

This is just a resume per chapter of Mark Manson's book The Subtle Art of Not Giving A Fck.

CHAPTER 1

Don't Try

See, despite the book sales and the fame, Bukowski was a loser. He knew it. And his success stemmed not from some determination to be a winner, but from the fact that he knew he was a loser, accepted it, and then wrote honestly about it. He never tried to be anything other than what he was. The genius in Bukowski's work was not in overcoming unbelievable odds or developing himself into a shining literary light. It was the opposite. It was his simple ability to be completely, unflinchingly honest with himself—especially the worst parts of himself—and to share his failings without hesitation or doubt.

This is the real story of Bukowski's success: his comfort with himself as a failure. Bukowski didn't give a fuck about success. Even after his fame, he still showed up to poetry readings hammered and verbally abused people in his audience. He still exposed himself in public and tried to sleep with every woman he could find. Fame and success didn't make him a better person. Nor was it by becoming a better person that he became famous and successful.

Self-improvement and success often occur together. But that doesn't necessarily mean they're the same thing.

Our culture today is obsessively focused on unrealistically positive expectations: Be happier. Be healthier. Be the best, better

than the rest. Be smarter, faster, richer, sexier, more popular, more productive, more envied, and more admired. Be perfect and amazing and crap out twelve-karat-gold nuggets before breakfast each morning while kissing your selfie-ready spouse and two and a half kids goodbye. Then fly your helicopter to your wonderfully fulfilling job, where you spend your days doing incredibly meaningful work that's likely to save the planet one day.

But when you stop and really think about it, conventional life advice—all the positive and happy self-help stuff we hear all the time—is actually fixating on what you *lack*. It lasers in on *what you perceive your personal shortcomings and failures to already be*, and then emphasizes them for you. You learn about the best ways to make money *because* you feel you don't have enough money already. You stand in front of the mirror and repeat affirmations saying that you're beautiful *because* you feel as though you're not beautiful already. You follow dating and relationship advice *because* you feel that you're unlovable already. You try goofy visualization exercises about being more successful *because* you feel as though you aren't successful enough already.

Ironically, this fixation on the positive—on what's better, what's superior—only serves to remind us over and over again of what we are not, of what we lack, of what we should have been but failed to be. After all, no truly happy person feels the need to stand in front of a mirror and recite that she's happy. She just *is*.

There's a saying in Texas: "The smallest dog barks the loudest." A confident man doesn't feel a need to prove that he's confident. A rich woman doesn't feel a need to convince anybody that she's rich. Either you are or you are not. And if you're dreaming of something all the time, then you're reinforcing the same unconscious reality over and over: that you are *not that*.

Everyone and their TV commercial wants you to believe that the key to a good life is a nicer job, or a more rugged car, or a prettier girlfriend, or a hot tub with an inflatable pool for the kids. The world is constantly telling you that the path to a better life is more, more, more—buy more, own more, make more, fuck more, *be* more. You are constantly bombarded with messages to give a fuck about everything, all the time. Give a fuck about a new TV. Give a fuck about having a better vacation than your coworkers. Give a fuck about buying that new lawn ornament. Give a fuck about having the right kind of selfie stick.

Why? My guess: because giving a fuck about more stuff is good for business.

And while there's nothing wrong with good business, the problem is that giving too many fucks is bad for your mental health. It causes you to become overly attached to the superficial and fake, to dedicate your life to chasing a mirage of happiness and satisfaction. The key to a good life is not giving a fuck about more; it's giving a fuck about less, giving a fuck about only what is true and immediate and important.

The Feedback Loop from Hell

Welcome to the Feedback Loop from Hell. Chances are you've engaged in it more than a few times. Maybe you're engaging in it right now: "God, I do the Feedback Loop all the time—I'm such a loser for doing it. I should stop. Oh my God, I feel like such a loser for calling myself a loser. I should stop calling myself a loser. Ah, fuck! I'm doing it again! See? I'm a loser! Argh!"

It's this last part that gets us into trouble. We feel bad about feeling bad. We feel guilty for feeling guilty. We get angry about getting angry. We get anxious about feeling anxious. What is wrong with me?

This is why not giving a fuck is so key. This is why it's going to save the world. And it's going to save it by accepting that the world is totally fucked and that's all right, because it's always been that way, and always will be.

By not giving a fuck that you feel bad, you short-circuit the Feedback Loop from Hell; you say to yourself, "I feel like shit, but who gives a fuck?" And then, as if sprinkled by magic fuck-giving fairy dust, you stop hating yourself for feeling so bad.

George Orwell said that to see what's in front of one's nose requires a constant struggle. Well, the solution to our stress and anxiety is right there in front of our noses, and we're too busy watching porn and advertisements for ab machines that don't work,

wondering why we're not banging a hot blonde with a rocking six-pack, to notice.

Because here's the thing that's wrong with all of the "How to Be Happy" shit that's been shared eight million times on Facebook in the past few years—here's what nobody realizes about all of this crap:

The desire for more positive experience is itself a negative experience. And, paradoxically, the acceptance of one's negative experience is itself a positive experience.

It's what the philosopher Alan Watts used to refer to as "the backwards law"—the idea that the more you pursue feeling better all the time, the less satisfied you become, as pursuing something only reinforces the fact that you lack it in the first place. The more you desperately want to be rich, the more poor and unworthy you feel, regardless of how much money you actually make. The more you desperately want to be sexy and desired, the uglier you come to see yourself, regardless of your actual physical appearance. The more you desperately want to be happy and loved, the lonelier and more afraid you become, regardless of those who surround you. The more you want to be spiritually enlightened, the more self-centered and shallow you become in trying to get there.

Ever notice that sometimes when you care less about something, you do better at it? Notice how it's often the person who is the least invested in the success of something that actually ends up achieving it? Notice how sometimes when you stop giving a fuck, everything seems to fall into place? What's with that?

If pursuing the positive is a negative, then pursuing the negative generates the positive. The pain you pursue in the gym results in better all-around health and energy. The failures in business are what lead to a better understanding of what's necessary to be successful. Being open with your insecurities paradoxically makes you more confident and charismatic around others. The pain of honest confrontation is what generates the greatest trust and respect in your relationships. Suffering through your fears and anxieties is what allows you to build courage and perseverance.

Seriously, I could keep going, but you get the point. Everything worthwhile in life is won through surmounting the associated negative experience. Any attempt to escape the negative, to avoid it or quash it or silence it, only backfires. The avoidance of suffering is a form of suffering. The avoidance of struggle is a struggle. The denial of failure is a failure. Hiding what is shameful is itself a form of shame.

Pain is an inextricable thread in the fabric of life, and to tear it out is not only impossible, but destructive: attempting to tear it out

unravels everything else with it. To try to avoid pain is to give too many fucks about pain. In contrast, if you're able to not give a fuck about the pain, you become unstoppable.

In my life, I have given a fuck about many things. I have also not given a fuck about many things. And like the road not taken, it was the fucks not given that made all the difference.

To not give a fuck is to stare down life's most terrifying and difficult challenges and still take action.

Look, this is how it works. You're going to die one day. I know that's kind of obvious, but I just wanted to remind you in case you'd forgotten. You and everyone you know are going to be dead soon. And in the short amount of time between here and there, you have a limited amount of fucks to give. Very few, in fact. And if you go around giving a fuck about everything and everyone without conscious thought or choice—well, then you're going to get fucked.

—how to pick and choose what matters to you and what does not matter to you based on finely honed personal values. This is incredibly difficult. It takes a lifetime of practice and discipline to achieve. And you will regularly fail. But it is perhaps the most worthy

struggle one can undertake in one's life. It is perhaps the only struggle in one's life.

Because when you give too many fucks—when you give a fuck about everyone and everything—you will feel that you're perpetually entitled to be comfortable and happy at all times, that everything is supposed to be just exactly the fucking way you want it to be. This is a sickness. And it will eat you alive. You will see every adversity as an injustice, every challenge as a failure, every inconvenience as a personal slight, every disagreement as a betrayal. You will be confined to your own petty, skull- sized hell, burning with entitlement and bluster, running circles around your very own personal

Feedback Loop from Hell, in constant motion yet arriving nowhere.

The Subtle Art of Not Giving a Fuck

Subtlety #1: Not giving a fuck does not mean being indifferent; it means being comfortable with being different.

Because here's a sneaky truth about life. There's no such thing as not giving a fuck. You must give a fuck about something. It's part of our biology to always care about something and therefore to always give a fuck.

The question, then, is, What do we give a fuck about? What are we choosing to give a fuck about? And how can we not give a fuck about what ultimately does not matter? the overcoming adversity stuff, the willingness to be different, an outcast, a pariah, all for the sake of one's own values. The willingness to stare failure in the face and shove your middle finger back at it. The people who don't give a fuck about adversity or failure or embarrassing themselves or shitting the bed a few times. The people who just laugh and then do what they believe in anyway. Because they know it's right. They know it's more important than they are, more important than their own feelings and their own pride and their own ego. They say, "Fuck it," not to everything in life, but rather to everything unimportant in life. They reserve their fucks for what truly matters. Friends. Family. Purpose. Burritos. And an occasional lawsuit or two. And because of that, because they reserve their fucks for only the big things that matter, people give a fuck about them in return.

Because here's another sneaky little truth about life. You can't be an important and life-changing presence for some people without also being a joke and an embarrassment to others. You just can't. Because there's no such thing as a lack of adversity. It doesn't exist. The old saying goes that no matter where you go, there you are. Well, the same is true for adversity and failure. No matter where you go, there's a five-hundred-pound load of shit waiting for you. And that's perfectly fine. The point isn't to get away from the shit. The point is to find the shit you enjoy dealing with.

Subtlety #2: To not give a fuck about adversity, you must first give a fuck about something more important than adversity.

The problem with people who hand out fucks like ice cream at a goddamn summer camp is that they don't have anything more fuck-worthy to dedicate their fucks to.

I once heard an artist say that when a person has no problems, the mind automatically finds a way to invent some. I think what most people—especially educated, pampered middle-class white people—consider “life problems” are really just side effects of not having anything more important to worry about.

Subtlety #3: Whether you realize it or not, you are always choosing what to give a fuck about.

Maturity is what happens when one learns to only give a fuck about what's truly fuckworthy.

We now reserve our ever- dwindling fucks for the most truly fuck-worthy parts of our lives: our families, our best friends, our golf swing. And, to our astonishment, this is enough.

So Mark, What the Fuck Is the Point of This Book Anyway?

The idea of not giving a fuck is a simple way of reorienting our expectations for life and choosing what is important and what is not. Developing this ability leads to something I like to think of as a kind of “practical enlightenment.”

CHAPTER 2

Happiness Is a Problem

Soon, every experience felt empty and valueless. The problem was that no matter what his father gave him, it never seemed enough, never meant anything.

One of those realizations was this: that life itself is a form of suffering. The rich suffer because of their riches. The poor suffer because of their poverty. People without a family suffer because they have no family. People with a family suffer because of their family. People who pursue worldly pleasures suffer because of their worldly pleasures. People who abstain from worldly pleasures suffer because of their abstention.

There is a premise that underlies a lot of our assumptions and beliefs. The premise is that happiness is algorithmic, that it can be worked for and earned and achieved as if it were getting accepted to law school or building a really complicated Lego set. If I achieve X, then I can be happy. If I look like Y, then I can be happy. If I can be with a person like Z, then I can be happy. This premise, though, is the problem. Happiness is not a solvable equation.

Dissatisfaction and unease are inherent parts of human nature and, as we'll see, necessary components to creating consistent happiness.

The Misadventures of Disappointment Panda

We are wired to become dissatisfied with whatever we have and satisfied by only what we do not have. This constant dissatisfaction has kept our species fighting and striving, building and conquering. So no—our own pain and misery aren't a bug of human evolution; they're a feature.

Physical pain is a product of our nervous system, a feedback mechanism to give us a sense of our own physical proportions—where we can and cannot move and what we can and cannot touch.

Pain is what teaches us what to pay attention to when we're young or careless. It helps show us what's good for us versus what's bad for us. It helps us understand and adhere to our own limitations.

If you're avoiding your problems or feel like you don't have any problems, then you're going to make yourself miserable.

To be happy we need something to solve. Happiness is therefore a form of action; it's an activity, not something that is passively bestowed upon you, not something that you magically discover in a top-ten article on the Huffington Post or from any specific guru or teacher. It doesn't magically appear when you finally make enough money to add on that extra room to the house. You don't find it waiting for you in a place, an idea, a job—or even a book, for that matter.

Happiness is a constant work-in-progress, because solving problems is a constant work-in-progress—the solutions to today's problems will lay the foundation for tomorrow's problems, and so on. True happiness occurs only when you find the problems you enjoy having and enjoy solving.

Whatever your problems are, the concept is the same: solve problems; be happy.

Remember, nobody who is actually happy has to stand in front of a mirror and tell himself that he's happy.

Highs also generate addiction. The more you rely on them to feel better about your underlying problems, the more you will seek them out. In this sense, almost anything can become addictive, depending on the motivation behind using it. We all have our chosen methods to numb the pain of our problems, and in moderate doses there is nothing wrong with this. But the longer we avoid and the longer we numb, the more painful it will be when we finally do confront our issues.

Emotions Are Overrated

if you feel crappy it's because your brain is telling you that there's a problem that's unaddressed or unresolved. In other words, negative emotions are a call to action. When you feel them, it's because you're supposed to do something. Positive emotions, on the other hand, are rewards for taking the proper action. When you feel them, life seems simple and there is nothing else to do but enjoy it. Then, like everything else, the positive emotions go away, because more problems inevitably emerge.

Decision-making based on emotional intuition, without the aid of reason to keep it in line, pretty much always sucks. You know who bases their entire lives on their emotions? Three-year-old kids.

And dogs. You know what else three-year-olds and dogs do? Shit on the carpet.

An obsession and overinvestment in emotion fails us for the simple reason that emotions never last. Whatever makes us happy today will no longer make us happy tomorrow, because our biology always needs something more. A fixation on happiness inevitably amounts to a never-ending pursuit of “something else”—a new house, a new relationship, another child, another pay raise. And despite all of our sweat and strain, we end up feeling eerily similar to how we started: inadequate.

Everything comes with an inherent sacrifice—whatever makes us feel good will also inevitably make us feel bad. What we gain is also what we lose. What creates our positive experiences will define our negative experiences.

Choose Your Struggle

A more interesting question, a question that most people never consider, is, “What pain do you want in your life? What are you willing to struggle for?” Because that seems to be a greater determinant of how our lives turn out.

Real, serious, lifelong fulfillment and meaning have to be earned through the choosing and managing of our struggles. Whether you suffer from anxiety or loneliness or obsessive-compulsive disorder or a dickhead boss who ruins half of your waking hours every day, the solution lies in the acceptance and active engagement of that negative experience—not the avoidance of it, not the salvation from it.

What determines your success isn't, "What do you want to enjoy?" The relevant question is, "What pain do you want to sustain?" The path to happiness is a path full of shitheaps and shame.

You have to choose something. You can't have a pain-free life. It can't all be roses and unicorns all the time. Pleasure is the easy question. And pretty much all of us have a similar answer.

I wanted the reward and not the struggle. I wanted the result and not the process. I was in love with not the fight but only the victory.

And life doesn't work that way. Who you are is defined by what you're willing to struggle for. People who enjoy the struggles of a gym are the ones who run triathlons and have chiseled abs

and can bench-press a small house. People who enjoy long workweeks and the politics of the corporate ladder are the ones who fly to the top of it. People who enjoy the stresses and uncertainties of the starving artist lifestyle are ultimately the ones who live it and make it.

This is not about willpower or grit. This is not another admonishment of “no pain, no gain.” This is the most simple and basic component of life: our struggles determine our successes. Our problems birth our happiness, along with slightly better, slightly upgraded problems.

See: it's a never-ending upward spiral. And if you think at any point you're allowed to stop climbing, I'm afraid you're missing the point. Because the joy is in the climb itself.

CHAPTER 3

You Are Not Special

It turns out that adversity and failure are actually useful and even necessary for developing strong-minded and successful adults. It turns out that teaching people to believe they're exceptional and to feel good about themselves no matter what doesn't lead to a population full of Bill Gateses and Martin Luther Kings. It leads to a population full of Jimmys.

The problem with the self-esteem movement is that it measured self-esteem by how positively people felt about themselves. But a true and accurate measurement of one's self-worth is how people feel about the negative aspects of themselves. If a person like Jimmy feels absolutely fucking great 99.9 percent of the time, despite his life falling apart around him, then how can that be a valid metric for a successful and happy life?.

frankly—"Yes, sometimes I'm irresponsible with money," "Yes, sometimes I exaggerate my own successes," "Yes, I rely too much

on others to support me and should be more self-reliant”—and then acts to improve upon them.

Things Fall Apart

The truth is that there's no such thing as a personal problem. If you've got a problem, chances are millions of other people have had it in the past, have it now, and are going to have it in the future. Likely people you know too. That doesn't minimize the problem or mean that it shouldn't hurt. It doesn't mean you aren't legitimately a victim in some circumstances. It just means that you're not special.

The easier and more problem-free our lives become, the more we seem to feel entitled for them to get even better.

The Tyranny of Exceptionalism

Most of us are pretty average at most things we do. Even if you're exceptional at one thing, chances are you're average or below average at most other things. That's just the nature of life. To become truly great at something, you have to dedicate shit-tons of time and energy to it. And because we all have limited time and energy, few of us ever become truly exceptional at more than one thing, if anything at all.

We can then say that it's a statistical improbability that any single person will be an extraordinary performer in all areas of life, or even in many areas of their life. Brilliant businesspeople are often fuckups in their personal lives. Extraordinary athletes are often shallow and as dumb as a lobotomized rock. Many celebrities are probably just as clueless about life as the people who gawk at them and follow their every move.

We're all, for the most part, pretty average people. But it's the extremes that get all of the publicity. We kind of know this already, but we rarely think and/or talk about it, and we certainly never discuss why this could be a problem.

Having the Internet, Google, Facebook, YouTube, and access to five hundred-plus channels of television is amazing. But our attention is limited. There's no way we can process the tidal waves of information flowing past us constantly. Therefore, the only zeroes and ones that break through and catch our attention are the truly exceptional pieces of information—those in the 99.999th percentile.

Technology has solved old economic problems by giving us new psychological problems. The Internet has not just open-

sourced information; it has also open-sourced insecurity, self-doubt, and shame.

B-b-b-but, If I'm Not Going to Be Special or Extraordinary, What's the Point?

The fact that this statement is inherently contradictory—after all, if everyone were extraordinary, then by definition no one would be extraordinary—is missed by most people. And instead of questioning what we actually deserve or don't deserve, we eat the message up and ask for more.

A lot of people are afraid to accept mediocrity because they believe that if they accept it, they'll never achieve anything, never improve, and that their life won't matter.

This sort of thinking is dangerous. Once you accept the premise that a life is worthwhile only if it is truly notable and great, then you basically accept the fact that most of the human population (including yourself) sucks and is worthless. And this mindset can quickly turn dangerous, to both yourself and others.

The rare people who do become truly exceptional at something do so not because they believe they're exceptional. On the contrary, they become amazing because they're obsessed with

improvement. And that obsession with improvement stems from an unerring belief that they are, in fact, not that great at all. It's anti-entitlement. People who become great at something become great because they understand that they're not already great—they are mediocre, they are average—and that they could be so much better.

The ticket to emotional health, like that to physical health, comes from eating your veggies—that is, accepting the bland and mundane truths of life: truths such as “Your actions actually don’t matter that much in the grand scheme of things” and “The vast majority of your life will be boring and not noteworthy, and that’s okay.” This vegetable course will taste bad at first. Very bad. You will avoid accepting it. But once ingested, your body will wake up feeling more potent and more alive. After all, that constant pressure to be something amazing, to be the next big thing, will be lifted off your back. The stress and anxiety of always feeling inadequate and constantly needing to prove yourself will dissipate. And the knowledge and acceptance of your own mundane existence will actually free you to accomplish what you truly wish to accomplish, without judgment or lofty expectations.

CHAPTER 4

The Value of Suffering

The Self-Awareness Onion

Rock Star Problems

If you want to change how you see your problems, you have to change what you value and/or how you measure failure/success.

These stories suggest that some values and metrics are better than others. Some lead to good problems that are easily and regularly solved. Others lead to bad problems that are not easily and regularly solved.

Shitty Values

1. *Pleasure*. Pleasure is great, but it's a horrible value to prioritize your life around. Ask any drug addict how his pursuit of pleasure turned out. Ask an adulterer who shattered her family and lost her children whether pleasure ultimately made her happy. Ask a man who almost ate himself to death how pleasure helped him solve his problems.

2. Material Success. Many people measure their self-worth based on how much money they make or what kind of car they drive or whether their front lawn is greener and prettier than the next-door neighbor's. The other issue with overvaluing material success is the danger of prioritizing it over other values, such as honesty, nonviolence, and compassion. When people measure themselves not by their behavior, but by the status symbols they're able to collect, then not only are they shallow, but they're probably assholes as well.

3. Always Being Right. Our brains are inefficient machines. We consistently make poor assumptions, misjudge probabilities, misremember facts, give in to cognitive biases, and make decisions based on our emotional whims. As humans, we're wrong pretty much constantly, so if your metric for life success is to be right—well, you're going to have a difficult time rationalizing all of the bullshit to yourself.

It's far more helpful to assume that you're ignorant and don't know a whole lot. This keeps you unattached to superstitious or poorly informed beliefs and promotes a constant state of learning and growth.

4. Staying Positive. Then there are those who measure their lives by the ability to be positive about, well, pretty much

everything. Lost your job? Great! That's an opportunity to explore your passions. Husband cheated on you with your sister? Well, at least you're learning what you really mean to the people around you. Child dying of throat cancer? At least you don't have to pay for college anymore!

Defining Good and Bad Values

You'll notice that good, healthy values are achieved internally. Something like creativity or humility can be experienced right now. You simply have to orient your mind in a certain way to experience it. These values are immediate and controllable and engage you with the world as it is rather than how you wish it were.

This, in a nutshell, is what "self-improvement" is really about: prioritizing better values, choosing better things to give a fuck about. Because when you give better fucks, you get better problems. And when you get better problems, you get a better life.

CHAPTER 5

You Are Always Choosing

Imagine that somebody puts a gun to your head and tells you that you have to run 26.2 miles in under five hours, or else he'll kill you and your entire family. That would suck. Now imagine that you bought nice shoes and running gear, trained religiously for months, and completed your first marathon with all of your closest family and friends cheering you on at the finish line. That could potentially be one of the proudest moments of your life. Exact same 26.2 miles. Exact same person running them. Exact same pain coursing through your exact same legs. But when you chose it freely and prepared for it, it was a glorious and important milestone in your life. When it was forced upon you against your will, it was one of the most terrifying and painful experiences of your life.

Often the only difference between a problem being painful or being powerful is a sense that we chose it, and that we are responsible for it. If you're miserable in your current situation, chances are it's because you feel like some part of it is outside your control—that there's a problem you have no ability to solve, a problem that was somehow thrust upon you without your choosing.

When we feel that we're choosing our problems, we feel empowered. When we feel that our problems are being forced upon us against our will, we feel victimized and miserable.

The Choice

We don't always control what happens to us. But we always control how we interpret what happens to us, as well as how we respond.

The point is, we are always choosing, whether we recognize it or not. Always. It comes back to how, in reality, there is no such thing as not giving a single fuck. It's impossible. We must all give a fuck about something. To not give a fuck about anything is still to give a fuck about something. The real question is, What are we choosing to give a fuck about? What values are we choosing to base our actions on? What metrics are we choosing to use to measure our life? And are those good choices—good values and good metrics?

The Responsibility/Fault Fallacy

“With great power comes great responsibility.” It is true. But there’s a better version of this quote, a version that actually is profound, and all you have to do is switch the nouns around: “With great responsibility comes great power.” The more we choose to accept responsibility in our lives, the more power we will exercise over our lives. Accepting responsibility for our problems is thus the first step to solving them.

A lot of people hesitate to take responsibility for their problems because they believe that to be responsible for your problems is to also be at fault for your problems.

But there are also problems that we aren’t at fault for, yet we are still responsible for them. For example, if you woke up one day and there was a newborn baby on your doorstep, it would not be your fault that the baby had been put there, but the baby would now be your responsibility. You would have to choose what to do. And whatever you ended up choosing (keeping it, getting rid of it, ignoring it, feeding it to a pit bull), there would be problems associated with your choice—and you would be responsible for those as well

We are responsible for experiences that aren't our fault all the time. This is part of life.

Nobody else is ever responsible for your situation but you. Many people may be to blame for your unhappiness, but nobody is ever responsible for your unhappiness but you. This is because you always get to choose how you see things, how you react to things, how you value things. You always get to choose the metric by which to measure your experiences.

And if I dated someone with shitty values for that long, what did that say about me and my values? I learned the hard way that if the people in your relationships are selfish and doing hurtful things, it's likely you are too, you just don't realize it.

We all love to take responsibility for success and happiness. Hell, we often fight over who gets to be responsible for success and happiness. But taking responsibility for our problems is far more important, because that's where the real learning comes from. That's where the real-life improvement comes from. To simply blame others is only to hurt yourself.

Responding to Tragedy

A few years ago, I had written about some of the ideas in this chapter on my blog, and a man left a comment. He said that I was shallow and superficial, adding that I had no real understanding of life's problems or human responsibility. He said that his son had recently died in a car accident. He accused me of not knowing what true pain was and said that I was an asshole for suggesting that he himself was responsible for the pain he felt over his son's death. This man had obviously suffered pain much greater than most people ever have to confront in their lives. He didn't choose for his son to die, nor was it his fault that his son died. The responsibility for coping with that loss was given to him even though it was clearly and understandably unwanted. But despite all that, he was still responsible for his own emotions, beliefs, and actions. How he reacted to his son's death was his own choice. Pain of one sort or another is inevitable for all of us, but we get to choose what it means to and for us. Even in claiming that he had no choice in the matter and simply wanted his son back, he was making a choice—one of many ways he could have chosen to use that pain

Genetics and the Hand We're Dealt

The beauty of poker is that while luck is always involved, luck doesn't dictate the long-term results of the game. A person can get

dealt terrible cards and beat someone who was dealt great cards. Sure, the person who gets dealt great cards has a higher likelihood of winning the hand, but ultimately the winner is determined by—yup, you guessed it—the choices each player makes throughout play.

I see life in the same terms. We all get dealt cards. Some of us get better cards than others. And while it's easy to get hung up on our cards, and feel we got screwed over, the real game lies in the choices we make with those cards, the risks we decide to take, and the consequences we choose to live with. People who consistently make the best choices in the situations they're given are the ones who eventually come out ahead in poker, just as in life. And it's not necessarily the people with the best cards.

There are those who suffer psychologically and emotionally from neurological and/or genetic deficiencies. But this changes nothing. Sure, they inherited a bad hand and are not to blame. No more than the short guy wanting to get a date is to blame for being short. Or the person who got robbed is to blame for being robbed. But it's still their responsibility. Whether they choose to seek psychiatric treatment, undergo therapy, or do nothing, the choice is ultimately theirs to make. There are those who suffer through bad childhoods. There are those who are abused and violated and screwed over, physically, emotionally, financially. They are not to

blame for their problems and their hindrances, but they are still responsible—always responsible—to move on despite their problems and to make the best choices they can, given their circumstances.

Victimhood Chic

The current media environment both encourages and perpetuates these reactions because, after all, it's good for business. The writer and media commentator Ryan Holiday refers to this as "outrage porn": rather than report on real stories and real issues, the media find it much easier (and more profitable) to find something mildly offensive, broadcast it to a wide audience, generate outrage, and then broadcast that outrage back across the population in a way that outrages yet another part of the population. This triggers a kind of echo of bullshit pinging back and forth between two imaginary sides, meanwhile distracting everyone from real societal problems. It's no wonder we're more politically polarized than ever before.

There Is No “How”

And to this I say, in my best Yoda impersonation: “Do, or do not; there is no ‘how.’ ”

be met with internal and external resistance along the way. More than anything, you will feel uncertain; you will wonder if what you're doing is wrong. But as we'll see, this is a good thing.

CHAPTER 6

You're Wrong About Everything (But So Am I)

There's a famous Michael Jordan quote about him failing over and over and over again, and that's why he succeeded. Well, I'm always wrong about everything, over and over and over again, and that's why my life improves.

Growth is an endlessly iterative process. When we learn something new, we don't go from "wrong" to "right." Rather, we go from wrong to slightly less wrong. And when we learn something additional, we go from slightly less wrong to slightly less wrong than that, and then to even less wrong than that, and so on. We are always in the process of approaching truth and perfection without actually ever reaching truth or perfection.

When viewed from this perspective, personal growth can actually be quite scientific. Our values are our hypotheses: this behavior is good and important; that other behavior is not. Our actions are the experiments; the resulting emotions and thought patterns are our data.

Certainty is the enemy of growth. Nothing is for certain until it has already happened—and even then, it's still debatable. That's why accepting the inevitable imperfections of our values is necessary for any growth to take place.

Architects of Our Own Beliefs

The result of all this? Most of our beliefs are wrong. Or, to be more exact, all beliefs are wrong—some are just less wrong than others. The human mind is a jumble of inaccuracy. And while this may make you uncomfortable, it's an incredibly important concept to accept, as we'll see.

Be Careful What You Believe

The Dangers of Pure Certainty

It's the backwards law again: the more you try to be certain about something, the more uncertain and insecure you will feel. But the converse is true as well: the more you embrace being uncertain and not knowing, the more comfortable you will feel in knowing what you don't know.

Uncertainty is the root of all progress and all growth. As the old adage goes, the man who believes he knows everything learns nothing. We cannot learn anything without first not knowing something. The more we admit we do not know, the more opportunities we gain to learn.

Manson's Law of Avoidance

The more something threatens your identity, the more you will avoid it.

If I believe I'm a nice guy, I'll avoid situations that could potentially contradict that belief. If I believe I'm an awesome cook, I'll seek out opportunities to prove that to myself over and over again. The belief always takes precedence. Until we change how we view ourselves, what we believe we are and are not, we cannot overcome our avoidance and anxiety. We cannot change.

In this way, "knowing yourself" or "finding yourself" can be dangerous. It can cement you into a strict role and saddle you with unnecessary expectations. It can close you off to inner potential and outer opportunities.

I say don't find yourself. I say never know who you are.
Because that's what keeps you striving and discovering. And it
forces you to remain humble in your judgments and accepting of
the differences in others.

Kill Yourself

There's a kind of self-absorption that comes with fear based on an irrational certainty. When you assume that your plane is the one that's going to crash, or that your project idea is the stupid one everyone is going to laugh at, or that you're the one everyone is going to choose to mock or ignore, you're implicitly telling yourself, "I'm the exception; I'm unlike everybody else; I'm different and special."

This is narcissism, pure and simple. You feel as though your problems deserve to be treated differently, that your problems have some unique math to them that doesn't obey the laws of the physical universe.

My recommendation: don't be special; don't be unique. Redefine your metrics in mundane and broad ways. Choose to measure yourself not as a rising star or an undiscovered genius. Choose to measure yourself not as some horrible victim or dismal failure. Instead, measure yourself by more mundane identities: a student, a partner, a friend, a creator. The narrower and rarer the identity you choose for yourself, the more everything will seem to threaten you.

For that reason, define yourself in the simplest and most ordinary ways possible.

How to Be a Little Less Certain of Yourself

Question #1: What if I'm wrong?

“Am I jealous—and if I am, then why?” “Am I angry?” “Is she right, and I’m just protecting my ego?” Questions like these need to become a mental habit. In many cases, the simple act of asking ourselves such questions generates the humility and compassion needed to resolve a lot of our issues.

Question #2: What would it mean if I were wrong?

Aristotle wrote, “It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.” Being able to look at and evaluate different values without necessarily adopting them is perhaps the central skill required in changing one’s own life in a meaningful way.

Question #3: Would being wrong create a better or a worse problem than my current problem, for both myself and others?

CHAPTER 7

Failure Is the Way Forward

The Failure/Success Paradox

Improvement at anything is based on thousands of tiny failures, and the magnitude of your success is based on how many times you've failed at something. If someone is better than you at something, then it's likely because she has failed at it more than you have. If someone is worse than you, it's likely because he hasn't been through all of the painful learning experiences you have.

If you think about a young child trying to learn to walk, that child will fall down and hurt itself hundreds of times. But at no point does that child ever stop and think, “Oh, I guess walking just isn’t for me. I’m not good at it.”

Avoiding failure is something we learn at some later point in life. I’m sure a lot of it comes from our education system, which judges rigorously based on performance and punishes those who don’t do well. Another large share of it comes from overbearing or critical parents who don’t let their kids screw up on their own often enough, and instead punish them for trying anything new or not preordained. And then we have all the mass media that constantly expose us to stellar success after success, while not showing us the thousands of hours of dull practice and tedium that were required to achieve that success.

At some point, most of us reach a place where we’re afraid to fail, where we instinctively avoid failure and stick only to what is placed in front of us or only what we’re already good at.

This confines us and stifles us. We can be truly successful only at something we’re willing to fail at. If we’re unwilling to fail, then we’re unwilling to succeed.

A lot of this fear of failure comes from having chosen shitty values. For instance, if I measure myself by the standard “Make everyone I meet like me,” I will be anxious, because failure is 100 percent defined by the actions of others, not by my own actions. I

am not in control; thus my self worth is at the mercy of judgments by others.

Whereas if I instead adopt the metric “Improve my social life,” I can live up to my value of “good relations with others” regardless of how other people respond to me. My self-worth is based on my own behaviors and happiness.

Better values, as we saw, are process-oriented. Something like “Express myself honestly to others,” a metric for the value “honesty,” is never completely finished; it’s a problem that must continuously be reengaged. Every new conversation, every new relationship, brings new challenges and opportunities for honest expression. The value is an ongoing, lifelong process that defies completion.

If your metric for the value “success by worldly standards” is “Buy a house and a nice car,” and you spend twenty years working your ass off to achieve it, once it’s achieved the metric has nothing left to give you. Then say hello to your midlife crisis, because the problem that drove you your entire adult life was just taken away from you. There are no other opportunities to keep growing and improving, and yet it’s growth that generates happiness, not a long list of arbitrary achievements.

In this sense, goals, as they are conventionally defined—graduate from college, buy a lake house, lose fifteen pounds—are limited in the amount of happiness they can produce in our lives. They may be

helpful when pursuing quick, short-term benefits, but as guides for the overall trajectory of our life, they suck.

Picasso remained prolific his entire life. He lived into his nineties and continued to produce art up until his final years. Had his metric been “Become famous” or “Make a buttload of money in the art world” or “Paint one thousand pictures,” he would have stagnated at some point along the way. He would have been overcome by anxiety or self-doubt. He likely wouldn’t have improved and innovated his craft in the ways he did decade after decade.

The reason for Picasso’s success is exactly the same reason why, as an old man, he was happy to scribble drawings on a napkin alone in a café. His underlying value was simple and humble. And it was endless. It was the value “honest expression.” And this is what made that napkin so valuable.

Pain Is Part of the Process

Dabrowski argued that fear and anxiety and sadness are not necessarily always undesirable or unhelpful states of mind; rather, they are often representative of the necessary pain of psychological growth. And to deny that pain is to deny our own potential. Just as one must suffer physical pain to build stronger bone and muscle, one must suffer emotional pain to develop greater emotional resilience, a stronger sense of self, increased compassion, and a generally happier life.

Our most radical changes in perspective often happen at the tail end of our worst moments. It's only when we feel intense pain that we're willing to look at our values and question why they seem to be failing us. We need some sort of existential crisis to take an objective look at how we've been deriving meaning in our life, and then consider changing course.

It's easy to look back at my parents' generation and chuckle at their technophobia. But the further I get into adulthood, the more I realize that we all have areas of our lives where we're like my parents with the new VCR: we sit and stare and shake our heads and say, "But how?" When really, it's as simple as just doing it.

Many people, when they feel some form of pain or anger or sadness, drop everything and attend to numbing out whatever they're feeling. Their goal is to get back to "feeling good" again as quickly as possible, even if that means substances or deluding themselves or returning to their shitty values.

Learn to sustain the pain you've chosen. When you choose a new value, you are choosing to introduce a new form of pain into your life. Relish it. Savor it. Welcome it with open arms. Then act despite it.

I won't lie: this is going to feel impossibly hard at first. But you can start simple. You're going to feel as though you don't know what to do. But we've discussed this: you don't know anything. Even when

you think you do, you really don't know what the fuck you're doing.
So really, what is there to lose?

Life is about not knowing and then doing something anyway. All of life is like this. It never changes. Even when you're happy. Even when you're farting fairy dust. Even when you win the lottery and buy a small fleet of Jet Skis, you still won't know what the hell you're doing. Don't ever forget that. And don't ever be afraid of that.

The “Do Something” Principle

Even if you don't know what you're doing, the simple act of working on it will eventually cause the right ideas to show up in your head."

Action isn't just the effect of motivation; it's also the cause of it.

Most of us commit to action only if we feel a certain level of motivation. And we feel motivation only when we feel enough emotional inspiration. We assume that these steps occur in a sort of chain reaction, like this:

Emotional inspiration → Motivation → Desirable action

If you want to accomplish something but don't feel motivated or inspired, then you assume you're just screwed. There's nothing you can do about it. It's not until a major emotional life event occurs that

you can generate enough motivation to actually get off the couch and do something.

The thing about motivation is that it's not only a three-part chain, but an endless loop:

Inspiration → Motivation → Action → Inspiration → Motivation →
Action → Etc.

Your actions create further emotional reactions and inspirations and move on to motivate your future actions. Taking advantage of this knowledge, we can actually reorient our mindset in the following way:

Action → Inspiration → Motivation

The author Tim Ferriss relates a story he once heard about a novelist who had written over seventy novels. Someone asked the novelist how he was able to write so consistently and remain inspired and motivated. He replied, "Two hundred crappy words per day, that's it." The idea was that if he forced himself to write two hundred crappy words, more often than not the act of writing would inspire him; and before he knew it, he'd have thousands of words down on the page.

If we follow the "do something" principle, failure feels unimportant. When the standard of success becomes merely acting—when any result is regarded as progress and important,

when inspiration is seen as a reward rather than a prerequisite—we propel ourselves ahead. We feel free to fail, and that failure moves us forward.

CHAPTER 8

The Importance of Saying No

And I like it that way. Because after all the years of excitement, the biggest lesson I took from my adventuring was this: absolute freedom, by itself, means nothing.

Rejection Makes Your Life Better

As an extension of our positivity/consumer culture, many of us have been “indoctrinated” with the belief that we should try to be as inherently accepting and affirmative as possible. This is a cornerstone of many of the so-called positive thinking books: open yourself up to opportunities, be accepting, say yes to everything and everyone, and so on.

But we need to reject something. Otherwise, we stand for nothing. If nothing is better or more desirable than anything else, then we are empty and our life is meaningless. We are without values and therefore live our life without any purpose.

The avoidance of rejection (both giving and receiving it) is often sold to us as a way to make ourselves feel better. But avoiding rejection gives us short-term pleasure by making us rudderless and directionless in the long term.

To truly appreciate something, you must confine yourself to it. There’s a certain level of joy and meaning that you reach in life only when you’ve spent decades investing in a single relationship, a

single craft, a single career. And you cannot achieve those decades of investment without rejecting the alternatives.

The act of choosing a value for yourself requires rejecting alternative values. If I choose to make my marriage the most important part of my life, that means I'm (probably) choosing not to make

cocaine-fueled hooker orgies an important part of my life. If I'm choosing to judge myself based on my ability to have open and accepting friendships, that means I'm rejecting trashing my friends behind their backs. These are all healthy decisions, yet they require rejection at every turn.

The point is this: we all must give a fuck about something, in order to value something. And to value something, we must reject what is not that something. To value X, we must reject non-X.

That rejection is an inherent and necessary part of maintaining our values, and therefore our identity. We are defined by what we choose to reject. And if we reject nothing (perhaps in fear of being rejected by something ourselves), we essentially have no identity at all.

The desire to avoid rejection at all costs, to avoid confrontation and conflict, the desire to attempt to accept everything equally and to make everything cohere and harmonize,

is a deep and subtle form of entitlement. Entitled people, because they feel as though they deserve to feel great all the time, avoid rejecting anything because doing so might make them or someone else feel bad. And because they refuse to reject anything, they live a valueless, pleasure-driven, and self-absorbed life. All they give a fuck about is sustaining the high a little bit longer, to avoid the inevitable failures of their life, to pretend the suffering away.

Boundaries

The truth is, there are healthy forms of love and unhealthy forms of love. Unhealthy love is based on two people trying to escape their problems through their emotions for each other—in other words, they're using each other as an escape. Healthy love is based on two people acknowledging and addressing their own problems with each other's support.

People can't solve your problems for you. And they shouldn't try, because that won't make you happy. You can't solve other people's problems for them either, because that likewise won't make them happy. The mark of an unhealthy relationship is two people who try to solve each other's problems in order to feel good about themselves. Rather, a healthy relationship is when two

people solve their own problems in order to feel good about each other.

People with strong boundaries are not afraid of a temper tantrum, an argument, or getting hurt. People with weak boundaries are terrified of those things and will constantly mold their own behavior to fit the highs and lows of their relational emotional roller coaster.

People with strong boundaries understand that it's unreasonable to expect two people to accommodate each other 100 percent and fulfill every need the other has. People with strong boundaries understand that they may hurt someone's feelings sometimes, but ultimately they can't determine how other people feel. People with strong boundaries understand that a healthy relationship is not about controlling one another's emotions, but rather about each partner supporting the other in their individual growth and in solving their own problems.

Without conflict, there can be no trust. Conflict exists to show us who is there for us

unconditionally and who is just there for the benefits. No one trusts a yes-man. If Disappointment Panda were here, he'd tell you

that the pain in our relationship is necessary to cement our trust in each other and produce greater intimacy.

For a relationship to be healthy, both people must be willing and able to both say no and hear no. Without that negation, without that occasional rejection, boundaries break down and one person's problems and values come to dominate the other's. Conflict is not only normal, then; it's absolutely necessary for the maintenance of a healthy relationship. If two people who are close are not able to hash out their differences openly and vocally, then the relationship is based on manipulation and misrepresentation, and it will slowly become toxic.

Freedom Through Commitment

CHAPTER 9

... And Then You Die

It was sitting on my mom's couch that summer, staring into the so-called abyss, seeing the endless and incomprehensible nothingness where Josh's friendship used to be, when I came to the startling realization that if there really is no reason to do anything, then there is also no reason to not do anything; that in the face of the inevitability of death, there is no reason to ever give in to one's fear or embarrassment or shame, since it's all just a bunch of nothing anyway; and that by spending the majority of my short life avoiding what was painful and uncomfortable, I had essentially been avoiding being alive at all.

Josh's death marks the clearest before/after point I can identify in my life. Pre-tragedy, I was inhibited, unambitious, forever obsessed and confined by what I imagined the world might be thinking of me. Post-tragedy, I morphed into a new person: responsible, curious, hardworking. I still had my insecurities and my baggage—as we always do—but now I gave a fuck about something more important than my insecurities and my baggage. And that made all the difference. Oddly, it was someone else's death that gave me permission to finally live. And perhaps the worst moment of my life was also the most transformational.

Something Beyond Our Selves

Becker's argument is this: We are all aware on some level that our physical self will eventually die, that this death is inevitable, and that its inevitability—on some unconscious level —scares the shit out of us. Therefore, in order to compensate for our fear of the inevitable loss of our physical self, we try to construct a conceptual self that will live forever. This is why people try so hard to put their names on buildings, on statues, on spines of books. It's why we feel compelled to spend so much time giving ourselves to others, especially to children, in the hopes that our influence—our conceptual self—will last way beyond our physical self. That we will be remembered and revered and idolized long after our physical self ceases to exist.

But, when our immortality projects fail, when the meaning is lost, when the prospect of our conceptual self outliving our physical self no longer seems possible or likely, death terror—that horrible, depressing anxiety—creeps back into our mind. Trauma can cause this, as can shame and social ridicule. As can, as Becker points out, mental illness.

If you haven't figured it out yet, our immortality projects are our values. They are the barometers of meaning and worth in our life. And when our values fail, so do we, psychologically speaking. What Becker is saying, in essence, is that we're all driven by fear to give way too many fucks about something, because giving a fuck about

something is the only thing that distracts us from the reality and inevitability of our own death. And to truly not give a single fuck is to achieve a quasi-spiritual state of embracing the impermanence of one's own existence. In that state, one is far less likely to get caught up in various forms of entitlement.

Becker later came to a startling realization on his deathbed: that people's immortality projects were actually the problem, not the solution; that rather than attempting to implement, often through lethal force, their conceptual self across the world, people should question their conceptual self and become more comfortable with the reality of their own death. Becker called this "the bitter antidote," and struggled with reconciling it himself as he stared down his own demise. While death is bad, it is inevitable. Therefore, we should not avoid this realization, but rather come to terms with it as best we can. Because once we become comfortable with the fact of our own death—the root terror, the underlying anxiety motivating all of life's frivolous ambitions—we can then choose our values more freely, unrestrained by the illogical quest for immortality, and freed from dangerous dogmatic views.

The Sunny Side of Death

Confronting the reality of our own mortality is important because it obliterates all the crappy, fragile, superficial values in life. While most people whittle their days chasing another buck, or a little bit more fame and attention, or a little bit more assurance that

they're right or loved, death confronts all of us with a far more painful and important question: What is your legacy?

How will the world be different and better when you're gone? What mark will you have made? What influence will you have caused? They say that a butterfly flapping its wings in Africa can cause a hurricane in Florida; well, what hurricanes will you leave in your wake?.

Bukowski once wrote, "We're all going to die, all of us. What a circus! That alone should make us love each other, but it doesn't. We are terrorized and flattened by life's trivialities; we are eaten up by nothing."