objects — not your life. Your life is the series of moments that is steaming through your consciousness right now, and how you use those moments and what you fill them with is what truly matters, not what you fill your home with. At the end of this short journey, you'll look back and remember your experiences, the people you loved and who loved you back, the things you did and didn't do. Not the stuff you had.

5: Beating Discontentment

“There is no greater sin than desire, No greater curse than discontent, No greater misfortune than wanting something for oneself. Therefore he who knows that enough is enough will always have enough.” – **Lao Tzu**

I was talking to a loved one sometime ago, a woman who from an outside point of view has everything: an incredible house with a swimming pool, a wonderful husband, two smart and beautiful and good-hearted children, and a life of mostly leisure. But as we were talking about contentment with life, she said, “That’s what I need — I need to find contentment.”

And there were tears in her eyes, and my heart reached out to her.

She’s not alone, either: many people feel that there is something missing from their lives, that despite having everything they need they aren’t happy, aren’t content, cannot find satisfaction.

I’ve been through stages in my life like this, and I’ve also climbed out of such ruts more than once. I know it isn’t easy, but I also know that it’s possible. Looking back on these times in my life, when I overcame discontentment, I’ve realized there are three things you can do:

1. Change your attitude and perspective.
2. Take some kind of positive action.
3. Do something that gives you meaning.

And you can do one of these things or all three, all at once, one at a time, or in whatever combination works for you. They can work alone, or together.

Let’s look at each one of these solutions.

Change Your Attitude and Perspective

This is huge. I can’t overstate the importance of how you look at things. And I know, the power of positive thinking is a cliché in the self-help world, but that’s because it works. It’s worked for me in everything I’ve done, and without it I would have accomplished nothing .

But it’s more than accomplishing things — by changing your attitude, you can become happy, almost immediately. It’s a choice.

Here are just a few but important ways:

Appreciate what you have. You already have some amazing things in your life, whether you realize it or not. Most of us have incredible family members, friends, other loved ones who love us back. Learn to appreciate what a miracle that is. Most of us have good health, which is another miracle. Most of us have eyes, with which to enjoy the amazing miracles of sunsets and nature and beauty all around us. Most of us have ears, with which to enjoy music, one of the greatest miracles ever. Be grateful for each of these

things, and more! Take time every day, throughout the day, to thank life for all that it has given you, to thank others for what they give you, to be grateful.

Find good in everything. Everything can be seen in a negative way, or a positive way. I've said this before, but even the death of a loved one is an opportunity for you to appreciate life more, to appreciate their amazing life, to appreciate the time you have with your loved ones, to be thankful you're even alive. When you get sick, it's a chance for you to rest. When you're jobless, you have more time with your family, more chances to create, a fresh start on life. When your child is throwing a tantrum, he's expressing himself, asserting his individuality, being human. Find the good in anything that normally irks you, in anyone who you have issues with.

Start believing that you can change things. A general feeling that things are too difficult to change, that they'll never get better, can in itself be the cause of our problems. Instead, start believing that you can make things better, and you will open the doors for change. And you can change things — I've done it, and many, many others have too. It's possible.

Enjoy the moment. Whatever you're doing right now, or at any time during the day, take the time to enjoy it. Anything: reading, writing, talking with a co-worker, taking a shower, walking up stairs, eating, washing dishes, sweeping. Anything can be fully appreciated if you pay attention. It makes life better.

Take Some Kind of Positive Action

It doesn't matter what the action is, as long as you're doing something positive. Start small — just take a tiny little baby step. But start.

Do Something That Gives You Meaning

Often we feel dissatisfied with life because while we might have a good life — at least, all the comfort and leisure we need — we might not be doing anything that feels worthwhile. It might feel meaningless.

Think Positive

Focus on the good things. Everyone's life has positive and negative aspects — whether you're happy or not depends largely on which aspects you focus on. Did you lose today's softball game? At least you got to spend time with friends doing something fun. Did you sprain your ankle running? Well, your body probably needed a week's rest anyway, as you were running too much! Did your baby get sick? Well, at least it's only a flu virus and nothing life-threatening ... and at least you have a wonderful baby to nurse to health! You can see my point — almost everything has a positive side, and focusing on the positives make all the difference.

Notice the small things. Instead of waiting for the big things to happen — marriage, kids, house, nice car, big promotion, winning the lottery — find happiness in the small things that happen every day. Little things like having a quiet cup of coffee in the early morning hours, or the delicious and simple taste of berries, or the pleasure of reading a book with your child, or taking a walk with your partner. Noticing these small pleasures, throughout your day, makes a huge difference.

And you know what? Taking that little baby step will feel like a victory. Then take that feeling of success and use it to take another little tiny baby step. And another. And then, yet another. And so on, until you look back and you've actually taken a series of baby steps that add up to a whole great amount of traveling. It's amazing how the power of little positive steps can add up over time.

6: Find Contentment

Almost everyone I know is looking for something better, all the time.

They want a better life, better clothes, a better car, a better job, a better place to live. And I understand this, because I was there most of my life.

It wasn't until I learned to find contentedness, slowly, that I was actually able to improve my life:

- By realizing that spending time with my family, friends and myself was all I needed, I no longer needed entertainment or shopping. I spent less
- By learning to be content with homemade food, I stopped needing to eat out all the time (although I still do on a semiregular basis) and I lost weight.
- Most of all, I stopped the endless cycle of wanting more, of wanting better, and I realized I already had everything. I'm so much happier now.

Finding contentment isn't something that usually happens overnight, but rather comes in small doses. Here are some things you can do today to learn to find that contentedness:

- Look around you right now, or perhaps when you're sitting at home. Realize that everything around you is all that you need for happiness. What do you need to be happy? Food, shelter, clothing, other people, something meaningful to do, and a

mindset of contentedness.

- Want something meaningful to do? You don't need to change jobs—just help others, in any way you can. Help coworkers to succeed. Be there for friends when they need you. Spend time with loved ones and encourage them. Volunteer to help the needy. Improve your community in small ways.

- Need others in your life? Find a neighbor and make a friend. Volunteer and be friendly. Hang out with coworkers. Be considerate, friendly, positive in all human transactions.

- Start counting your blessings—all the things for which you have to be grateful.

- When you find yourself thinking about what you want, start appreciating what you have, every day.

- Be more mindful in everything you do—eating, showering, walking, working, washing dishes, talking, writing, reading and spending time with others.

- Improve your capacity of mindfulness through daily sitting meditation.

When you find contentment, you realize you need very little, and little needs to be done. Life becomes easier, and better.

Section Three

Awareness

1: Live Consciously

A life lived of choice is a life of conscious action. A life lived of chance is a life of unconscious creation.
– Neale Donald Walsch

As much as possible, I try to live my life by bringing to my consciousness what is bubbling up from my unconsciousness.

I try to clear the fog through which we often drift, to see where I'm going, to make conscious choices instead of automatic ones.

Do you ever have a feeling that you're drifting through life, and not going where you want to go? Or that you don't know how you got where you are today?

Living consciously is about taking control of your life, about thinking about your decisions rather than making them without thought, about having a life that we want rather than settling for the one that befalls us.

If you're drifting through life, or feel out of control, or don't know how you got here ... deciding to live consciously could be the single most important thing you do.

Are you living unconsciously now?

Ask yourself the following questions ... if you find yourself saying yes to many of them, you might want to consider trying conscious living:

Are you in a job that you fell into rather than the job you want?

Are you doing things that are given to you rather than what you love to do?

Are you spending your time doing busy work rather than what you want to do with your days?

Do you wish you could spend more time with loved ones?

Do you find yourself overweight because you've been eating the food you've been eating for years and stuck in a rut of not exercising?

Do you find yourself living from paycheck to paycheck or in debt, not knowing where your money goes?

Do you find yourself wasting your time doing things that aren't important rather than focusing on completing the things that are very important?

Do you go through your days not thinking about what you want out of life and how to get it?

If you answered “no” to all of these questions, you’re probably already living consciously, and you don’t need this article at all. For those who would like to live more consciously, read on.

How to Live Life Consciously

It’s not something you can change overnight. Living consciously is a lifestyle, a skill, an art. It’s not something you do just once, but a habit that you can form for the rest of your life.

But it is deceptively simple: Be conscious, and think about, everything you do. Make conscious choices rather than doing things without thinkings. That’s all.

It sounds simple, but it’s amazing how few people actually do this, and it’s amazing how easy it is to live life on autopilot, and just do what we always do because that’s what we’re used to doing. And it’s easier that way, even if our lives are difficult.

It’s not easy to changes our lives, to break out of our routines, to begin to live the lives we want.

It takes willful effort, energy and constant vigilance to think about our choices ... all of them.

Here are some key tips that have worked for me:

Make reflecting on your life a regular routine. Whether you keep a journal, or make reflecting on your day part of your evening routine, or have a weekly session where you review your life or take some time away from the office to reflect on everything ... it’s important that you give things some thought. Regularly.

At least once a year, set or review your life’s goals. What do you want to do in life? What is important to you? What do you want your life to be like? And how will you get there? Write it down, and keep it somewhere you will see it often, and take action.

Also review your relationships. The people we love are among the most important things in our lives, if not the *only* important things. You need to think about your relationships. Do you spend enough time with them? Do you show your appreciation for them? Is there a way you can improve your relationship? Do you need to forgive or apologize about anything? Are there barriers that can be removed? Communication that can be improved? Also review your relationships with others, such as co-workers.

Consider your impact on the world. How does what you do, what you consume, and how you live, impact the environment? How does it impact the poor, the powerless, the voiceless? How does it impact your community? Your life has an impact, whether you think about it or not. Being conscious of how your decisions affect others is important.

Consider the real costs of each purchase. We often buy things without really thinking about what we're doing or what they really cost. Sure, it's just \$30 ... no problem, right? But that \$30 might represent several hours of your life ... hours that you'll never get back. Do you really want to spend your life earning money for trivial purchases? Is that what you want to do with your life? Worth some thought, I think.

Review how you spend your time. Until we do a time audit, and keep a log of our day, even if it's just for one or two days, we don't really know how we spend our time. And if we do audit our time, it can be very surprising. And if we know how we're spending our time now, we can make conscious decisions to change how we spend our time in the future.

Explore yourself. Not in a dirty way. Take some time to think about what kind of person you are. What your values are. Whether you live your life according to those values. How you treat people. How you treat yourself..

2: Solitude

“I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude. We are for the most part more lonely when we go abroad among men than when we stay in our chambers.” ~**Henry David Thoreau**

One problem with our complicated lives these days is that many of us never find time to spend alone, in peace, without being bombarded with noise and information. There’s no time for solitude and quiet contemplation, and as a result, we have stress and anxiety and depression and repression.

Find time each day to be alone, for your mental health, by stealing pockets of time from other areas of your life.

This time will pay off for you in the long run. You will become sane, and with the ability to reflect on your life, on what you’ve gone through in the last 24 hours, in the last week, in the last year, you can slowly improve it or learn to be peaceful with it.

Finding time for solitude is extremely important, and yet it’s an area that is often neglected. I don’t mean time alone, where you’re watching TV or surfing the Internet or reading or watching the news. There’s nothing wrong with those activities, but they aren’t conducive to contemplation, to getting to know yourself, to reflecting on what you’ve been going through, for thinking about your dreams.

Learning to spend time in quiet solitude is also very difficult. It’s probably best if done in small doses at first, so if you only do it for 20 or 30 minutes at first, that’s OK. Learn to fight the urge to turn the TV on or turn your computer on or play music or read. It’s hard, but it’s worth it.

You don’t need to be a monk to find solitude, nor do you need to be a hermit to enjoy it.

Solitude is a lost art in these days of ultra-connectedness, and while I don’t bemoan the beauty of this global community, I do think there’s a need to step back from it on a regular basis.

Some of my favorite activities include sitting in front of the ocean, still, contemplating ... walking, alone with my thoughts ... disconnecting and just writing ... finding quiet with a good novel ... taking a solitary bath.

Don’t get me wrong: I love being with loved ones, and walking with a friend or watching the sunset with others are also among my absolute favorite things in the world.

But solitude, in these days as much as ever, is an absolute necessity.

The Benefits of Solitude

The best art is created in solitude, for good reason: it’s only when we are alone that we can reach into ourselves and find truth, beauty, soul. Some of the most famous philosophers took daily walks, and it was on these walks that they found their deepest thoughts.

Just a few of the benefits I’ve found from solitude:

- time for thought
- in being alone, we get to know ourselves
- we face our demons, and deal with them
- space to create
- space to unwind, and find peace
- time to reflect on what we've done, and learn from it
- isolation from the influences of other helps us to find our own voice
- quiet helps us to appreciate the smaller things that get lost in the roar

There are many more benefits, but that's to get you started. The real benefits of solitude cannot be expressed through words, but must be found in doing.

How To Find Solitude

You start by disconnecting.

Take every means of connecting with others, and sever them. Disconnect from email, from Facebook and Twitter, from forums and social media, from instant messaging and Skype, from news websites and blogs. Turn off your mobile device and phones.

Turn off the computer ... unless you're going to use the computer to create, in which case, shut off the Internet, close your browser, and shut down every other program used to connect with others.

The next steps depend on which of two strategies you use:

Holing yourself up. This can be done in your office, by shutting the door and/or using headphones and the calming music of your choice. If possible, let coworkers know you can't be disturbed during a certain block of your day. Or it can be done at home, by finding a quiet space, shutting the door if you can, or using headphones. The key is to find a way to shut out the outside world, including co-workers or those who live with you.

Getting away. My favorite way to find solitude, actually. Get out the door, and enjoy the outdoors. Take a walk, find a park or a beach or a mountain, find a quiet coffee shop, find a shady spot to rest. People watch, or nature watch.

Other tips:

- Try taking a quiet, relaxing bath from time to time.
- Curl up with a good novel.
- If you're married with kids, ask your spouse to give you some time off to be alone, and then return the favor. Make it a regular swap.
- Take a walk every day.
- Get into work earlier, and work in quiet.
- Have a nice cup of tea.
- Try a regular time each day when you're disconnected.
- Try sitting still, and focusing on your breath as it comes in and goes out. As your mind wanders to thoughts of the past and future, make a patient note of that, then gently return to your breathing.

"I live in that solitude which is painful in youth, but delicious in the years of maturity." ~**Albert Einstein**

3: Disconnection

We live in curious times. It's called the Age of Information, but in another light it can be called the Age of Distraction.

While humanity has never been free of distraction — from swatting those bothersome gnats around the fireplace to dealing with piles of paper mail and ringing telephones — never have the distractions been so voluminous, so overwhelming, so intense, so persistent as they are now. Ringing phones are one thing, but email notifications, Twitter and Facebook messages, an array of browser tabs open, and mobile devices that are always on and always beeping are quite another. More and more, we are connected, we are up to our necks in the stream of information, we are in the crossfire of the battle for our attention, and we are engaged in a harrying blur of multitasking activity.

When we're working, we have distractions coming from every direction. In front of us is the computer, with email notifications and other notifications of all kinds. Then there's the addicting lure of the browser, which contains not only an endless amount of reading material that can be a black hole into which we never escape, but unlimited opportunities for shopping, for chatting with other people, for gossip and news and lurid photos and so much more. All the while, several new emails have come in, waiting for a quick response. Several programs are open at once, each of them with tasks to complete. Several people would like to chat, dividing our attention even further.

And that's just in front of us. From the sides come a ringing desk phone, a ringing mobile device, music from several different coworkers, a colleague

coming to our desk asking a question, incoming papers needing attention, other papers scattered across our desks, someone calling a meeting, another offering up food.

With so much competing for our attention, and so little time to focus on real work, it's a wonder we get to find peace.

And then we leave work, but the attack on our attention doesn't end.

We bring the mobile device, with incoming text and email messages, all needing a reply, with incoming calls that can't be ignored. We have reading material, either in paper form or on the mobile device, to keep our attention occupied. We are bombarded from all sides by advertising, asking for not only attention but our desires. We get home, and there's the television, constantly blaring, with 500 channels all asking for yet more attention, with 500,000 ads asking for yet more desires. There's our home computer, asking us to do more work, sending us more messages, more distractions, social networks and shopping and reading. There are kids or spouses or roommates or friends, there's the home phone, and still the mobile device is going off.

This is unprecedented, and it's alarming.

We've come into this Age without being aware that it was happening, or realizing its consequences. Sure, we knew that the Internet was proliferating, and we were excited about that. We knew that mobile devices were becoming more and more ubiquitous, and maybe some people harrumphed and others welcomed the connectivity. But while the opportunities offered by this online world are a good thing, the constant distractions, the increasingly urgent pull on our attention, the stress of multitasking at an ever-finer granular level, the erosion of our free time and our ability to live with a modicum of

peace ... perhaps we didn't realize how much this would change our lives.

Maybe some did. And maybe many still don't realize it.

I think, with so many things asking for our attention, it's time we paid attention to this.

There are days when I wake up and refuse to turn on the Internet, and sit still with my cup of coffee in the hush that fills the hours just before dawn. I'll listen to the quiet. I'll reflect on life. I'll lose myself in a novel. Some days I'll sit down and write, just my thoughts and the quiet and the gentle tapping of the keyboard.

And it's beautiful.

Other days I'll go for a run and enjoy the rich outdoor air, salty when I jog by the ocean, sweet when I pass a field of wildflowers, saturated with soft light. And this is a wonderful time for me, as I enjoy the moment, as I soak in the quietness, as I bask in my connection with life but my disconnection with technology.

These are unbeatable moments.

These are the moments when disconnection shows its glorious face, when life is in full force, when we are fully connected to the world immediately around us, while disconnected from the world at large.

These moments have become increasingly rare and fleeting, because of our connectedness with technology.

I don't think we should abandon technology.

Technology has empowers us in many ways and I am as big a proponent of the latest technologies as anyone.

It's not technology we should be afraid of. It's a life where we're always

connected, always interrupted, always distracted, always bombarded with information and requests. It's a life where we have no time to create, or connect with real people.

But it's important to get away from these constant distractions — we need some quiet, some time to reflect and contemplate, some time for Solitude. Without it, our minds are constantly bombarded by information and sensations, unable to rest. That constantly stresses our minds in ways we're not meant to handle.

We need the rest. It's important in ways we don't often think about. We need to de-stress, and we need to recharge our mental batteries.

Quiet and solitude and reflection lead to greater peace when they're a part of our daily lives, at least in some degree. What you do during this time — read, write, run, nap, sit, watch, listen, even have a quiet conversation, play, study, build — isn't as important as the simple fact of having that time of disconnection.

4: Stillness and Breathe

“Silence is a source of great strength.” ~Lao Tzu

With all these distraction, we can practice stillness to find peace

Take a minute out of your busy day to do this little exercise: pause in the middle of all you have to do, all that’s going on around you. Close your eyes, and sit still. Breathe in, and breathe out, and pay attention to your breath as it comes in and goes out. Just sit still, for about a minute.

This stillness might seem like inaction, which we’re taught is a bad thing. It’s lazy, it’s passive, it’s against our Puritan work ethic. And yet, this simple inaction can change our world.

Stillness calms us. It gives us a small oasis of quiet that allows us to hear our thoughts, that allows us to catch our breath, that gives us room to breathe at all. It is the antibody to the stress and rush we feel daily.

“Activity conquers cold, but stillness conquers heat.” ~Lao Tzu

The strength of Stillness

Stillness has a calming effect on the world around us as well. By becoming still, we cause others to pause, to pay attention. Our quiet also quiets others. We set the mood for those who work and otherwise interact with us.

When we rush and set a frenetic pace, it stresses others and inspires them to rush frenetically too. Stillness has the opposite effect. It slows the world down, allows us to focus, gives us time for contemplation, for what matters most.

It takes strength to be still when others rush. It takes courage to be different, to go against the stream. But while others might think us weird at first, that’s OK. Sometimes it’s the weird ones that make the most difference. And soon, as our stillness inspires others to find stillness of their own, we won’t be the weird ones — we’ll be the ones with wisdom.

It takes strength to find stillness when the world around us is a chaos of activity, but it’s a strength that’s in us, and we need only to find it. Paradoxically, it’s stillness that will allow us to find that strength. Be still, look within, and it’ll be there.

Finding Stillness

It’s pretty simple, really, and you don’t need me to tell you to do this: to find stillness, you just need to take the time to sit still, every day that you can.

Find a time in the morning, when the world is still fairly quiet, to sit still. Don’t do anything, don’t plan your day, don’t check email, don’t eat. Just sit, and learn to be comfortable being still.

In practice, we'll gradually find that comfort, and we'll become good at it. If mornings are no good, find time during your lunch break, or after work, or just before you go to bed.

Find a place to be still. It can be a chair in your house, or a front porch, or the roof. It can be a park bench, or the beach, or a path in the woods. Let this be a ritual that you come to look forward to.

From this small place of stillness, calm will carry to the rest of your day, radiating like a soothing force. You'll be calmer throughout the day, and learn to find little pockets of stillness everywhere: when you first start your workday, when you are ready to sit down and create, when you're about to eat, when you are ready to exercise, during a meeting, even.

Practice, regularly. Practice, and learn. Practice stillness, and the stillness becomes a canvas upon which you can paint the masterpiece of your life.

Breathe.

Breathing can transform your life.

If you feel stressed out and overwhelmed, breathe. It will calm you and release the tensions.

If you are worried about something coming up, or caught up in something that already happened, breathe. It will bring you back to the present.

If you are discouraged and have forgotten your purpose in life, breathe. It will remind you about how precious life is, and that each breath in this life is a gift you need to appreciate. Make the most of this gift.

If you have too many tasks to do, or are scattered during your workday, breathe. It will help bring you into focus, to concentrate on the most important task you need to be focusing on right now.

If you are spending time with someone you love, breathe. It will allow you to be present with that person, rather than thinking about work or other things you need to do.

If you are exercising, breathe. It will help you enjoy the exercise, and therefore stick with it for longer.

If you are moving too fast, breathe. It will remind you to slow down, and enjoy life more.

So breathe. And enjoy each moment of this life. They're too fleeting and few to waste.

5: Being Present

“With the past, I have nothing to do; nor with the future. I live now.” – **Ralph Waldo Emerson**

How often are you driving while talking on a cell phone, or thinking about work problems, or the errands you have to do? How often do you eat without thinking about the food you’re eating? How often do you drift off while doing other things, thinking about something you messed up on, or worrying about something that’s coming up?

I would submit that most of us are elsewhere, much of the time, rather than in the here and now.

If I could only give one word of advice to someone trying to find peace in an overwhelming and stressful and chaotic world, it would be this: simplify. But if I could give two more words of advice, they’d be: be present.

I can’t claim to be perfect at being present. I can’t claim that I do it all the time. But I can say this: I’ve been practicing being present for awhile now, and I’ve gotten better at it. I’ve learned a lot about being present, and I’d like to share that with others.

Focus On Now

There are three things we can think about:

1. **The past.** Reliving things we messed up about. Being embarrassed about something we did. Wishing we could have something back that is gone. Living in memories of good times past. Being angry about things done to us. You get the idea.
2. **The future.** Worrying about things we need to do later. Worrying about what might happen, or a big event coming up. Being anxious that things might go wrong, or that we might mess up. Hoping for something wonderful. Dreaming of great things to come.
3. **The present.** What is happening right now, at this moment. What we are doing now.

It is inevitable that we will think about all three. We cannot stop ourselves from thinking about the past or the future. However, with practice, we can focus on the present more than we already do.

But why should we do that? What’s wrong with focusing on the past or future? Nothing’s wrong with it. It isn’t wrong to think about past or future. However, there’s nothing we can do about things that have already happened, and worrying or agonizing about them doesn’t usually do us much good. I’d suggest analyzing what happened, learning from it, and moving on. It’s much healthier.

We also can’t control the future. It’s impossible. We can do things that will change the future, but they might change the future in ways we cannot anticipate. Or they might not change things at all. And the only thing we can do about the future is do something ... now. In the present. So focusing on what we do now is the best way to improve the future. Not thinking about the future. Plans change. We must be prepared for that change not by overplanning, but by being in the moment and rolling with the punches.

There's also the problem of missing the present. If we spend most of our time thinking about the past or future, we are missing life itself. It's passing us by while we're elsewhere. You can't get the most out of life unless you learn to focus on being present, while things are happening. Thinking about your childhood, or your kid's future, is useless if your kids' childhood is passing by without you being there.

Benefits of Being in the Moment

I've noticed a ton of benefits from my increased focus on the present. Here are just a few to consider:

1. **Increased enjoyment.** I find that I enjoy life more if I'm present rather than having my mind elsewhere. Food tastes better, I have more fun with my family, even work becomes more enjoyable.
2. **Reduced stress.** Worrying about the past and future gives you stress. But being present is almost like meditation. There are no worries. There is just experiencing.
3. **Better relationships.** When you really commit yourself to being with someone, to listening to them, you are being a better father, husband, friend, daughter, girlfriend. You have better conversations. You bond.
4. **Get things done.** I find that focusing on what I'm doing, rather than trying to multitask or multithink a million different things at once, I actually complete what I'm doing, do a better job on it, and get it done faster. I don't necessarily do more, but I get things done. Focus tends to get things done, in my experience, and when your focus is split among a lot of things, it is less powerful.

The Magic of Flow

There's a concept called Flow that's been pretty popular among productivity circles in the last couple of years. I'm a big fan of it myself. In a nutshell, it's basically losing yourself in whatever you're doing — reaching that magical zone where you forget about the outside world and are completely doing what you're doing, whether that's writing or drawing or coding or whatever.

It's a wonderfully productive zone to be in, and a state that also, incidentally, makes you happier. Productive and happier at the same time. Hard to beat that.

However, it can't happen if you're switching between tasks or thinking about the past or the future. It basically happens when you are in the present. So practicing being present will help you get to flow, which makes you happier and more productive. Best argument yet for being present, perhaps.

Practice, Practice

There's no single method that will get you better at being present. I don't have the magical formula, except one word: practice.

You won't be good at it at first, most likely. Your mind will wander, or you'll do a lot of "meta-thinking", which is just thinking about what you're thinking, and whether you're thinking it the right way, and whether there is a right way ... and so on, until you're no longer in the present. That's normal. We all do that, I think.

Don't beat yourself up about that. Don't get discouraged. Just practice.

So what's the magical method for learning to be present? Practice.

You do it in the morning. You practice it while eating lunch. You do it with your evening jog or walk. You do it while washing dishes after dinner. Every opportunity you get, practice.

And you'll get better. I promise.

One Month Challenge

The best method I can offer for learning to be present, the best method for practicing, is to focus on it for one month. Make focusing on being present a habit. If you make it your only focus, I guarantee you'll get better at it, and more importantly, you'll get into the habit of remembering to focus, of remembering to practice, of being more aware.

“The living moment is everything.” – **D.H. Lawrence**

Tips On Being Present

Here are things that have worked for me ... pick and choose the ones that you think will work best for you:

1. **When you eat, just eat.** The best way to think about being present is this: do just one thing at a time. When you are eating, don't read or think about something else or iron your clothes (especially if you're eating something that might splatter on the clothes). Just eat. Pay attention to what you're eating. Really experience it — the taste, the texture. Do it slowly. Same thing with anything else: washing dishes, taking a shower, driving, working, playing. Don't do multiple things at once — just do what you're doing now, and nothing else.
2. **Be aware.** Another important step is to become more aware of your thoughts. You will inevitably think about the past and future. That's OK. Just become aware of those thoughts. Awareness will bring change.
3. **Be gentle.** If you think about the past or future, do not beat yourself up about it! Don't try to force those thoughts out of your head. Just be aware of them, and gently allow them to leave. Then bring yourself back to the present.
4. **Daily routines.** Anything can be your practice. When you wash dishes, this is practice. This is your meditation. When you walk, focus on walking. Make anything you do become practice.
5. **Put up reminders.** A reminder on your fridge or computer desktop or on your wall is a good thing. Or use a reminder service to send you a daily email. Whatever it takes to keep your focus on practicing being present.
6. **There is no failure.** You will mess up, but that's OK, because it is impossible to mess up. The only thing that matters is that you practice, and over time, if you keep doing it, you will learn to focus on the present more often than you do now. You cannot fail, even if you stop doing it for awhile. Doing it at all is success. Celebrate every little success.
7. **Keep practicing.** When you get frustrated, just take a deep breath. When you ask yourself, “What should I do now, Self?”, the answer is “keep practicing”.

“I never think of the future. It comes soon enough.” – **Albert Einstein**

