

**A SERIES  
OF  
MOMENTS**



**HOW TO BALANCE ACHIEVEMENT AND  
CONTENTMENT IN THE MODERN WORLD**

**REESE PATEL**

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*Intro*

## **Introduction**

Ok so before you begin reading, there are a few things you should know:

- 1) I wrote this book at the wise, old age of 18. Please bear this in mind when reading. I'm sharing this book with you mostly for entertainment purposes.
- 2) The views I express in this book at age 18 are absolutely not the same views I have now
- 3) If you make it through the entire book, I will be extremely shocked. There are basically no jokes and it is, by most standards, very boring.
- 4) Some argue that this book actually represents the greatest, most profound piece of text ever written
- 5) Given the subject matter, there is the potential for parts of this book to induce an existential crisis. If this is something you'd prefer to avoid, stop reading now.

And that's basically it, I think. Thanks for signing up to my newsletter and enjoy!

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*The Meaning  
of Life*

## **Introduction**

With every breath you take, there's a countdown relentlessly ticking away in the background. You don't know what it's set to. You don't know how much time you've got left. But it's there. And when it hits zero, everything stops. Silence *will* return; the same deathly silence that existed before your emergence.

Now, I'm not reminding you of this because I want you to feel uncomfortable. It's just that your time is finite and every day that passes is a day you'll *never* get back. You have this one opportunity, this unbelievably brief period of time on earth before it's all over. The question you need to ask yourself is as follows: how are *you* going to make the best use of your remaining years?

Although I endeavour to help you answer that question in this book, I would hate for you to think of it as a guide on how to live your life. No such guide exists. Only *you* can decide how you want your life to unfold. But that said, establishing what you want to do with your one life can be really tough. Should you strive to achieve great things? Should you strive to be content? Can you strive for both simultaneously and if so, how? The aim of this book is not to write your narrative. Rather, I hope to help you discover how you want to write *your own* narrative.

## **The Meaning of Life**

If I were to ask you what the *meaning of your life* is, I'd expect you to fall into one of three camps. Either:

- The 'I want to get famous so I can leave a legacy and be remembered' camp
- The 'I want to get loads of money so I can buy a mansion and have everything I'd ever want' camp
- Or the 'I just want to be happy' camp

I understand some of you out there may not resonate with any of these three, and that's totally fine. But because the overwhelming majority of people do, before moving onto what *I* deem to be the meaning of life and how that relates to finding the balance between achievement and contentment, I first want to explain why I don't believe any of these three to be particularly productive aspirations.

## The problem with 'legacy'

Whether it be “I want to be remembered,” or “I want to leave a small footprint on earth,” or “I want to know I made a difference,” the common theme that'll propagate through every ‘legacy-based’ reply is the fact they are all rooted in how the individual might be viewed *after* death. The emphasis is not on doing what you can while you're *living* but rather on how you can use this one life you have in order to buy a temporary kind of immortality.

Pulitzer Prize winner and author Ernest Becker posits that the deepest fear any human will ever consciously experience is the fear of death. Whether it be striving for fame so you're remembered after you die, believing in an afterlife, deluding yourself into thinking your children will carry a part of you on into the future thus keeping you ‘alive’ or storing endless photos that you hope will exist forever, Becker believes that for many of us, ‘the meaning of life’ is nothing but a manifestation of the denial of death. And that's why you might find the idea of ‘legacy’ so appealing; although *you* can't live beyond death, your legacy sure can. In our minds we've subconsciously convinced ourselves that as long as we're *remembered*, we can never die.

The Ancient Egyptians believed that you die twice. One time when you stop breathing and a second time, slightly later, when somebody says your name for the last time. A scarily high proportion of us live under this delusion where we subconsciously view this second death as our true death. If you've ever seen the Disney film ‘Coco’, it conveys this idea superbly. In the film, when you die physically, you enter the ‘Land of the Dead’, where wealth and contentment are based on how many people remember you in the ‘Land of the Living’. The more fame you accumulate, the greater the chances of immortality. If you become so famous that you'll never be forgotten in the Land of the Living, you can live in the Land of the Dead, almost as a God, forever. But for almost every other normal citizen, once they're forgotten by everyone in the Land of the Living, they die, and this time forever.

Now although the idea of legacy inevitably provides a warm kind of comfort, I'd argue the film, which is predominantly aimed at younger children, only serves to exacerbate this idea that fame and being remembered are worthwhile things to strive for. In my eyes, what the film loosely based off Mexican tradition fails to establish is this: **there is no second death**. There is only a first death and after that you're simply out of existence. Consider this question:

What's the difference between a privately miserable man who's spent his entire life in the limelight soaking up attention and a strangely happy man who's spent his entire life in a prison cell? Both will die and both will become distant memories, things of the past. Sure, the famous man might preserve his mortality for a tad longer, given that he'll probably be remembered, but like almost anyone, eventually he'll fade along with his precious legacy. If the man in prison spent his entire life having fun and enjoying his time there, irrespective of whether he was locked up or not, you could argue his life was better than the life of the famous man.

Legacy is really a strange concept. We want fame because we like the idea of attention, of our memory living on beyond death. But what's the point in fame if at the end of the day, it'll all disappear regardless? Would it not be wiser to use this one life you have doing things *you* truly enjoy in the present rather than chasing something you want solely because of how other people will perceive you?

### **The lure of money – does money buy contentment?**

If it's not fame people strive for, the next most common thing people will turn to is perhaps the obvious - money. There's no doubt about it – the world revolves around money. Money, in modern society, is power. It'd indubitably be incredibly naïve to suggest money has no bearing whatsoever on happiness because it absolutely does, but the more salient question is this: is spending this one life with the sole purpose of accumulating as much money as possible really the best way of reaching a state of contentment?

Zig Ziglar: “Money will buy you a bed, but not a good night's sleep, a house but not a home, a companion but not a friend.”

In 1978 a study was published that found quadriplegics (people affected by paralysis of all four limbs) were more content in their everyday activities than recent lottery winners. Think about this for a second – people deprived of something most of us take for granted, use of both their arms and legs, were on average more content in their everyday activities than people who'd won millions of pounds and had their entire lives financially sorted. The results are really quite striking and an indication that this ‘money buys happiness’ ideology so many of us live by might not tell the entire story.

In another study by Dr Robert Biswas-Diener, an expert on the science of happiness, similar results were found. In the study, the wellbeing of slum dwellers in Calcutta was compared to the wellbeing of the American homeless. Although both are poor, it's well documented that the American homeless have much higher material wealth. They have relatively easy access to shelter, free food, coats and hygiene products whereas the Calcutta slum dwellers own virtually no possessions, are compelled to endure harsh weather conditions and struggle to access basic health care, clean water and nourishing food. But despite these radical differences in prosperity, it was found that the homeless in America reported *lower* levels of subjective well-being than the pavement dwellers in Calcutta.

The question is...why? The results are a clear indication that there must be more factors than solely money at play. But even if money is not the *only* factor, it's difficult to argue that it isn't an *important* one. You'd intuitively guess, for example, that your average homeless person would likely feel lower levels of contentment than your average millionaire. And that intuition would be completely accurate. So although money *is* important, *how* important really is it? Let's begin by taking a look at an idea proposed by psychologist Abraham Maslow.



Maslow believed that human beings are motivated by a set of underlying needs. These range from basic needs which include food, water and shelter placed at the bottom of the hierarchy to self-awareness and personal growth placed at the top. He initially proposed that we could only move on to acquiring the next set of needs up the hierarchy once we had met the previous set but as I'll later mention, this might not quite be accurate. The reason the hierarchy holds so much value is because it'd suggest that contentment and overall wellbeing

might not be intrinsically tied to money and factors such as social needs and personal growth might in fact be more important contributors. For example, in the ‘security’ row, Maslow suggests that all we need is a ‘steady’ job. The row above then has no mention of more money but rather suggests the next most important thing is our social needs. Current scientific research seems to support this idea. Research based on over 450,000 responses from people in the US found that:

“Emotional well-being also rises with log income, but there is no further progress beyond an annual income of ~\$75,000.”

A follow up study conducted on 1.7 million people in 2017 yielded similar results – they found the line this time to be somewhere between \$60,000-75,000. Both pieces of research seem to agree with Maslow’s idea that once people have met their basic needs and are financially secure, money has little to no impact on emotional well-being. Maslow’s hierarchy, however, is often criticised for lacking scientific integrity. In a study published in 2011, researchers from the University of Illinois put the hierarchy to the test. They found that while the fulfilment of the needs was strongly correlated with happiness, people from all over the world reported that self-actualization and social needs were important even when many of the most basic needs were unfulfilled. The results suggest that while the needs Maslow noted may be strong motivators of human behaviour, they do not necessarily take the hierarchical form Maslow described.

The question is then: what other factors are at play when it comes to maximising the odds of reaching contentment? And what things can we practise in our own daily lives to improve the odds of us finding more joy in everyday activities? These are some of the questions I’ll be addressing in Chapter Two.

### **So should we simply strive to ‘be happy’?**

So if striving for fame might be considered futile and if there’s little to no correlation between amassing a wealth of fortune and emotional wellbeing, should our goal in life not simply be ‘to be happy’?

Albert Camus: “You will never be happy if you continue to search for what happiness consists of. You will never live if you are looking for the meaning of life.”

My answer in short is a resounding no. Happiness, in my eyes, is not something that constitutes a worthwhile pursuit. Sure, you *can* pursue it, but you'll just never reach it. The reason being – happiness is a state, a temporary state, just like disappointment or anger that comes and goes. One day you'll feel happy and the next day, for no reason whatsoever, you won't. And no matter how much you think about why or what you're missing, you'll never be able to provide a stable answer. Your goal in life cannot simply be 'to be happy' because you can't pursue what should be a side effect of other pursuits. You just need to question which pursuits will give your life meaning and sustain you when the storms of life hit, when reliance on 'happiness' is not sufficient. Rather than establishing temporary happiness as the primary goal, I'll discuss in the next chapter the importance of *contentment*, of realising that when you love what you have, you have everything you need.

Thich Nhat Hanh: "There is no way to happiness. Happiness is the way."

So if money doesn't buy contentment, if fame is futile, if happiness is something that shouldn't be pursued, if death washes away every achievement you ever obtain, then what *should* we pursue? What possible meaning *can* we derive from life?

### **The small things are really the big things**

Before answering the questions above, it's crucial to first put things into perspective. The fact of the matter is this: to even be able to consider the meaning of life renders you ridiculously fortunate. Over the past thousand years on Earth and still in much of the world today, the 'meaning of life' is predefined upon birth. **Survival.** Restricted access to drinking water, working twelve hour days to provide the bare minimum amount of food to sustain the family, compelled to engage in sex work just to have a bed to sleep in, fear of being sentenced to death or tortured for speaking the wrong words – this is the harsh reality much of the global population faces daily.

So when contemplating the meaning of life, it's vitally important to first acknowledge your immense fortune. There are millions of people in the world today who, if you were to tell them about your life, would think you were living in some kind of heaven. They'd consider their dreams made if they could spend a week, even a day, living in your shoes. You therefore, to hundreds of millions of people out there, are *already* living the dream life.

But even after acknowledging your relative fortune, the fact still remains that you *were* born comparatively privileged and that you do have a choice. You have this one opportunity, this once chance to make this one life you've been blessed with as amazing as possible. It's the fact you have a choice, the fact that for the first time in centuries you can actually question your meaning that makes deciding on a meaning so agonising. And to avoid questioning what 'living with meaning' involves, the easy fall back most of us resort to is deriving meaning from what society regards as success – **we judge ourselves based on our achievements**. We tell ourselves that we *have* to do something great in order for our life to have meaning. But do we really?

Consider this. There'll always be a gap between what you *have* and what you *want* and this gap will make you unhappy. You might think that in order to close that gap, you simply need to achieve what you want. But the problem is: the gap will never close. No matter how much you have, no matter how much you've achieved, it's human nature to want more. The urge to want things doesn't stop when you reach the things you previously wanted; you'll just come up with new things you need. This means, if you're not careful, you'll spend your entire life climbing a mountain that never ends. You'll tell yourself that when you reach the summit, happiness will finally arrive. But in reality, the summit simply doesn't exist; every time you think you've reached it, you'll see an even higher peak in the distance. That's why, ultimately, people don't live to achieve things or to get famous or to accumulate an obscene amount of wealth.

People live so they can make cake and fall in love and go to concerts and watch their kids grow and surround themselves with the people that make them happy. All the little things are really the big things because they are what shape you into *you*. We only have a finite number of moments and that's what makes those moments so valuable. Those moments which just feel like fun at the time but later turn into memories you hold on to and cherish forever – those moments are what make your life, *your* life. There is nothing deeper or more profound than simply acknowledging the sheer wondrousness of being alive to experience this world and its contents. Science estimates the odds of you being born are one in four hundred trillion. Yet here you are. Every day you have the privilege to see a sunset or to pet your docile dog resting on your lap or to gaze up at those distant balls of light millions of miles from you or to feel the hand of someone you love in yours.

There's a tendency to delude ourselves into thinking that life means something more than simply existing, than simply being grateful for the miracle of life. But what if there is no grand purpose for our existence? What if we merely live and die and then disappear as the memory of us slowly fades away until it's extinguished forever? Everything we've done, every achievement we've ever acquired, gone, until eventually we're nothing but a name on a tombstone that no one visits. The only certainty in life is that we are free, *when living*, to make our *own* meaning.

Alan Watts: "The meaning of life is just to be alive. It is so plain and so obvious and so simple. And yet, everybody rushes around in a great panic as if it were necessary to achieve something beyond themselves."

### **The problem with being content**

As you might have inferred from the fact there are still four more chapters in this book, there's a problem with just being content that you're alive. If the meaning of life is simply to be alive, to experience the world and all its beauty before death and to derive contentment from the small things, then how could anyone ever do anything great? If just waking up every morning was enough then how could you ever have any ambition? If you're always content with what you are, then how can you ever be something more? Would it be satisfactory to simply sleep in the street daily and derive satisfaction from the sun shining on your face and the morsels of food you're sporadically given? I mean...at least you'd be alive.

Mike Tyson, one of the greatest boxers of all time said:

"The most insecure people in the world are the most powerful ones."

He goes on to say: "If you're secure in the position that you're in, you're in position to lose that position."

In his eyes, greatness requires *not* being ok with merely existing. You *have* to feel as if you aren't enough because that feeling is what propels you to be something more. But surely insecurity and feeling perpetually inadequate is not a pleasant feeling? Do we *need* to feel as if we're perpetually 'not enough' in order to 'succeed' and grow as an individual? Because if so, is that not somewhat depressing?

The key question is this: do we have to choose between contentment and achievement or is there instead a balance that can be struck? As you might have guessed from the fact I'm writing this book, I believe the latter. I do believe we can be content with what we have whilst still having ambition to be something more.

The first half of this book will focus on the former – how to be content. Specifically, I'll be walking you through various techniques and thought experiments you can use to improve the odds of you feeling content and grateful for what you have as well as explaining how to derive joy from the small things and appreciate life and its beauty for what it is. I'll also be explaining how you can learn to become more mindful and quell that annoying voice inside your head that you might feel as if controls you.

The second half of the book will then explore the flip side of the coin. I'll be explaining how you might go about establishing meaningful goals and perhaps more importantly, will provide tips to help you stay motivated in pursuit of them. I'm aware at this point that some of you 'success-orientated' individuals out there might be inclined to skip the first half of this book and move onto the 'How to set goals' chapter, but I'd really urge you not to. As I'll soon explain, if you're predicating your wellbeing solely on acquisition of achievement, you're dooming yourself to failure.

I've said it before, but I'll say it again - ultimately this is *your* life. Think of this book not so much as a guide but rather as a resource that provides tools that you'll hopefully find useful in deciding how you'd like to write *your* story. I hope you enjoy the read!

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# *Finding Contentment in the Modern World*

## **The importance of connecting to each moment as it comes**

Dr Piers Steel, author and economics professor, devised the following formula for motivation.

$$Motivation = \frac{Expectancy \times Value}{Impulsiveness \times Delay}$$

*Expectancy* refers to how much you expect to succeed – the more confident you are in your ability to achieve a great outcome, the more motivated you'll be to work towards achieving it. *Value* refers to how much you value or care about a specific task – for example if the reward that comes from completing a task is appealing, you'll be more motivated to complete that task. *Impulsiveness* is fairly self-explanatory - the more impulsive you are, the less willing you are to delay gratification and the less motivation you'll have. But for the moment, I just want to hone in on this variable *delay*. *Delay* refers to how long you have to do a task - the longer you have to complete a task, the less motivated you'll be to do so. Let's imagine you have a school assignment due in a week. *Delay* explains why you'll be much less likely to do it a week before than on the night before. The closer you get to the deadline, the more motivated you become.

Now, although all this might be interesting, you might be wondering what relevance this formula has in a chapter on contentment. Well, I want you to take a moment to consider the repercussions of this formula if we imagined life was infinite, if we could live forever. In particular, I want you to think about what that would mean for the variable *delay*.

As *delay* in the equation tends to infinity, motivation tends to zero. If life were infinite, therefore, the formula implies that you'd lack motivation to do anything. It's the finitude of life; the certainty of everything coming to end that motivates us to do painful things. The procrastination that would ensue if life was infinite would be immeasurable – we could always do that painful activity tomorrow. And as I'll discuss in more detail in Chapter Three, it's usually the painful things in life that are the most beautiful. To do well in an exam you *have* to endure revision. To get stronger you *have* to put your muscles through pain. To get good at anything you *have* to be willing to fail repeatedly. But does that mean that in order to grow you have to always be looking towards the future and therefore always be suffering in the present?

To put it simply, no. But if you don't spend time rooting yourself to the present moment, if your entire livelihood is based on suffering in the present for growth in the future, you'll *always* be suffering. Life is unpredictable, volatile, a story that could end at any moment. It's not uncommon for someone to dedicate thirty years of their early life working tirelessly at their job, forgetting to enjoy each of life's moments along the way, all for this dream of retiring at fifty, only to be diagnosed with terminal cancer or wind up dead in a freak car accident. They spend their entire lives setting up a future that they never even get to experience.

And that's why connecting with the present moment is so important. Life is all about connecting to each individual moment because you just don't know how many of them you'll have. It's this idea of finitude, the certainty of all things coming to an end which makes life so meaningful, so beautiful; if we were to live forever, connecting with each moment wouldn't be important because we'd be able to experience everything over and over again for eternity. It's the fact we only have a finite number of moments that makes those moments so precious.

Picture the difference between a person eating a meal and a prisoner eating that same meal but knowing it's their last. How might the experience differ from person to person? Who would appreciate the food more and be more present whilst eating? The reason anything in life can be deemed significant is because one day you're going to get old and die and never get to experience that thing again. If you kiss your child goodnight for the last time, it's important for you to recognise that that might be the last time you ever kiss them. Not thinking this because you believe you're going to somehow meet again beyond death takes away from the significance of that moment in the present. If you were able to kiss your child over and over forever, you would lose appreciation for the kiss entirely; it'd mean nothing.

Life is nothing more than a series of moments. And as I discussed in Chapter One, life is *not* about the big things; it's about the small things, those moments that shape you into the person you are. Watching your kid walk their first steps or going on that road trip with all your friends or making pancakes with your Mum on her birthday or kissing your kid goodnight; these memories give *life* to your life. The more you're able to be present in these moments and create these long lasting moments of meaning from every day activities, the more fulfilling your life will become.

Dr Seuss: “Sometimes you will never know the value of a moment until it becomes a memory.”

Being able to truly connect with these moments is what life is about, and in this chapter I’ll be providing various ways to help ensure you’re connecting as best you can with each individual moment as it comes. As well as offering various techniques you can employ to become more content and grateful, I’ll also be outlining some useful thought experiments that’ll hopefully help you to remember to enjoy life in the present.

## **The power of mindfulness**

Mindfulness is a relatively new phenomenon and one that is slowly taking a hold of western society. Numerous scientific and psychological studies have been conducted in recent times and almost all are in concordance that practising mindfulness can have significant benefits for our mental health. Scientific research has suggested mindfulness can benefit sleep, chronic pain, our immune system, our memory and even our chances at weight loss. So although it’s pretty clear that mindfulness is good for you...what exactly is it and how does it work?

Mindfulness, to put it simply, is the act of being fully engaged and completely present with whatever it is you’re doing. The idea is to bring awareness to your ‘here and now’ experience, with curiosity and inquisitiveness. But why would ‘being present’ help you?

Have you ever noticed that your mind has a mind of its own? You’re ensconced on your sofa, ready for a relaxing night of TV, when suddenly a thought pops into your head.

“I need to get some cake from the fridge.”

You try and push the thought away, convince yourself you don’t need the cake. But the more you try convincing yourself, the worse the urge becomes. Eventually, you have no choice but to succumb to the desire. But where did this desire even come from? How could you have dealt with it better? Well, the first thing to acknowledge is this: you don’t choose your desires. Let me explain why.

Imagine you’re in a supermarket and have to choose between two drinks, say apple juice and orange juice. You’d agree you can freely choose either drink.

Let's say you choose orange juice. The question is: although you freely chose the orange juice, did you choose to *want* the orange juice more than the apple juice? Think about that for a second. No matter how hard you tried, you couldn't have decided to *want* the apple juice more than the orange juice. Sure, to disprove this theory, you might have taken the apple juice but then your want to disprove the theory would have been greater than your want to pick the drink you liked most. And is that something you could have controlled?

**The idea is, yes, you can do what you want, but that doesn't mean you can choose your wants.** One of the purposes of mindfulness is to ensure those unconscious wants and desires don't control you. Since the thoughts and desires you have are in *your* mind, it's only natural for you to take ownership of them. After all, they are your thoughts. But just because you have a thought or desire, you don't have to take ownership. The rational portion of your brain didn't ask for that thought or desire to be there; it in a sense bubbled up from a deeper more primitive part.

Living with this primitive subconscious mind that provides intrusive thoughts is like having a flatmate who keeps telling you what you should think, want and feel. You might succeed to get the flatmate to shut up for a bit but soon he/she'll be right back at it, making new suggestions. It's unlikely in reality that you'd put up with this flatmate in the real world, except the problem is, you and this flatmate are stuck together in your skull until your very last day on Earth. That's where mindfulness comes in – you need to devise a strategy to deal with this flatmate situation because exercising willpower to shut up your flatmate constantly is too exhausting. Mindfulness enables you, in the analogy, to know the dynamics of the situation better. By practising mindfulness, you can learn to cultivate a better relationship with this flatmate and realise that although he/she can tell you what to think, you don't have to listen. You don't have to take ownership of the thoughts this flatmate provides. By using the rational part of the mind, you can better deal with the sub-rational part (the flatmate).

Despite there being a general framework around which mindfulness tends to revolve, there are actually quite a number of ways to practise it. It's important to emphasise that no way is the 'right way' and you'll probably have to undergo the trial and error process numerous times to settle on a way that works well for you. Here are some of my personal favourites.

## **The general principle – mindfulness everywhere**

Ultimately, mindfulness can be practised anywhere, but I've found from personal experience that it's much easier to practise when you're alone. You might practise it when you're out for a walk, staring out your bedroom window or even just sitting in bed. The basic aim is for you to become increasingly aware of your surroundings and the sensations on the different parts of your body in context with that surrounding. Let's say, for example, you've gone for a walk. Instead of thinking about what you're going to have for breakfast tomorrow or that horrible presentation you did earlier today, bring your awareness to the here and now. Run through each sense, asking yourself questions.

How does the wind feel against your skin? How does your skin feel against the texture of your t-shirt or socks or trousers? What sensations can you feel in your body when you breathe in? Is the air cold or warm? Become aware of your breath, of the air hitting the back of your throat and filling your stomach – how does it feel?

What noises can you hear? The sound of cars? Trees waving in the wind? Birds singing? Pay close attention.

What can you smell? Freshly cut grass? Litter? Don't attach an opinion to that smell. Just observe. Inhale through your nose and be aware. Being aware means there is no reaction, just observation.

Look around you. Again, just observe. What kind of things can you see? The ripples in a puddle? The moon in the sky? A cloud passing by? Just watch. If a thought arises, that's ok, don't try and push it away but just be aware of its presence and sit with it until it passes.

These are just a contrived set of questions you might ask yourself when going for a walk, but you could ask similar kinds of questions in any setting.

When doing a task as mundane as brushing your teeth, for example, you could pay close attention to how the toothpaste tastes in your mouth, the texture of the brush, the smell of the toothpaste, how the vibrations of the electric toothbrush feel like in your hand or the sound of the brush hitting your teeth.

The beauty of mindfulness is that it isn't restricted to one specific domain. All we're trying to do is learn to observe the world in all its beauty without our

prejudices, opinions and beliefs interfering. And once you learn to adopt a heightened sense of awareness of the world, it simultaneously enables you to have a heightened sense of awareness of yourself.

### **Mindful meditation**

Some people prefer to be still when they practise mindfulness and that's when meditation can be especially useful. The idea of mindful meditation is to reach a state of stillness and calm, where you're simply a passive observer. You're aware of the sensations in your body, from your inhalation and exhalation, to your heartbeat, to the rise and fall of your stomach and there is no judgement or opinion; just intense observation. There's this widespread view that meditation is somehow the act of 'not thinking'. But meditation is not control of thought or even suppression of thought. As Indian philosopher and author Jiddu Krishnamurti says:

“Meditation is to be aware of every thought and of every feeling, never to say it is right or wrong but just to watch it and move with it.”

He goes on to say:

“Meditation is a state of mind which looks at everything with complete attention, totally, not just parts of it.”

When you're being mindful, you're devoting your complete attention to the here and now; your mind has emptied itself of the past and the possible future. Some people initially find it easier to practise mindful meditation under the guidance of a voice. There are plenty of guided mindfulness YouTube videos online and if you feel as if they might benefit you, I'd recommend trying out various channels until you settle on a voice you're comfortable with.

One of the first things you might notice when engaging in this form of mindfulness is the tendency for thoughts to intrude and disrupt the cycle. When this occurs, don't try and repress but instead acknowledge the thought until it passes on, like a cloud passing by in the sky, and then return to your breath or to whatever it is you are directing your attention towards. The more you practise, the better you'll get. The ultimate idea of mindfulness is, to outline a Buddhist idea, for your thoughts “to become like robbers in an empty house”. They cannot affect you or hurt you or take anything away from you. You should instead view your thoughts as a kind of consistent and constant background radio noise that you can choose whether or not to pay attention to. You can tune

in for the helpful thoughts and simply allow that blur to continue for the unhelpful ones.

Mindfulness can also help you to better deal with your emotions. It's important to remember that negative emotions, just like positive emotions, serve a functional purpose; they are resources you can use to understand how your brain is feeling. Rather than categorising emotions into 'bad emotions' and 'good emotions' and trying to 'push away' the bad ones, we should instead see all our emotions as useful tools rather than uncomfortable inconveniences. For example, rather than seeing a negative emotion as 'bad', we should realise that the emotion could be our brain signalling to us that we need to make a change. Convincing yourself to just 'be positive' all the time and try and maintain a delusional level of happiness when you're clearly not happy might work out in the short-term but certainly won't in the long-term. Negative emotions are just as important as positive ones.

### **The first time experience**

Another useful mindfulness technique is doing any task as if it were the first time you were ever doing it. Imagine you're reading a book. If you'd never read a book before, you'd probably feel the pages and their texture, smell the book, run your hands over the cover, notice how the words on the page flow. Instead of having your thinking-self dominating, you allow your body to revert to 'observing mode'.

When you're having a shower, for example, don't take it for granted. Feel the water on your skin, feel how the droplets roll down your legs, feel how different parts of your body feel warm and cold, listen to the sound of the water hitting the ground, engage the senses. Really imagine you've never had a shower before.

The purpose of pretending it's the first time you've ever encountered something before is to simulate the same kind of wonder and gratitude that you experience when you genuinely *do* witness something fascinating for the first time.

Fascination is a feeling that tends to fade and so although a Ferrari might feel amazing for the first three weeks or so, eventually the novelty will disappear and you won't be imbued with that same wonder you once had. The first time technique offers a way to bypass this process of accustomisation and instead helps you to remember just how wondrous the small things in this world we take for granted really are.

## **The last time experience**

A technique recommended by neuroscientist and author Sam Harris that might help you to be more present whilst doing activities is known as the ‘last time experience’. Every time you’re about to engage in an activity, let’s say, for example, going to the gym, remind yourself of two things:

1) That there will be a last time you ever do this activity

And:

2) That there is a possibility that this time, right now, is the last time you will ever do this activity

For all you know, tomorrow you might be involved in a terrible accident or be diagnosed with a certain kind of illness that strips your ability to move as you currently do. This time in the gym may very well be your last. Now take a moment to think about how this consideration might change your workout?

As I’ve mentioned earlier in the chapter, it’s the finitude of life, the fact that everything comes to end that motivates us to do painful things. But this thought, that there’ll be a last time you ever go to the gym and that this could very well be that last time is not a thought many of us want to consider and not surprisingly. It’s not exactly pleasant to remind yourself of the fact that one day your capability for physical movement will vanish and that you don’t know when that day will come.

But by actively reminding yourself of this possibility before engaging in an activity, you should be considerably more engaged and intrusive thoughts should be much less frequent.

## **Using mindfulness to help with anxiety and addiction**

When we experience negative thoughts, it can be tempting to want to immediately push them away. Let’s say you’re about to do a presentation. Your flatmate might be telling you:

“This presentation is going to go *terribly*. You’re going to forget everything you prepared and freeze on the spot.”

The problem is, the more you try and push this thought away, the more powerful it becomes. Repressing a thought is like trying to push an inflatable

ball underwater. No matter how hard you press down or for how long, that ball will still come flying up to the surface, often with even more force than if you were to have simply let it be. So rather than repressing thoughts, try instead to acknowledge thoughts as they come, question them and determine whether they are actually useful. If they're not useful then just let them be, don't try and push them away, and they should naturally subside. Let's go back to the presentation example. Imagine you've just had an intrusive thought about how you're going to freeze on the spot. Instead of giving that thought power and saying to yourself "I'm going to freeze on the spot", you might say something like:

*"Ah, I'm noticing I'm having the thought that I'm going to freeze on the spot."*

The addition of "I'm noticing I'm having the thought that..." is there to remind you that you are not your thoughts. Whatever thoughts your flatmate feeds you have no bearing on how you must act. You are in complete control of your actions. You might even go a step further and say something like:

*"Ah, I've noticed my flatmate has given me this thought about me freezing again. But I know that doesn't mean that this thought is true, he/she's just feeding me meaningless words that aren't useful."*

From then, you can simply acknowledge the presence of the thought and wait for it to naturally fade. The same technique can be applied to addiction – if you feel a craving, rather than saying, "I need 'x'", you should rather say, "Ah, *I notice I'm having the thought* that I need 'x'. Another technique that might help you when you experience cravings is a technique known as urge surfing.

Whenever we feel a sudden compulsion to engage in some activity that we know will be detrimental to our future self, it can be easy to succumb to this urge. 'Urge surfing' revolves around using mindfulness and connection with the present to wait for this urge to pass.

The idea is that you want to ride the urge you have like a wave. Don't try and repress the urge or push it away. Just simply let the wave rise and fall. Pretend you're a curious scientist and interested about how this urge makes you feel, what physical sensations it evokes. You can rate the urge intensity, for example, on a scale of 0-10 every couple of minutes or so until it passes. It can also be useful to really focus on your breath. Feel the air flow down your throat and fill your stomach. Then exhale and let go. Try and direct all your attention towards your breath as you breathe into the urge, making room for it.

If the urge arises at an inopportune time to engage in deep breathing, you could also try to focus your full energy and attention on doing whatever activity it is you're doing, while allowing the urge to simply come and go. Some people find that when they can't engage in breath work (for example when they're at work) 'habit replacement' can work too. While you're waiting for this urge to pass, you could focus your attention on something else, for example tapping your wrist or rubbing your hands.

## **The power of gratitude**

Gratitude has been demonstrated by a large body of psychological research to be strongly and consistently associated with improved contentment. As I drew on in the first chapter, to millions of people in the world today, you are *already* living the dream life and learning to recognise this as well as giving thanks and being appreciative for what you have can help you to feel more positive emotion more frequently. So how might you go about practising it?

### **Using a diary**

Gratitude is not something you can learn overnight. It takes time. But it's still a feeling you can learn to slowly cultivate if you make sure to experience the feeling daily. One way of doing this is by using a diary. Every night, for example, you might write three things you encountered during the day that you felt grateful for. Understandably, at first this might seem like a chore but the more you do it, the more you'll begin to experience the benefits of the routine. You should notice with time that as you go about your day to day business, instead of blindly partaking in various experiences, your brain will be subconsciously on the lookout for anything you might be able to write in your diary. You are, in a sense, training your brain to automatically search for things to be grateful for.

Some people find that instilling gratitude into their wake up routine can be useful too. For so many of us, we feel a compulsion to wake up and instantly check our phone, that flood of bulletins darting into our minds and inducing stress before our brains even have a chance to properly awaken. To bypass this problem, you might instead create a routine that involves mentally running through a list of things that you'll likely encounter in the day ahead that you're grateful for. The advantage of practising gratitude in the morning is that it could put you in a better mood for the day ahead. You do, however, miss out on the

benefits of reflecting on the day that's just gone. There are hundreds of gratitude diaries online that you can buy to help you with your routine, but from my experience, if you'd prefer to save a little money, a simple notepad will do the trick.

### **Volunteering**

Gratitude and volunteering are somewhat intrinsically tied to one another. The more you volunteer, the more grateful you become of what you have. Once you experience first-hand what other people in the world must endure and learn to live with on a daily basis, you naturally begin to feel blessed for the life you have. Volunteering compels you to consider just how lucky you are not to have been born into poverty or without certain limbs or disabled or with certain mental disorders or with abusive family members. Things that you'd ordinarily take for granted, like sight for example, you suddenly feel extremely appreciative of.

The truth is, if not for an accident of birth you could be easily be the people you are volunteering to help. And as I mentioned earlier, to them, you are already living the dream life. Learning to be appreciative of that fact is paramount to feeling content with where you are. Volunteering can help open your eyes to the real world and help you to realise just how lucky you are.

### **Negative visualisation**

As well as creating routines that encourage the feeling of gratitude, there are also techniques you can employ during the day, when perhaps you're feeling down or angry, that can be used to elevate your mood.

One of the most powerful techniques I've encountered to help you feel gratitude comes from *the stoics* (stoicism is a school of philosophy founded in the early third century BC):

Whenever you find yourself stressed or angry or sad (let's say you've failed an exam), take a moment to think about all the bad things that could have happened to you that haven't. The person who you most love could have been stripped away from you today. You could have been diagnosed with terminal cancer today. You could have had a sudden heart attack today and been paralysed from the chest down. You could have been diagnosed with motor neurone disease today.

Now if any of those things would have happened, how much would you be willing to pay to get back into the exact moment you find yourself in right now? You'd consider your prayers answered if you could simply return to this moment...just failing an exam. Considering the infinite spectrum of possibilities puts life into perspective – is failing this one exam really the end of the world? Yes, your life could be much better but it could also be much much worse.

You could also combine this with the 'last time experience' technique I mentioned earlier. Take a second to pick something in your life that's extremely valuable to you and imagine that the last time you interacted with it was the last time you'll ever interact with it. Imagine you'll never be able to interact with that thing again. Imagine what that would feel like. Now when you do see that thing again, you should feel much more grateful for it. Imagine, for example, that the last time you hugged your child was the last time you'll ever hug your child. Acknowledge that this is a possibility. When you see your child next time, you'll undoubtedly feel much more grateful for being able to hug them than before.

### **Remembering that each moment could become a memory**

Life can be really tough. At times, so tough that it's difficult not to descend into this damaging spiral which culminates in us being convinced we'll never experience happiness. It's easy to forget that even though you might hate the life you are currently living, there is a good chance that in the future you will look back at this time in your life in a wistful state of mind. How many times have you reminisced about going back to a specific period of your life? If only you could go back and relive those teenage years again, you might think. What you potentially forget, however, is that in those teenage years you wish you could return to, you were likely experiencing a lot of pain and at the time, probably just wanted to move on from that stage of life onto the next. You wanted to be an adult and thought adulthood would bring joy and contentment. But then adulthood came...

Kids want to grow up and adults want to grow young. Whatever stage we are at in life, it's easy to delude ourselves into thinking that moving to a different stage would make us happy. But this just leaves us in a state of perpetual unhappiness. Rather than thinking about what could be, it can be useful to realise that this stage of life you're in right now, you'll someday look back on and wish you could return to. There'll come a time when you're in a nursing

home, ensconced to an armchair and dreaming about how much you'd give to live the life you are currently living.

The time will come when you wish you were strong and well enough to do the washing or mow the lawn. When you are mowing the lawn, for example, instead of getting mad and thinking about how annoying it is, think about how much ninety year old you would give to be able to walk around the garden and feel the fresh air and the rays of sunshine on his/her skin. Enjoy being however old you are because it's not going to last.

### **Something to bear in mind when practising gratitude**

Although practising gratitude is on the whole, overwhelmingly positive, there is one important caveat to mention:

#### **Don't trivialise your own problems.**

Just because someone in another part of the world has a 'worse' problem than you, that by no means renders *your* problem irrelevant or negligible. Your problem is just as valid as theirs. Your problem is real and still needs to be fixed.

Gratitude does not mean you are not allowed to feel sad. Being sad is perfectly ok and normal and like any other emotion, it's something that will pass. By attempting to repress that sadness and pretend it doesn't exist, you are doing yourself a disservice. The more you try suppressing an emotion, the harder it will bite back later down the line. The idea of gratitude is not to contrast your life with people in worse conditions and simply view all your problems as irrelevant but instead to look into your own life and think about the things you take for granted that you should probably be extremely grateful for.

Rather than focusing on the problems you are experiencing and the negativity in life, focus instead of the positives, on what there is in your life and how lucky and blessed you are to have these things. It is perfectly plausible and possible to acknowledge that you are sad but nonetheless feel grateful simultaneously.

Rabbi Hyman Schachtel - "Happiness is not having what you want, but wanting what you have."

## **The Wim Hof technique**

The Dutch extreme athlete, Wim Hof, has broken sixteen world records, most of which in some way related to cold exposure. He's a huge believer that exposure to cold combined with breathing techniques can help to relieve forms of mental illness such as anxiety and depression as well as serving to improve the immune system to counter physical illness and viruses. His motivation to help people and evoke real change in others' lives came when his wife tragically took her own life in 1995, leaving Wim with four children to raise himself. In a documentary with Vice, Wim said:

“Where I got peace was in these breathing exercises, swimming outside in the cold.”

His aim from then was to translate the methods he'd developed to the modern world to prevent as far as possible what happened to his wife happening to others. To note just two of the insanely ridiculous things this man has done, he's spent 1hr 53min with full body contact with ice as well as running a full marathon in the Arctic Circle in temperatures close to -20°C, wearing only a pair of shorts. These are what most would consider, sub-human feats.

One of the main things Wim encourages us all to do is take cold showers. Research has shown that cold showers contribute to the reduction of stress. Each time you have a cold shower, you are forcing your body to deal with a small amount of stress. This gradual process of encouraging your nervous system to deal with stress helps in situations beyond the shower. This process is known as 'hardening'. But what might cold showers have to do with mindfulness?

Well with a traditional warm shower, your mind is always active – ruminating about that meeting tomorrow or whether you got that job yesterday. There is no time to simply stop and experience the present moment just as it, to simply become aware of the sensations on your skin. Cold showers, in a sense, compel you to do this. When you first go into a cold shower, the first thing you'll notice is that you're gasping for air. And so to counteract this, you are forced to breathe deep. You'll also notice your mind starts becoming vacant as you are compelled to simply experience the raw sensations of cold on your skin and notice how it feels for you to breathe in and out. Your brain reverts to a kind of survival mode where intrusive thoughts about the past and future almost

disappear entirely. That's why for me, cold showers act as a kind of meditative experience. To counter the pain, you don't try and fight it. You just acknowledge its existence and learn to breathe through it, become at one with the present moment in order to endure the cold.

One rule to always bear in mind when taking cold showers, however, is never to force. If you feel like you need to get out then get out. Listen to your body. Generally, cold showers are extremely safe but if you have any heart conditions, high blood pressure, or are ill or feverish then it would be best to avoid. I'd also strongly recommend checking out the Wim Hof breathing method, a meditative experience that revolves around deep breathing and breath retention. There are plenty of guided YouTube videos online which run through the method that might help start you off.

### **Living a value based life**

There is a strange contradiction that arises when someone decides they're going to live their life based on goals. Imagine a person sets a goal and works and grinds and pushes until eventually that goal is reached. You'd expect for them to now feel happiness right? Well perhaps they do. But all too often, that happiness is fleeting. The contentment fades as the realisation surfaces that the underlying emptiness in the pit of their stomach is still there. They are still the exact same person as the person without this achievement. And so how do they react to this feeling? They create another goal; another goal that doesn't lead to freedom. There's always that something else they feel like they need to achieve before maybe they'll finally 'be happy'.

How many times have you heard someone say things like:

“If I had his job, I'd be happy.”

“If I had her house, I'd be happy.”

“If I had the same amount of money as him, I'd be happy.”

It's a common misconception people hold that if they were able to just get X, Y or Z, all their worries would fade and instantaneous happiness would ensue. If this is how you view contentment, however, you'll always be fighting a losing battle. The urge to want things doesn't stop when you reach the things you previously wanted; you'll just come up with new things you need.

As I'll discuss in later chapters, goals, when used correctly, have the capability of being extremely useful. There's a reason they are advocated by so many top athletes and successful entrepreneurs. But when it comes to maximising contentment, there is an argument to be made that true contentment arises not from the mere acquisition of achievement but rather from living a life predicated on values. Rather than creating a goal of "I'm going to run a marathon", for example, you might reframe this goal with the question of what value this goal is aiming towards, in mind. In this case for example:

"I value being fit and healthy."

Whatever goal you might have, you can extract a value from it and once you lay out these values and live your life in accordance with them, contentment is arguably much more likely. Instead of falling into the illusion that achieving a goal will make you happy, only to resort to setting another goal that you convince yourself will make you happy after the first one doesn't, there's an argument to be made for setting short-term goals under the guidance of an overarching value. That way, there is no delusionary belief about achieving X to feel Y. You know that irrespective of action, you are living in accordance with what you deem valuable.

In that respect, it's important to remember this:

### **You're already enough.**

You don't need to achieve that next goal in order for happiness to ensue. Every time you go for a run, for example, you're appealing to this value of being fit and healthy and that should make you feel content within. As long as you're *trying* to improve yourself as an individual, there's really nothing more you can do.

### **Being honest about who *you* really are**

Deep-rooted lies are often the cause of emotional instability. Perhaps at first the link between honesty and emotional stability might appear tenuous but when you take a second to consider the implications of lying, then it becomes apparent just how negatively dishonesty can impact emotional wellbeing.

Now I'm not talking about lying to your partner about their clothes looking good; I'm talking about a deeper kind of lie – the lie we tell people about who we really are. There's a tendency for each of us to hold up a mask, a veil in

front of our face and act in ways around other people solely because we want to be perceived in a certain way. It's human nature to want recognition, praise and respect. But these desires are in many cases the root of emotional instability. You see particularly in men for example this proclivity to act tough all the time, as if negative emotions like sadness or loneliness don't apply to them, as if crying is not something men do. I'll say it again: the more you repress a certain emotion, the worse it'll become. Bottling up emotion, pretending it doesn't exist, will only make things worse. Wearing a mask constantly is draining and exhausting and when that mask inevitably falls off, you'll find you begin to plummet, and fast. Imagine filling up a balloon. The more you hold in those emotions, the more you're pumping that balloon with air. The problem is, one day the balloon's going to pop.

Learning to be honest about who you are and being able to express exactly what you genuinely feel to other people is a kind of superpower. You're not forced to be anything you're not; no having to conceal anything or repress anything. You're liberated to be unapologetically you. There's also no real room for embarrassment or feelings of inadequacy because if you're being openly vulnerable to begin with, if you're already super open about your fear of spiders, for example, and mock yourself, no one else can really ever hurt you and make you feel embarrassed about that fear. Embarrassment arises from caring about what people might think if they found something out about you. If you've already voluntarily told them that thing, however, there is nothing to be embarrassed about.

Humour is a great way to transcend any problem you might be experiencing; making a joke about a problem or fear you have is the ultimate sign that you've acknowledged that problem, are comfortable about it and have risen above it. So you need to be truly honest with yourself; are you prone to lying just so others perceive you in a certain light? It's painful to admit sometimes, but admittance is really the first step to change. You simply can't fix a problem that you refuse to acknowledge exists. It goes without saying, however, that if there is no problem and you're happy as you are, then obviously carry on doing whatever it is you're doing.

### **Why contentment is unsustainable**

Although staying connected to each moment and living life in the present sounds great, the truth is, to do so for the entirety of your life would be virtually

impossible. We need money to provide for our families. We need to suffer in the present in order to survive long-term.

If waking up in the morning was enough, we'd never have any ambition to do anything. So the question then becomes, how can we set good goals? In the next chapter I'll begin exploring this question by addressing a preliminary question: should we be gravitating towards things that are pleasurable, things that 'make us happy'?

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*The Pleasure  
Paradox*

## **Introduction**

I'd like to begin this chapter with a thought experiment. I want you for a second to imagine a world where Class A drugs are legal. There's also a pill out there which you can take to completely eradicate any negative effects of the drugs. Let's assume that you're able to afford an endless supply of these drugs. The question I want you to ask yourself is this: would you spend your entire life 'on drugs', feeling this state of perpetual joy and lack of worry forever? I suppose the question, reframed, is something like, if it were possible, would you choose to be high forever? Would you seize this opportunity to feel 'happy' for eternity, to have no responsibility, to have no worries or concerns, to *never* suffer?

Interestingly, most people would voluntarily choose to reject this style of life. The only possible explanation for this is that we, as humans, *must* seek something deeper than merely pleasure or happiness. 'Feeling good' is not enough; we want something deeper. We want *meaning*. And we are willing to undergo suffering and open ourselves up to the possibility of pain in order to have that meaning.

In this chapter I'll be explaining exactly why pursuing temporary pleasure can be dangerous, why addictions form and why, in a lot of cases, embracing suffering is actually a better alternative. I'll then give you some examples of when voluntary suffering in the present might be warranted for your future self. But before anything: why is temporary pleasure even so enticing to us?

## **Why we gravitate towards temporary pleasure**

We, as humans, are on a biological level nothing but base animals whose core instincts revolve around survival and the passing on of genes. Thanks to millions of years of evolution and adaptation, our brains' have been biologically hardwired to choose the path that offers the greatest reward for the least resistance.

We now live in what's called a *delayed-return environment* which means that if you do something good today, it might take months, even years for the appropriate reward to be delivered. Think about going to the gym or producing a good piece of work for your boss or meditating. You won't get healthy in a day. You won't get that pay rise in a day. You won't see the positive effects of meditation in a day.

The problem is our brains, through evolution, are adapted for an *immediate return environment*. Back when we were hunting, if we caught the prey, we got the food; almost every task was undertaken with instant gratification being the key motivator. That means attempting to live our lives not reliant on temporary pleasure requires learning techniques to bypass our basic physiology – techniques such as habit formation or establishing an underlying purpose to justify the short-term suffering (and other techniques I’ll discuss in Chapter Five).

Temporary pleasure is also enticing because it offers a way to seemingly fill the emptiness we might feel within. As I mentioned in Chapter One, wanting something does not necessarily mean that getting that thing will make you happy, or at least as happy as you think it will. Psychologist Dan Gilbert refers to this as ‘impact bias’, defined as the tendency to overestimate the enduring impact that future events will have on our emotional reactions.

Unless you can take a step back and remember how much you have, you’ll always be agonising over what you’re missing that’d make you happy. And in order to temporarily remove that agony you’ll revert to temporary pleasure, have your happiness levels soar up for a brief five minutes and then plummet back down into the dark, grimy depths of the empty void and repeat this cycle until death. Those five minutes of pleasure make the subsequent suffering justified. You’re just ‘getting through’ life. But life, at least in my eyes, isn’t something we should just be ‘getting through’. Rather than striving to survive, we should be striving to live.

The reason many of us stray towards short-term pleasure is because we lack a deeper understanding of why we are here and what we want to do with this brief time we have on Earth.

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche said:

“To live is to suffer, to survive is to find some meaning in the suffering.”

Consider your average person who wakes up early, goes to work and comes back home. They don’t stop to think about the ‘why’, they’re instead content being enslaved to this time-draining, meaningless cause of helping another money thirsty individual rake in the profit. They’re nothing but a number, a name on a piece of paper. To the company, they’re...nothing. And part of them knows that, part of them understands the purposelessness of their daily trials

and this part of them needs to numb these feelings out; they're simply too overbearing to consider. And so how does this numbing process occur?

Well, through temporary pleasure; drugs, alcohol, sex, food or any other thing you can think of that induces momentary relief. Even beyond the daily meaningless job, the inevitability of death adds to the sense of suffering too. To know that every single person who gave you the best memories will soon become a memory, to know that every person you love will soon be gone forever, to know that everything you'll ever achieve will soon be washed away as you fade into the cosmos and become nothing but a distant memory, to know all that and to live through it anyway is to suffer. But as Nietzsche points out, even with all this suffering there is still a way we can transcend it and live great lives, lives filled with meaning.

Now even if you *were* somehow able to cultivate responsibility and live a life based on meaning, it'd still be incredibly difficult to avoid becoming temporary pleasure reliant. We live in a society where we're encouraged almost every second of our waking life to be a consumer – bombarded with advertisements about products that could make our life just that little bit easier, products that more often than not offer some kind of instant gratification. Think about the things that have thrived in modern society – fast food, cigarettes, alcohol, pornography, betting stores. These are all products built to satiate the primordial urge we each possess that encourages us to rush towards short-term pleasure.

Consumerism encourages us to behave and act based on unconscious energy such as lust, fear and immediate gratification because it's those unconscious energies that make us consume. Society as it's currently set up, therefore, makes it incredibly difficult for us to extricate ourselves from this trap and realise that reliance on immediate gratification is not the optimal solution for our future selves. The question you might be asking yourself at this point is: why? What's even wrong with temporary pleasure? Surely temporary pleasure in moderation is ok?

### **Why temporary pleasure is not a good long-term solution**

So far, I've discussed reasons why temporary pleasure seeking is virtually inevitable. But some of you might still be struggling to see what the problem with temporary pleasure even is. What's wrong with having a quick drink and feeling good for a night? What's wrong with temporary pleasure in moderation?

Well, to put it simply, *absolutely nothing*. If you're able to engage in temporary pleasure and not feel any kind of guilt or not feel as if it's having a detrimental impact on your life, there is no reason whatsoever why you should give up having fun in the moment. Short-term pleasure makes you feel good and depriving yourself of that pleasure should only happen if you feel as if you *really* need to. The real issue comes when that 'feeling good for a night' happens every night as your desire for a bigger and bigger rush begins to grow. The problem isn't temporary pleasure itself but the risk of becoming reliant on temporary pleasure to keep you from descending into despair. When we become overly reliant on short-term pleasure to cover some kind of underlying trauma or pain, addiction is a probable outcome.

As physician and addiction expert Dr Gabor Maté puts it:

“Addiction is a response to emotional pain.”

Unlike how addiction is commonly perceived, it's not something that's a choice, something that can simply be eradicated through increased willpower. An addiction is a holding pattern of sorts, to sustain you and prevent something worse from happening. The addiction is there to cover some kind of underlying pain and if you don't address the root cause, the addiction will stay. That's why it's important to always be compassionate towards people with addiction. Someone with an addiction is in pain and telling them to simply 'get over it' will do absolutely nothing other than make them feel even more worthless and helpless. As Dr Maté puts it, instead of asking “what's wrong with you?” to someone with addiction you should ask instead, “what happened to you?” If addiction were something we could brush aside through simply popping a pill or increasing our motivation, it wouldn't be so destructive or prevalent in modern society. It's the risk of addiction manifesting as a consequence of reliance on temporary pleasure that makes temporary pleasure so potent. Addiction really does have the capacity to be incredibly dangerous and destructive.

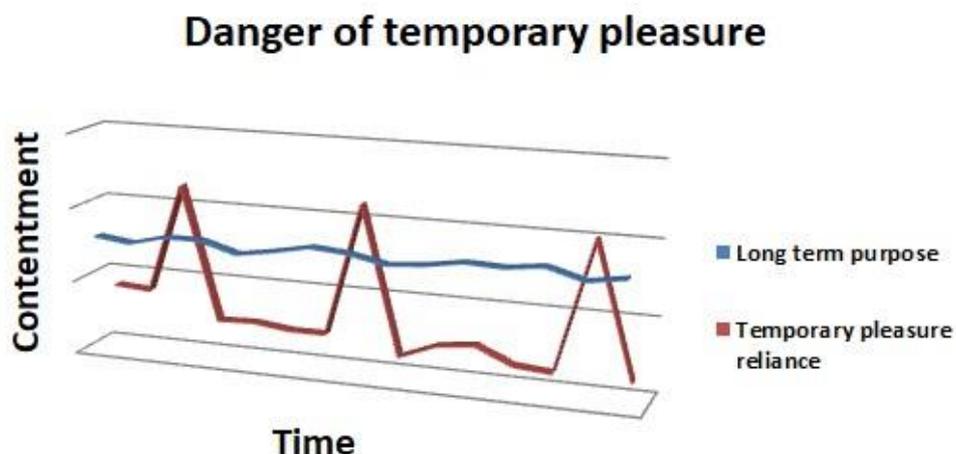
They say a bird trapped in a cage for a long time will prefer the cage to freedom. But with addiction, it's even worse than this; after a short period of time, the initial rush you get from your addiction will likely not provide enough relief or pleasure for you anymore. You'll want more. You'll need more. And so you'll give yourself even more pleasure and as the pleasure escalates, so will the subsequent pain of regret. And how is this pain cured? Well...through pleasure. And then with the pleasure comes pain and to cure that pain you use

pleasure... The cycle perpetuates and it's so easy to become trapped in this struggle forever.

What's difficult to process when engaging in the activity that offers instant gratification is that the pleasure you're feeling *will* fade. Whatever activity it is you find pleasurable, whatever item you buy to make you feel good, it's inevitable that soon you'll no longer derive the same amount of pleasure from it as you used to. You'll get accustomed to it. You'll need to move onto something else. This process is known as 'hedonic adaptation'.

Imagine you buy a new car, a Ferrari say. For the first three weeks it'll undoubtedly feel amazing, smooth and swift. But a month in, you'll notice that you're starting to forget about how beautiful it looks and how it feels to drive. As with everything new and initially amazing, you'll become accustomed to it, it'll lose its novelty. And then suddenly you'll need something new. You'll need to buy a new experience, a new item that'll once again instil a sense of temporary happiness.

What would happen if you ate your favourite food every day? Do you think it would be your favourite for very long? Or would you need to try something new, different? Jumping from temporary pleasure to pleasure in order to keep you stable enough to continue functioning is not a healthy lifestyle. There are numerous ways you can counter this. One way is to use the 'negative visualisation' technique we discussed in Chapter Two so you become more appreciative of the things you have. Another way, which I'll discuss later in the book, is when you decide you want to live life based on deeper meaning. Here's just a rough graph I made to elucidate the point.



You can see this difference in stability, in volatility, in emotional chaos. As soon as you make the active step to begin detaching yourself from all that simply serves to satiate your pleasure seeking self and instead allow a long-term purpose to infiltrate into everything you do, that's when contentment will begin to rise. In the next chapter, I'll discuss how you might go about establishing that long-term purpose in your life.

So although we've examined the risks of becoming reliant on temporary pleasure, it's important to look at the flip side: if pleasure is bad, does that mean suffering in the present is required and beneficial for your future self?

### **Does contentment require suffering?**

Dr Viktor Frankl, an Austrian Holocaust survivor and founder of logotherapy – a school of psychotherapy centred on living with meaning – wrote in his best-selling novel, *'Man's search for meaning'*:

“Success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side-effect of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself.”

Dr Frankl is a firm believer that for you to be truly successful at something, it's imperative that you're doing something you love. He believes that only when you're working on a project simply because you want to, rather than because it feels like work, will success occur. Albeit an interesting perspective, I still can't help but view this as a radical oversimplification. It's universally acknowledged that the majority of successful athletes have goals, aspirations and targets and dedicate practically their entire lives to reaching these. Although it's indisputable that they do truly love their profession, it's inevitable that there'll still be days when they wake up and think, “I'd prefer just to lie in bed.” It'd be foolish to assume that they look forward to the daily pain and suffering that training will entail. Athletes train because they know what they want and they know suffering is required to get there. In this way, success does not simply ‘ensue’; it requires pursuit. Success, at least in the domain of achievement, requires suffering, it requires going through the pain of discipline to get where you need to be.

Muhammad Ali: “I hated every minute of training, but I said, ‘Don't quit. Suffer now and live the rest of your life as a champion.’”

You might recall our discussion about the danger of basing contentment on *achievement* and the importance of being present, but this idea of prior pain being required in order to progress is not something that's solely restricted to achievement. The notion that to grow as an individual, you're going to have to engage in some kind of voluntary suffering is transferrable to almost all aspects of life. In fact, even when it comes to maximising the odds of us accessing a state of contentment, arguably the right kind of suffering is actually unavoidable.

A natural progression from 'I need to feel good' is 'I must not feel bad'. This leads to something known as *experiential avoidance* which is essentially the mentality of 'I must avoid all painful feelings'. But this mind-set not only strips you of pain but also of joy. Often, things that you're initially anxious about you end up actually really enjoying and you never would have experienced that joy if you'd have been completely discomfort avoidant. You can't have love without fear of rejection. You can't achieve great things without fear of failure. You can't make friends without opening yourself up to the possibility of your trust being manipulated. You can't get stronger without putting your muscles through pain. Instead of living your life based on running away from all these negative things that might arise, perhaps you should instead be looking to run towards the things you *do* want and learning to cope with those negative emotions along the way.

In this way we can see that 'success' (at least in the domain of success constituting contentment) is going to require some degree of suffering and embracing that suffering as opposed to running away from it is imperative. By definition, to get out of your comfort zone, you are going to *have* to be uncomfortable. That's the only way to grow - discomfort. And discomfort in a lot of cases involves real pain and suffering. But it's necessary suffering. It's suffering for your future self. If you only do what you can currently do, you'll never be more than you currently are. I'm aware that that is quite a negative outlook on life – to suggest all good things demand a certain degree of prior pain is not a pleasant thought. But it's a thought that, in my opinion, couldn't be truer.

It's important here to make a distinction between unnecessary suffering and suffering with a long-term goal in mind. There are two types of suffering. You have the kind of suffering that grows you (i.e. going to the gym) and you have unnecessary suffering (i.e. falling over and hurting your leg). When I talk about

suffering in this book, I am always referring to the first kind, the kind which demands a kind of sacrifice, the kind where you know subsequent growth will occur.

The reason I'm mentioning the necessity of suffering in a chapter on the danger of temporary pleasure is because it's very easy, and many people do, to completely reverse this 'short-term pain, long-term gain' mentality into living for temporary pleasure. Temporary pleasure provides a way to make current you happy whilst simultaneously disregarding future you. To avoid this, it's important to bear in mind why you are voluntarily going through this suffering – for your future self. Yes, smoking that cigarette might be the best decision for the you in the present. But that's not the only you, you need to worry about. You also have the you tomorrow and the you in a month and the you in a year to look out for. Will smoking that cigarette be good for these you's too?

### **Grief**

When it comes to suffering, potentially the most painful emotion of all is grief. I know a section on grief might seem out of place in this chapter, but I want to address it because for me, grief perfectly sums up the necessity of suffering and the dangers that'd ensue from simply striving to be 'happy' all the time.

Robin Williams in the film 'Good Will Hunting' says to the character Will:

**“You don't know about real loss, 'cause it only occurs when you've loved something more than you love yourself.”**

For a lot of us, the saddest part of life is when the person who gave us the best memories becomes a memory. A little thought experiment:

Imagine there was a pill that could immediately vanquish any feelings of grief completely – when, if at all, would you take it?

Of course, almost no one would take it right away. If you witnessed your child get run over and die, you could simply take this pill and ten minutes later, go shopping, have a coffee and go about your day like nothing happened. Clearly, that's not something most of us would actually want. We kind of *want* to feel pain. We kind of *need* to suffer.

It's somewhat contradictory but suffering is a necessary component of grieving and if we had the choice, a lot of us would actually choose, despite the fact this

person we love is gone, to continue suffering and reliving those memories because to not do so would feel like we're being somewhat ungrateful for the impact this person has had on our life. Grief is perfectly normal and natural. When you lose someone you love, a part of you wants to remember that person, to hold onto, cherish those happy memories you hold so dear. You'll never get the same moment twice and so memories can provide a way of reliving old times. But when we summon these memories excessively, reliving them can begin to feel painful. Each and every photo or video that you see reminds you that these are memories you'll never again recreate. They remind you that you'll never again be able to write new memories with the person you've lost. But a part of us has to hold on; we can't simply expunge all those parts of someone we hold so close to our heart.

It's just about moderation and not sentencing yourself to unnecessary suffering. Presumably, that person you loved would want nothing more than for you to make the most out of your life rather than sentence yourself to perpetual torture thinking about them. The reality is that grief is inevitable and natural and healthy but if it becomes paralysing for a significant period of time, then it might be time to see a psychologist or another mental health specialist who can offer individualised support.

### **Voluntary psychological discomfort**

Despite the fact discomfort is something people usually regard as being a purely physical phenomenon, there is something to be said about being willing to voluntarily endure forms of psychological discomfort too. Unnecessary psychological suffering is obviously futile but the point here is that small doses of voluntary suffering that are beneficial to your future self are like vaccinations that can serve to strengthen your psychological immune system. The more vaccinations you give yourself, the more prepared you'll be when life throws you that storm that might otherwise have been overwhelming. If you're accustomed to dealing and coping accordingly with stress on a small scale, it'll be much easier to deal with on a bigger scale.

The act of trying something, failing at it and learning from that failure for the next attempt is a key aspect of success. There is a tendency, however, and not surprisingly, for us to refrain from doing things simply because there is a possibility of failure. But the only way to get better at something is to fail at it. Everything you do well today involved repeated failure. And that's why giving

yourself healthy doses of psychological suffering is so important – you are training yourself to accept discomfort and not run away from it but embrace it. There'll always be that flatmate in your head telling you to take the easy path out and run towards that temporary pleasure. But by engaging in voluntary discomfort you're telling this voice that he/she is not in control. You're in charge.

Denis Waitley - "Failure should be our teacher, not our undertaker. Failure is delay, not defeat. It is a temporary detour, not a dead end. Failure is something we can avoid only by saying nothing, doing nothing, and being nothing."

Fear, for example, is a universal human emotion and one which we are all familiar with in one way or another. It's an emotion that can be incredibly powerful and lead, in some cases, to missed opportunities and regret. A common psychological technique used to counter phobias is known as *systemic desensitisation*, which in short, involves gradually exposing the person with the phobia to the thing they are afraid of. The technique revolves around inducing voluntary discomfort in order to stretch the comfort zone, so the individual can grow and not be as affected by the fear.

Let's say for example someone has a fear of lifts. Rather than setting the initial target to be actually standing in the lift, which might seem unattainable, the first goal might be to stand a few metres away from the lift.

From then, the distance from the lift can be reduced, each time the person going as close as they possibly can. They might repeat each distance over and over until they're comfortable with it before moving a metre closer. And even if it were to take considerable time, the person would eventually get to a stage where they'd feel comfortable in the lift itself. The important thing to remember is this: the task never gets easier. The person just gets stronger.

The same kind of logic can be applied in your life: practise psychological suffering. If you have a fear of failing, practise failing; a fear of public speaking, go on a public speaking course; a fear of rejection, practise being rejected; a fear of parties, start exposing yourself to smaller social situations. In general, if there is something you know you should be doing but are avoiding because you're afraid, then you should probably do it in small doses and try and gradually increase the amount of discomfort as you grow stronger and stronger.

Of course, this is much easier to say than to do, but as long as you are making a conscious and active effort to experience voluntary discomfort readily, you're improving your psychological immune system and you'll be better equipped for the storms life will throw at you in the future.

### **Voluntary physical discomfort**

When I talk about physical discomfort, as aforementioned earlier, I am not referring to unnecessary physical discomfort. I'm referring to physical activities that might be painful in the moment but that reap rewards for your future self. Activities such as: cold showers, hiking, running, going to the gym. You might set a goal to run a marathon, for example. You know a running a marathon is hard and you know that the training that'll be required in order for you to get to this goal will entail a great degree of voluntary suffering.

But you also know the purpose of this suffering. You are not running a marathon to impress others but to strengthen your psychological immune system, to push your own limits and improve your resilience so you can better deal with life's challenges in the future. Just like how when you repeatedly expose yourself to something you are afraid of in the psychological realm, you begin to slowly be less afraid of it, the same is applicable in the physical domain too.

If each and every morning you begin your day with a cold shower, any stressor that might spontaneously arise during the day should have far less impact on you than it would otherwise. Your body is already prepared and knows it has the capacity to deal with that stress. Each cold shower is like a small dose of a vaccination, so when the real illness comes (that super stressful event), your body is much better prepared than it would be if you hadn't engaged in that voluntary discomfort at all.

### **But it's hard to voluntarily suffer...**

Making yourself uncomfortable voluntarily is *extremely* difficult. It's all well and good saying that you're going to take that bold step to expose yourself to uncomfortable situations but actually *taking* that step is a whole different story.

So don't chastise yourself if you're struggling. Struggle is totally fine and totally normal and doesn't make you any worse of a person. You're no different from me or any other person on this planet – we all struggle to do things we

know we should. In fact, even as someone who's written an entire article on why we should learn to suffer on my website, I still find myself on numerous occasions avoiding things I know I should do. But that's normal, that's human nature - we're not machines.

The fact you're reading this book and trying to improve as a person says a lot about you. It's a noble and brave thing to do – not a lot of people are willing to undergo the hardship or suffering required for positive change. But as you're improving yourself, always remember the things in life that are truly important to you; always remember that you're changing for *you* and nobody else and as we discussed in Chapter Two, always remember that no amount of improvement is going to make you 'feel good enough'. That's a feeling that requires true self-love and acceptance and a feeling that cannot be taught but which is entirely dependent on you.

Who you are right now, in this moment...you're enough. You're enough just as you are. That doesn't mean that you shouldn't try to improve yourself. Of course try. I'll try too – that's why I wrote this book! But at the end of the day, all that really matters is just that: that you're trying.

### **A summary of the book so far...**

After discussing the meaning of life in chapter one, we established in chapter two the importance of making the most of each moment and looked at ways to help you stay rooted in the present moment to help you feel content. But we also noted that simply being content with being alive will not suffice; if simply existing is enough, you'll get nowhere in life. We then questioned what kind of things we *should* aim for and came to the conclusion that temporary pleasure is not a good long-term solution. So that begs the question: what *is* a good long-term solution? How can we set short-term and long-term goals that help us to excel? How can we find out what things in life we truly value and set goals in accordance with these values?

# 4

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## *How to Set Good Goals*

## Introduction

A fairly substantial portion of the book, up till this point, has outlined the importance of staying present and being mindful of the fact that achievement is *not* an optimal solution for lasting happiness. But goals, nonetheless, are still an incredibly important contributor to living a fulfilling and meaningful life. Why? Well because goals give you somewhere to aim towards, they give you a sense of direction. By establishing a goal and working towards it, you're no longer letting life control you but rather dictating where *you* want your life to go. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche said:

“He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how”

Viktor Frankl, holocaust survivor and psychologist, outlines how those in Nazi prison camps who had established a ‘why’, some reason to continue living, whether that be seeing their children or finishing their novel, were much more likely to survive than those who didn't. The idea is that once you've established a why, a noble goal that you can strive towards, life suddenly becomes a whole lot more manageable. You now have a reason to battle through the storms life will inevitably throw at you, a reason to continue pushing when things get tough. As we discussed in the last chapter, without well set goals or a sense of direction, without having something you're working towards, there's a tendency to become reliant on temporary pleasure for sustenance. But presumably you don't just want to be ‘getting through life’; you want to be *living* life.

So it appears you need to find some middle ground. You need something to aim for, something to focus your attention towards, but you also need to ensure that you don't get so sucked into achieving these arbitrary goals that your entire existence becomes dependent on them. Remembering the value of simply existing, of being grateful for where you are right now cannot be emphasised enough. I've already run through various techniques to help you stay present in Chapter Two and so in this chapter I'll be looking at the flip side of the coin - goals. Or more specifically, how can we set *good* goals? The first half of the chapter will hone in on how to set effective *short-term* goals and the second half will zoom out and examine how you might go about setting *longer term* goals.

## **Setting good short-term goals**

### **Don't set goals based on comparison with others**

In modern society, a great deal of suffering stems from comparing ourselves to others. The problem is, when you play the comparison game and hinge your self-worth on other people's validation, you're setting yourself up to lose. When we set goals, there's a tendency for us to do things simply to 'look good' or because we feel insufficient and feel as if achieving a specific goal will make us 'better' than others. The truth is this: no matter how good looking you are, there'll *always* be someone who looks better. No matter how smart you are, there'll *always* be someone who's smarter. No matter how good you are at anything, you'll *always* be able to find someone who your brain can use to justify your own inadequacy.

Social media exacerbates this problem. So many of us wake up, automatically reach out to grab our phone and as we aimlessly scroll, our mind absorbing all this amazingness and talent seemingly oozing from every other person around us, we, lying frozen in bed, can't help but to compare ourselves to them, can't help but to think of ourselves as a failure, as 'not enough'. Social media glamorises others to the point where you can easily start to believe that people are basically robots, deficient of any real flaws or weaknesses. You're not exactly going to get many people who are content posting a sub-par picture of themselves which means all you're left with is the good stuff, all those pictures that took half an hour to perfect. You're also imbued with this distorted sense of reality which encourages you to believe that you're the only person not working ten hour days or writing a novel or blogging daily or starting up a business. What most people fail to realise is that what they're comparing themselves to is nothing but a highlight reel, a snapshot of somebody else's life.

What someone posts online is not a representation of them. Behind the screen and the glamour, they are a normal person who feels pain and suffers and feels that same empty, vacuous void in the pit of their stomach as you. I know it's difficult to actively acknowledge this but when you start to put your needs first and think more about what *you* want rather than how what you are doing compares to others and how it might make you look, you're on your way to increasing the odds of you feeling more content.

In general, the only person you should be comparing yourself to is your past self. When you start becoming reliant on likes or follows to make you happy, you're subjecting yourself to a perpetual feeling of deficiency – no matter how many likes or followers you have, you could always have more. If you're instead doing whatever you're doing because *you* want to do it, then these menial things really won't matter. There are some instances, however, when comparison might be beneficial – for example if you really admire someone, you might use 'striving towards being like them' as motivation. As long as that motivation is not driven by envy but by inspiration, this is a completely healthy way of staying motivated. But ultimately, you shouldn't need pats on the back for your achievements. You shouldn't do things just to impress others.

Marcus Aurelius: "Anything in any way beautiful derives its beauty from itself and asks nothing beyond itself. Praise is no part of it, for nothing is made worse or better by praise."

A good way to determine whether a goal you're striving for is a goal that *you* truly want is by asking yourself the following question:

"If I were not allowed to talk to anyone ever about this goal after I achieve it, would I still be doing it?"

If your answer is yes, that's a good indication that you want to do this thing for *you* and nobody else. A no, however, would indicate that your goal is motivated by how you want to be perceived by others.

### **The SMART framework**

When it comes to setting short-term goals, one of the most common pieces of advice given to school children is as follows: set SMART goals.

S – specific

M – measurable

A – attainable

R – relevant

T – time based

Recent scientific research builds on this SMART framework and outlines four key factors to consider when setting and progressing towards achieving your short-term goals: clarity, challenge, feedback and task complexity.

### **Setting clear goals:**

You need your goal to be clear, you need to know *exactly* how you're planning to measure progress. What specific metric are you going to use? If your goal is to lose weight, will you measure progress based on waist to hip ratio or how you feel in your clothes or are you just going to periodically weigh yourself? How many times a week will you weigh yourself and on what days? It's crucial you have a clear picture of what would constitute you 'achieving' your goal. You might take the 'time based' element of the SMART framework and give yourself a set period of time to achieve your goal too.

### **Setting challenging goals:**

When setting a goal, there's a balance that must be struck between attainability and realism. Your goal cannot be unrealistically difficult, but it also can't be too easily achievable. A common mistake people make is to set the bar too low. It's human nature to subconsciously crave that rush of euphoria you get once you achieve a goal and the best way to access that feeling often is to set goals you're virtually guaranteed to reach. But by doing so, you're only deceiving yourself. To avoid falling into this trap, it's important you spend a fair amount of time ensuring the short-term goals you devise are not too easily attainable.

### **Consider task complexity:**

I've mentioned our proclivity to set goals that don't push us enough, but it's also worth ensuring that, in the early stages, you don't get over-excited and start setting goals that are outrageously overambitious. If you notice yourself beginning to get frenetic, take a step back and consider breaking your goals that have a great degree of complexity down into smaller and more achievable ones.

When a task appears too difficult or as if it'll require too much work, our brain will naturally put that task off. But the more we put the task off, the more stressed we become and the more stressed we become the more we put the task off. The cycle perpetuates. To minimise the odds of this cycle manifesting, you should ensure any goal that appears too complex is broken down into smaller sub-goals which seem attainable.

For example “I want to lose 10kg” is a poor goal; the target itself is too overwhelming. You might instead question exactly how you’re going to lose 10kg and construct a weekly timetable or even a daily timetable that requires you to do various exercises that’ll contribute towards you losing that weight.

### **Gaining feedback:**

No matter how hard you deliberate, the fact of the matter is that there’s a good chance the initial goal you set *will* be either too easy or too hard. To counter this, you should schedule time once a week to sit down and take a look at what things in your routine are working and what things are not. To continuously repeat techniques and methods that lack efficiency would be to waste precious time. After your weekly analysis, you can then adjust your strategy accordingly.

### **Don’t set a dead person’s goal**

The last rule I’d give when it comes to setting short-term goals comes from doctor and therapist, Russ Harris, who says:

#### **“Don’t set a dead person’s goal”**

Imagine you want to lose weight, and you know that you binge eating cake is contributing to the problem. Your goal might be:

“I won’t eat cake on weekdays.”

But this is a dead person’s goal since a dead person could do it better than you. So instead, you should convert ‘*not* eating cake’ into an activity you could do as a replacement. Think about what you’d be doing with your time if cake didn’t exist. Maybe you’d go for a walk or play your violin or read a good book. Whatever it is, a new habit needs to be formed in order to eradicate and replace the old destructive one. So irrespective of your overarching ambition, remember that your goals should not be things you’re *not* going to do, but rather things you *are* going to do.

### **Setting good long-term goals**

Life is simply too short to waste time doing things you don’t find meaningful. If you don’t do what you want to do in this life, you’re *never* going to get a second chance. There’s a tendency for a lot of us to never once halt to consider that fact. We instead sleepwalk through life, oblivious to the fact that we’re soon going to be dead. It’s easy to conform to what society tells us we should be, to

let life control us; it's much harder to decide you want to pursue something *you* find genuinely meaningful. The important thing to remember is that this is *your* life and you shouldn't let anyone tell you how you should live it. The ability to differentiate between what you truly want and what you want solely because of how others may perceive you is an incredibly useful skill. To help with this, professor of philosophy, William Irvine, proposed a thought experiment:

Imagine you wake up tomorrow, and everyone around you has disappeared. Everything's still there: buildings, clothes, cars, food, but there are just no people. How would that change your perspective on what's important in life? Now would you feel the need to wear designer clothes or would you instead prioritise comfort? Now would you really want to live in that huge mansion or would you prefer a small and cosier and more comfortable dwelling? Would you really want that diamond ring or that expensive jewellery?

Although you might initially object to the thought experiment, giving an argument along the lines of 'this world is not the world we actually live in and so inferences cannot be drawn', that's not the point. The thought experiment is there to demonstrate just how much of what people want is not what *they* want but what they want because of how other people might perceive them. Much of what they want, they only want because of what society has labelled as "success". You see this in today's society. Young children are becoming increasingly obsessed by the idea of becoming famous. From an early age, they're subconsciously conditioned to link fame to success. An online survey conducted on 3,000 children aged 8 to 12 in the UK, the United States and China, asked children what they wanted to be when they grew up.

The results were extraordinary – the children were almost three times more likely to want to be a YouTuber (29%) than an astronaut (11%).

So what is it about YouTube that is so inherently attractive? Well there's a biological longing within us all to be seen as desirable or powerful. Fame ultimately provides us with a taste of this – it serves as concrete evidence that you *are* desirable to others. It's no wonder therefore that young children, sometimes even adults, live under the delusion that being famous would induce instantaneous happiness.

If this were the case however, the rate of celebrity suicide wouldn't be so scarily high. When a celebrity comes to the sudden realisation that all which they thought fame could provide to fill that empty void has not come, emotional pain

becomes almost inevitable. Then to remove that pain, the quick and easy solution many resort to is to drown hopelessness and sorrow with drugs and alcohol. And that's where the cycle of addiction begins. Then comes dependency, reliance and then either an intervention where the celebrity rises stronger and wiser than before, or demise. Of course this won't happen to every celebrity, but it's still a rough representation of the pattern of events that could easily occur when someone believes fame will imbue their life with meaning. Fame simply doesn't provide us with deep and meaningful connections, connections that are necessary to sustain life.

So the question is: how can you find things that *you* truly value which you can use to set goals to strive towards? How can you find a purpose?

### **Finding a purpose**

For a lot of us, it'd be very difficult to pinpoint even one thing we feel truly passionate about. We don't feel like we could ever establish a strong 'why' for our existence. To help with this, one of the first questions psychiatrist Viktor Frankl would ask his patients was: "Why do you not commit suicide?" From their answer, he could often establish the guideline for his psychotherapy.

Although on the face of it, the question might appear pretty sinister and dark, deep consideration of the answer can highlight what things in life *you* truly find meaningful and can provide a good starting point for establishing your passions. For example, the most common response is 'my family'. For a lot of people, the purpose of their existence is defined as soon as they have children. Once someone has a child, life changes; they are now no longer the most important thing on this planet. They now have a duty, a moral responsibility, to devote all their remaining years to ensuring their children are set up to live the best lives they can. Their *purpose* in life is now set in stone; nothing else really matters.

But if you're young and either don't want children or don't yet have children, there'll inevitably be many other reasons why you don't commit suicide. Perhaps that novel you're working on, your love for art, how much you love helping people or your passion for coding. Whatever your responses might be, everything you list is guaranteed to hold a significant amount of importance in your life. If doing art is a reason you don't commit suicide then it's clearly important to you. You've established a passion. Likewise, if you figure you derive a lot of joy from helping people then that might provide the basis for

exploring careers which revolve around that quality – like being a therapist or doctor or vet perhaps.

The idea is to weed away the meaningless things that you're doing out of necessity and instead pinpoint what things in life are truly important to you. The priority, as I'll soon discuss should of course be on ensuring financial stability; having a stable job you dislike whilst pursuing your passion in your free time (until that passion provides enough income for you to switch careers) guarantees security. But establishing some kind of goal (even if you do have children) and having somewhere to strive towards alongside doing that job you perhaps dislike is incredibly important; this way you're taking control of your life. Of course you should prioritise ensuring your children are set up in the best way possible, but you shouldn't use this as an excuse to avoid pursuing other goals that are important to *you*, simply because pursuing them will require too significant a degree of hardship. You only have one chance, one life. Do you want your life to be a story you write or are you ok with it being a story that's written about you?

Albert Camus: "The literal meaning of life is whatever you're doing that prevents you from killing yourself"

Another tip that might help you discover what you want to do with your life is imagining how you'd view the world if you'd survived a near death experience. If you live life as if you've encountered a near death experience or as if you're living your second life, it changes your perspective on things. Considering what it might be like to be on the brink of death and somehow getting through it to survive and get a 'second chance' can make you more grateful for what you have and highlight what things are important in life. Suddenly simple things that are often taken for granted like family and nature and love might mean a whole lot more.

Even after this, however, it's still perfectly possible that you're just as lost, still unsure if you'll ever find something you're passionate about. And that's *totally* fine and normal. What I'd recommend doing, especially when you're young, is exposing yourself to as many different novel activities as possible. Try cooking and art and writing and sport and music and maths and anything else that you think there's a slim chance you might enjoy. The more things you experience, the more likely you are to discover that one thing that you love doing more than

anything. If something makes you feel energised, keep doing that thing; if something makes you feel exhausted then move onto something else.

Even if you're old and are not sure what you're doing with your life, there is still time. The older you get, the more difficult things become. If you have a family, as I've mentioned earlier, you now have added responsibility – you *have* to work that job in order to provide for your family and that makes it very difficult to find the time to try new things. Jiddu Krishnamurti, Indian philosopher, talks about the utility of finding a passion and pursuing it as a side passion in your spare time. If you don't get time during the week for example, on the weekends, instead of wasting hours watching TV, you now have a 'passion project' to work on and you can set yourself goals in order to turn this passion into a stable income. It might take ten years, it might take twenty years but if you're consistently working on something you're truly passionate about, the time it takes for this project to turn into your full time job will not be wasted time. The motivation for pursuing this passion should not be outcome based - motivated by fame, money or status. A true passion is something you'd do even if you knew you'd never get any recognition for it.

Van Gogh: "I can't change the fact that my paintings don't sell. But the time will come when people will recognize that they are worth more than the value of the paints used in the picture."

By establishing a 'passion project' alongside a job, Krishnamurti suggests that now you're taking the step to take control of life rather than let life control you. He says that: "It's important for you, for all of you, to find your own talent, and stick to it, even if it doesn't bring you success, fame and all that which is all nonsense anyhow, because we are all going to die!....While you live, *live*, not with all the rubbish that is going on." There is a problem with this proposition, however. First off, you might not be able to motivate yourself to do what needs to be done in order to achieve this goal (something I'll help you with in Chapter Five) and secondly you might simply be unable to find anything you love enough to work on for ten years. Firstly, I'd recommend continuing to search and experiment but even if you feel as if nothing will ever come, it's important to remember that sometimes the best things in life are things you never even planned for.

## **Why sometimes we should embrace life's spontaneity**

Although this chapter, up to this point, might have seemed very theoretical, this is absolutely not how life works. If you're young and reading this right now, chances are what your passion is right now will change. And that's completely ok. The emphasis should absolutely not be on deciding how you want your whole life to materialise at this very moment. It is, however, very useful to delve a little bit deeper into yourself and question whether your motivations and aspirations are *yours* or whether they've been unwillingly forced upon you by society or others.

Life will present you with opportunity after opportunity and a good life involves seizing these opportunities when they come. Sometimes the best things in life are not planned. Your perception of where you want to go is absolutely allowed to (and probably should) change. A lot of the time, you don't know what you want until it comes. But that shouldn't stop you from having a vision. Having a goal is important; having a why, a reason to wake up every day and fight through life's struggles is what gives life meaning. This vision can then change as you experience failure and learn from that failure and discover what things you enjoy. But without an overarching goal, you're just wandering aimlessly through life, letting external events control you.

Sometimes, however, it's just about embracing the spontaneity of life; reacting and learning from your mistakes and seizing those opportunities when they come.

## **A quick summary...**

So now we've looked at various ways you might go about setting good goals, the next question you might be asking yourself is this: how can I stay motivated enough to actually stick to these goals I set for myself? It's all well and good saying you want to achieve a goal or having a 'passion project' but the likelihood is that achieving that goal is going to require a significant investment of time and dedication. Motivation is not this infinite resource we can pluck from whenever we desire. In fact, at times, it can be incredibly difficult to motivate ourselves to do the things we know we should be doing. So what techniques can we use that might improve our productivity and help us stay motivated while pursuing our goals?

# 5

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# *How to Stay Motivated While Pursuing Your Goals*

## **Introduction**

Look, I know you might be tired of me saying this, but before you know it, it's all going to be over, everything you know and love...gone. It's this inevitability, the assurance of things coming to an end that should in theory provide sufficient motivation for you to wake up every day with a burning desire to go towards achieving your dreams. But as I'm sure you're aware, motivation is sadly not that simplistic. We humans are biologically hardwired to gravitate towards opportunities that offer short-term gratification and so harnessing motivation, especially in tough times, can be incredibly difficult.

There's always that temptation lurking in the back of our minds to sleep in that extra hour or binge that TV series or rewatch that movie we've seen a thousand times. Compare that to the alternative where we're compelling ourselves to endure hours of voluntary discomfort for the slim chance that our dreams might manifest and it's easy to see why we stray towards the lifestyle predicated on instant gratification. Suffering, even for our future selves, is hard. Pleasure in the present moment is easy. Deep down, most of us know what we should be doing and how to do it. We just can't seem to muster the willpower to get it done. So in this chapter I'm going to discuss several tips and tricks to help you motivate yourself to pursue those dreams.

## **Interrogate your goals**

One of the most powerful sources of motivation arises from knowing precisely *why* you want to achieve whatever goal (or passion project) you've set yourself. If the *why* is clear, the *how* becomes a whole lot easier. To get a deeper understanding of exactly why a specific goal is important to you, the first thing I'd recommend is asking yourself this question: "Why do I actually want to do this thing I'm telling myself to do?" A useful way to delve deeper into your motivational drives is to ask yourself "why?" or somehow question each response given. For example, a father might say:

**"I want to motivate myself to draw more pictures as an artist, so I can get more money."**

*Why do you want more money?*

**"I want to help my children to live the best lives they can."**

*And do you think money helps with this?*

**“I think love is most important but I also want to have the money to be able to give them opportunities like going to college and paying for school trips.”**

*Why do you want your children to go to college?*

**“So they can get educated, get a good job and have a stable foundation for their own lives.”**

This could continue for longer, but the idea is that the more reasoning you can give and the more scrutiny your idea stands up to, the more reason you have to do what you set out to do. Now for the father it's no longer just, 'I want to draw more pictures as an artist', but there's a why – 'I want to do draw more pictures as an artist so I can give my children access to opportunities such as education so they can live their best lives'. And that is so much more powerful.

So don't just settle with a basic reply. Imagine you're an interrogator trying to dig as deep as humanly possible. Your job is to find flaws, to really get to the bottom of *why* you want to reach this dream you've set yourself. Someone who dreams of creating a million pound business, for example, might say:

**“I want to create a million-pound business, so I can afford to do things I can't do now.”**

*Like what things?*

**“Like buying a helicopter and eating in fancy restaurants.”**

*Why do you want to buy a helicopter and eat in fancy restaurants?*

**“Because I can't right now and those things will make me feel good.”**

*Why will those things make you feel good?*

**“Because they'll make me happy.”**

*And do you think they'll always make you happy? Or will the 'happiness' be temporary? Will you soon need something else to 'make you happy'? Are there things, like perhaps family or love that will always be there, things that won't fade when you become accustomed to them?*

Sometimes, when we start to interrogate ourselves, we uncover the reasoning behind some of our dreams is actually quite faulty. You should ensure that

whatever dream you're aspiring towards can be backed with a truly robust reason that can survive this kind of interrogation. The more you're able to answer the 'why' question, the more fuel you're giving yourself to do what needs to be done.

### **Learn to love the journey**

Most of us know what we ought to do, we know what things we *should* be doing yet still lack the motivation to get up off the sofa and do them. Why? The reason in most cases is this: we enjoy fantasising over the end result (the lean body, the athletic endurance, the flexibility) but despise the actual process required to get there. Lying idly in bed, fantasising over how great it'd feel like to be a healthy weight, for example, is a very different feeling from being in the gym and having your muscles burning and your forehead dripping with sweat and your entire body feeling like it might collapse. We don't want to feel that kind of pain. We want the end result yet are not willing to adhere to the process required to get there.

The way to bypass this is by instead of fixating on the end goal, focusing on the journey. You need to learn to love the journey, to love that kind of pain that you know is growing you. You have to learn to love that feeling you get when you can run that extra mile, or lift a little more than you could yesterday. That needs to be your motivation. Not the end goal but the process. In fact, in life generally, you might notice that once you've achieved a big goal, your life suddenly starts to feel empty. The reason for this is due to a psychological phenomenon known as 'arrival fallacy'. As Tal Ben-Shahar, the Harvard lecturer and positive psychology expert says:

“Arrival fallacy is this illusion that once we make it, once we attain our goal or reach our destination, we will reach lasting happiness.”

We get significantly more contentment not from *reaching* the goal but from *chasing* it. But how can we learn to enjoy that chasing, that suffering, that process of change? How can we learn to love the journey?

David Blaine, endurance artist and illusionist, talks about how he uses the 'breakdown of numbers' to help him with his endurance acts. Instead of thinking about, for example, how he still had more than sixty hours left to stay encased in an ice cube for, he broke those sixty hours down and thought about simply getting through the next hour or the next ten minutes over and over

again. The same trick can be applied to your goals. Let's run with the last example and imagine your target is to lose weight. While you're training and putting your body through hell, your motivation to continue should not stem from wanting to get to that target weight but instead on simply finishing that set of weights or that run or that workout. By breaking down this year-long process of losing weight to simply, 'I need to finish these five minutes on the treadmill', there is much less of a burden for your brain to bear, meaning you are much more likely to adhere to your long-term schedule. The 'just worrying about what needs to be done today' mentality helps ensure you're deriving your motivation not from the desired outcome but rather from that feeling of gradual improvement.

Will Smith – “You don't set out to build a wall. You don't say 'I'm going to build the biggest, baddest, greatest wall that's ever been built.' You don't start there. You say, 'I'm going to lay this brick as perfectly as a brick can be laid.' You do that every single day. And soon you have a wall.”

### **Take action**

Once we have a rough idea of a goal we might want to reach, there's a tendency for us to use research and reading around that goal as a kind of procrastination. We plan in excess detail what needs to be done in order to avoid actually doing it. This planning makes us feel like we're being productive and making good use of our time. But you need to question whether it would be more beneficial to just get on with working towards this goal as opposed to spending your entire life planning how you'll get there. Sometimes it's better to throw out the planning and procrastination and just dive right in. You can plan and prepare all you want, but the only thing that will get you closer towards your dream is **action**.

It's easy to get lured into the trap of reading solely for that sudden shot of short-term inspiration that makes you temporarily feel good. But that 'feeling good' and increased motivation won't last long. For most of us, after a week perhaps, we'll forget all the ideas a book has taught us for the rest of eternity. You might notice that most people who read self-help are reading tens or hundreds of books which are all giving very similar advice. Why is this? Well, it's for that shot, that dopamine rush you get after finishing a book, that feeling where you think this time is *really* the time you're going to change your life. But then that feeling subsides and you realise that you're exactly the same person as the

person before the book. You realise you've lost motivation and need it back. And what's the easiest way to do this? Well, through buying another book. This is precisely the cycle I would hate for you to descend into.

Yes, I would recommend reading as much as possible; knowledge is power. But don't read blindly. Don't read solely for motivation. Read and actually *try* the techniques suggested to you. Most of the bestselling self-help books will include much more useful information than you could ever implement in your own life. So once you read one, instead of moving instantly on to the next, take a few months to actually sit down and try the things it's telling you to try. It's so easy to just read one book and proceed to immediately move on to the next. But don't fall into that cycle!

### **The heaven/hell technique**

Once you've established a problem in your life and know you need to make various lifestyle changes in order to improve, asking yourself useful questions and laying out answers in a detailed manner can be an invaluable tool. The heaven/hell technique encourages you to ask yourself two separate questions, the first of which being:

“If I continue living exactly like I am now and don't make the positive changes in my life that I know I need to make to go towards my dream, then in three years, what will my life look like?”

The idea is not just to read that question and let it slip through your brain. You have to stop. Think. And after you've done a lot of thinking, perhaps over the next day or two, map out in detail how you think your future might unfold. Spend a while just writing. What do you think will happen? What will your career look like – will you still be doing the same job? How much progress will you have made on your dream? Will not working hard enough have an impact on your family? On your friends? On your career? On your health?

The purpose of this question is to create a kind of hell for you to run away from. When the future is cloudy, reliance on instant gratification is relatively easy; turning to temporary pleasure becomes almost inevitable. But now we have a hell to run from, it would be useful to have somewhere to run towards...

“If I can successfully implement the positive changes in my life that I know I need to make to go towards my dream, then in three years, what will my life look like?”

Now for the fun part! Although it'd be near impossible, imagine you *were* able to do everything you said you were going to do. Imagine you *were* able to somehow harness all this internal motivation and turn all your wasted time into productive time. Spend a while thinking about exactly what impact this might have on your life. What would your new life look like? What things could you now do that you couldn't do before? How might your mood change? How might this change your relationships with others?

Paint a rough picture – it doesn't have to be perfect. But it's essential that you spend a good amount of time really thinking. Don't just half-heartedly spend ten minutes writing the first things that come to mind. Give yourself a day or two to really think. The purpose is not so much to create a vision that's realistic. You just want something to aim towards, the best version of what could happen if you actually focused your mind on the things you know you should.

The idea is that now every time you hear your brain telling you to indulge in a form of temporary pleasure, you now have something to refer to. Take a fleeting glance at your heaven and hell. Which direction do you want to go? Having these loose and unarranged thoughts concretely and distinctly laid out as best and worst case scenarios can help to give you that extra push when times get tough.

### **The old man/woman technique**

Picture yourself as an old man/woman sitting in your armchair. Now imagine looking back at your life, at all the things you've done. Do you have regrets? Could you have done more? Now come back to the present moment. Are you on the right path to do all those things you want to get done before you no longer can? And as that old man/woman would you have regrets if you didn't do the things you should be doing right now?

Posing these questions to yourself turns the inevitability of ageing into an asset that should help you to make the right decisions in the present. It's true, no matter how hard you try to stay oblivious to it, that one day you *will* have grey hair and be stuck to your armchair because your bones are simply too frail and fragile for you to stand on your own two feet. And it's also true that that old

man/woman will think back to their past and think about what could have been. You want to grow old and be content with how you spent your days. So make those changes you need to make *now* because one day it'll be too late.

### **Establish good habits**

What makes habits so extraordinarily powerful is the fact that they can occur without your brain even having to think. You can change your new default from these pleasure loaded temporary experiences to things that will serve you in the long-term. When you establish a habit, it requires almost no resistance to carry out. So if you establish good habits, you'll essentially be carrying out productive tasks daily without even having to think.

But how does habit forming even start? The answer to put it in its simplest terms – repetition. We need to commit to doing something every day without fail. How many times have you heard someone set the New Year's Resolution of 'get fit', only to go to the gym for the first two weeks before plummeting into the depths of the inescapable and inevitable mind trap of "I have no time"? Habits are all about consistency. Being super frenetic and motivated for two weeks only to do nothing for the next few months, while you're 'waiting for your motivation to return' is not going to do you any good.

Time needs to be spent building strong and robust systems so that when unexpected events occur, your brain is always defaulting to these positive habits. In order to build these systems, you need to commit to doing said activity every day without fail. It doesn't have to be for an hour. If even for five minutes, that's good enough. If your target is to get fit, you might recognise going to the gym daily as being a suitable target and rightly so. But there'll be days when you genuinely can't muster the internal energy to get yourself there. And it's those days which count. Instead of sitting idle on your sofa, convincing yourself this is a one off, the step has to be taken to instead get your trainers on and go to the gym for two minutes. That's all. Two minutes.

And what's the point in this? Well changing you is all about changing your identity. To create a new self, you need to destroy your old self. And so when you commit to going to the gym, even if only for two minutes, you're signalling to your body that you're someone who doesn't miss a workout. And that's how going to the gym becomes a habit. As James Clear says in his book *'Atomic Habits'*: "Every action you take is a vote for the type of person you wish to

become. No single instance will transform your beliefs, but as the votes build up, so does the evidence of your new identity.”

The environment around you also plays a key role in influencing behaviour. If you're able to make the appropriate changes in your environment, you can improve the odds of you sticking to your habits. If, for example, you lack the motivation to study, you might make the change from studying in your bed to studying at your desk. Your brain has a tendency to associate specific locations with specific activities. And since you spend the majority of the time in bed sleeping, your brain will associate your bed to sleep. To improve productivity, your bed should only be used for sleeping and your desk should only be used for working. That way, when you sit down to work at your desk, you'll have conditioned your brain to know that now is the time to switch into 'working mode'.

It's also advisable to minimise the number of obstacles that come between you and your habits. As I've mentioned before, our brains are hardwired to take the path of least resistance. That means that the more effort that's required to stick to the habit, the less likely it is that you will. If you need to eat healthily to lose weight, pre-prepare salads for the next day. If you know you need to revise maths tomorrow, open your textbook to the exact page you're going to be working on tomorrow, tonight. Have everything ready and prepared. Make life easy for your future self.

Above all, it's important to be realistic and realise that progress will inevitably be slow. You are *not* going to change overnight. You're allowed setbacks and you're allowed days where you simply do nothing. As long as over time you're improving, as long as you're striving to do better than you did yesterday, that's all that matters. Your journey is not going to be a straight line with a constant positive gradient; it'll be spiky, riddled with troughs and dips and lows. There *will* be days where you don't do better than you did yesterday. But that's totally normal and totally fine. As long as the general trajectory is upwards, then that's all that matters. Be realistic, don't expect rapid results, stay consistent and make sure you're remembering to enjoy the journey along the way.

# 6

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# *Connection and the Importance of Hope*

## **Introduction**

Although establishing goals or a passion project gives you a sense of direction and helps you to take back control of your life, it's important while chasing your goals to remember what's important in life. From an emotional wellbeing perspective, connection, love and meaning are almost always far more important than achieving your goals. As I discussed in Chapter One, it's crucial that from time to time, you take a step back and practise being present and grateful and remember the value of the small things, the memories that make life what it is. I want to spend the final portion of this book touching on a factor that I didn't spend a great deal of time discussing in Chapter One, a factor that is arguably the most important of all when it comes to living a happy, healthy life. Social connection.

## **The importance of social connection**

Allow me to take you back to Chapter One, where I highlighted a study that concluded the slum dwellers in Calcutta had higher levels of subjective wellbeing in relation to the American homeless despite having less access to 'basic needs' like food and shelter. Back then, I suggested the results indicated factors other than money *must* therefore contribute to wellbeing. One of these factors includes social connection. The researcher, Robert Biswas Diener, explicitly explains the difference in wellbeing between the two groups as being down to the quality of social relationships. The Indians have a sense of community; they all experience poverty together. The American homeless, on the other hand, are often alone and have no friends or loved ones.

Diener says in the same paper that:

“Having intimate, trusting social relationships appears to be necessary for happiness. Comparisons of the happiest and least happy people show that the dimension in which the happiest people are similar is having high-quality friendships, family support, or romantic relationships; the happiest folks all had strong social attachments.”

Almost all research done on social connection comes to a similar conclusion: social connection is an integral part of living a meaningful life. A prominent study conducted by the Harvard Study of Adult Development followed the lives of 724 men placed in two groups for a period of 75 years. The aim was to find factors that could increase the odds of living a happy and healthy life.

Robert Waldinger, director of the study, said in a TED talk:

“When we gathered together everything we knew about them about at age 50, it wasn’t their middle-age cholesterol levels that predicted how they were going to grow old. It was how satisfied they were in their relationships. The people who were the most satisfied in their relationships at age 50 were the healthiest at age 80.”

It’s clear that when it comes to wellbeing, there are numerous factors that can influence contentment. There is no one formula or equation that explains how you can live your best life. Your own personal needs and what makes *you* content will likely differ from what makes someone else so. But what’s indisputable and what’s been demonstrated over and over in the relevant psychological literature is that one of the few things you *can’t* go without if you wish to live a meaningful and fulfilling life is social connection.

It’s also worth noting that social connection has little relation to *quantity* of friends. *Quality* of friends is the overriding factor. Having one *true* friend is more valuable than having a thousand acquaintances. Having people you truly connect with, people who you know have your back and who always want the best for you is what constitutes *real* connection.

### **The importance of kindness**

A core aspect of social connection is this notion of *kindness*. Kindness, from a purely evolutionary psychological perspective, makes perfect sense – it prevents mutually assured destruction. If you’re not mean to me, I won’t be mean to you. An extension of this: if I’m kind to you and give *you* something, I’m doing so only to increase the odds of *me* receiving something I need later down the line. Looking through an evolutionary survival lens, kindness is not motivated by concern for the other person but rather because it’s the optimal solution for *you* long-term. The more allies you had in the wild, the less likely it’d be that you were killed. But thinking of kindness as this purely biologically driven transactional exchange is, in my eyes, problematic.

Kindness shouldn’t be about *you*. You should be kind to someone because you actually care about *them* and their wellbeing. An easy way to determine whether an act of kindness is motivated by this reasoning is by asking yourself the following question:

“Would I still be doing this act of kindness for this person if they never knew it was me who did it?”

Imagine someone breaks their bike and is looking for help, would you still help if they never knew it was you who fixed it? If so, that means the kindness is nothing to do with *you*, rather it's motivated by a genuine drive to help the other person. It's my personal experience that so much of 'kindness' in the modern world and especially in the political realm is transactional, fake. People are kind because they want to be perceived as kind, not because they care about the person or people they are supposedly being kind to. People are kind either because they subconsciously expect something in return or because they want to establish a feeling of moral superiority over others – the kindness is about *them* and how they look.

I'd urge you to consider what your motivations for being kind are. I'm not saying 'fake' kindness is not important or functional, I just believe true kindness is what'll really make the world a better place. And there's nothing to say you should be kind to everyone. If you're kind to someone and they treat you with disrespect, you have no obligation to be kind to them again. Kindness is a very different thing to being a pushover and opening yourself up to malicious manipulation. But any initial act of kindness should be done without expectation of anything in return.

Making a concerted effort to help people, not simply to look morally virtuous to others but rather because you actually care about *them* and are concerned about reducing the amount of unnecessary suffering in the world is arguably the best solution for all parties involved. It's perfectly plausible that you might meet someone a few days after they've tried to end their own life and simply have no idea at all – to me that's an incredibly scary thought. That's why I view kindness as really so crucial. None of us really have any clue whatsoever about what the people around us are going through; behind the fake smile and the mask, anything could be going on. You lose absolutely nothing by being kind. In fact, perhaps paradoxically, the psychological literature indicates being 'other-orientated' can actually help *you* experience happiness more frequently too.

Elizabeth Dunn conducted a study where participants were either given money to spend on themselves or were told to use that money to buy something for someone else. When the scenario was explained to people, most predicted that

the group spending money on themselves would feel happier. But interestingly, it was the group who bought something *for someone else* that reported higher levels of happiness. The results from the study are a clear indication that *giving* to others not only benefits others but can also positively impact *our* emotional wellbeing too.

But that said, you should always ensure that you are being kind to *yourself* too. You should never completely deprive yourself of happiness just to try and make everyone around you happy. However hard you try, you never will. So while you're being kind to others, always make sure you're attending to your own needs too.

Robin Williams – “I think the saddest people always try their hardest to make people happy, because they know what it's like to feel absolutely worthless and they don't want anyone else to feel like that.”

### **Why you have the capacity to change the world every single day**

There's this proclivity amongst the existentialists to argue that we, as humans, are nothing but insignificant grains of sand in a huge infinite cosmos and although this fact might be true, the fact itself doesn't necessarily hold any worth. If life is ultimately meaningless, so is the statement that says it is. Life is beautiful and sacred. Although it might not seem like it, you really do have the capacity to change the world on the daily. I understand that might seem like an exaggeration. But it's really not and the best example to illustrate why revolves around a simple act of kindness:

Imagine on your way to work, you go to the local store to buy a bottle of water. As you buy the bottle of water, you make an effort to smile at the shopkeeper and ask how he's doing. Then you go about your day, forgetting this interaction ever even occurred.

What you don't realise is that this one interaction has a ripple effect. You've inadvertently and unknowingly changed hundreds of lives for the better.

Turns out that shopkeeper was having a bad day until you had that conversation with him. After your interaction, the shopkeeper makes the effort to say good morning and smile at and ask every customer who walks in how they're doing. One of the customers, feeling particularly happy from this interaction, decides to send a good morning message on their work group chat, which inspires some of the people on this chat to say good morning to people they know.

Another one of the customers was having a bad day up to this point too but this interaction with the shopkeeper cheers her up. With this new found buzz, on her way to work she starts a conversation with a boy who she, in her previous mood, wouldn't have. This leads to them getting married a few years down the line.

The possibilities are endless but the point is, everything that has happened would all be down to you choosing to be kind in that one moment. I'm perfectly aware that this is a fictional scenario but it's not unfeasible or unrealistic by any stretch of the imagination. There's a ripple effect present in *every* action you undertake. One random act of kindness can inspire a mini ripple across the world. The average western human will know about 600 people who in turn will know 600 people who again will know 600 people. Your interactions with every single one of those 600 you know will unwittingly influence the interactions these 600 people will have with the 600 people they know and so on. You therefore easily have the capacity, even just living a 'boring and ordinary' life, to significantly impact the world in a positive way.

If you deem your life to be insignificant and meaningless, you're not looking at the full picture; every action you take *is* significant. Every interaction you partake in has the capability of altering the world. You have the capacity, just as this one little human being, to influence a huge number of people and that means you *need* to take responsibility for your actions. Knowing you're going to die does not represent a complete abdication of responsibility. You can be perfectly aware of life's finitude, of the unnerving fact that death will eradicate every achievement you've ever obtained, whilst simultaneously striving to take responsibility to become the best version of yourself possible in the time you have.

### **And finally... the importance of hope**

There are times in life where we might feel as if hope has left us, as if no matter what we do, change will simply never occur. We're so lost, so tied up in the nuances and details of life, that we have lost touch with the beauty of simply existing and experiencing the world for what it is. We no longer derive joy from the small things because we are too consumed by the big things. Whatever happens, no matter how awful you feel, I want to assure you of one thing: things *will* get better. It's posited by religious leaders that everything happens for a

reason and although I'm sceptical of this specific notion, I understand the sentiment; bad things can almost always lead to good things.

If worst comes to worst and something happens that requires you to reshape your entire life, all that's happened is you've been diverted down a new and different path. You don't know whether this path will be better or worse, you never will, but with it will still come an incredible amount of opportunity. In the moment, it might not seem like it, but this bad event can easily be turned into something great. The truth is, a lot of the time, in the moment you don't know whether bad events are really that bad after all. Allow me to tell you a famous parable about a Taoist farmer.

There was an old farmer who owned a horse. One night, this horse decides to run away, leaving the farmer with nothing.

"What bad luck," the farmer's neighbours say.

"Maybe," the farmer answers.

The next day the horse returns with 6 other wild horses.

"What good luck!" the neighbours say.

"Maybe," the farmer answers.

The next day, the farmer's son is playing with the wild horses, but one of them throws him off and he breaks his leg.

"What bad luck," the neighbours say.

"Maybe," the farmer answers.

The next day, a war is announced and soldiers from the nearby town come to conscript men for the army. The farmer's son is rejected because of his broken leg.

"What good luck!" the neighbours say.

"Maybe..." is all the farmer replies.

The farmer in this story does not attempt to split life up into good events and bad events. Instead, he is aware that self-proclaimed bad events in the present are simply taking you down a different path. And as aforementioned, whether that different path is good or bad – you'll just never know.

Let's say for example that you fail your exams. Not getting the grades you want might seem bad in the present, but the new path you are led down could easily turn out to have been for the better. Grades which you might not be happy with at the time might, for example, lead you to changing to a new career that you end up finding more meaningful or to a new college that you end up loving or to your second choice university which you meet your future partner at. You'll simply never know. Whatever happens *happens* and you can make the best out of your new circumstances.

When things feel like they're getting on top of you, a mantra that might be useful for you to repeat is as follows:

“This too shall pass”

Whatever feeling you're currently experiencing, no matter how bad it is, that feeling *will* pass. Our mood and our emotions are in a state of perpetual change. You might feel bad today, but I promise you, with time, things *will* get better. As long as you're alive, as long as you're breathing, there's *something* to look forward to, even if right now you don't know what that something might be. Life is nothing more than a series of moments and appreciating these moments when they come, staying connected in these moments, is what makes this life *your* life.

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