

Choose Your Struggle

*Excerpt from The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck. A Counterintuitive Approach to Living a Good Life by Mark Manson.*

If I ask you, what do you want out of life?" and you say something like, "I want to be happy and have a great family and a job I like," your response is so common and expected that it doesn't really mean anything.

Everybody enjoys what feels good. Everyone wants to live a carefree, happy, and easy life, to fall in love and have amazing sex and relationships, to look perfect and make money and be popular and well-respected and admired and a total baller to the point that people part like the Red Sea when they walk into the room.

Everybody wants that. It's easy to want that.

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.

For example, most people want to get the corner office and make a boatload of money—but not many people want to suffer through sixty-hour workweeks, long commutes, obnoxious paperwork, and arbitrary corporate hierarchies to escape the confines of an infinite cubicle hell.

Most people want to have great sex and an awesome relationship, but not everyone is willing to go through the tough conversations, the awkward silences, the hurt feelings, and the emotional psychodrama to get there. And so they settle. They settle and wonder, "What if?" for years and years, until the question morphs from "What if?" into "What else?" And when the lawyers go home and the alimony check is in the mail, they say, "What for?" If not for their lowered standards and expectations twenty years prior, then what for?

Because happiness requires struggle. It grows from problems. Joy doesn't just sprout out of the ground like daisies and rainbows. 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.

People want an amazing physique. But you don't end up with one unless you legitimately appreciate the pain and physical stress that come with living inside a gym for hour upon hour, unless you love calculating and calibrating the food you eat, planning your life out in tiny plate-sized portions.

People want to start their own business. But you don't end up a successful entrepreneur unless you find a way to appreciate the risk, the uncertainty, the repeated failures, the insane hours devoted to something that may earn absolutely nothing.

People want a partner, a spouse. But you don't end up attracting someone amazing without appreciating the emotional turbulence that comes with weathering rejections, building the sexual tension that never gets released, and staring blankly at a phone that never rings. It's part of the game of love. You can't win if you don't play.

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.

The more interesting question is the pain. What is the pain that you want to sustain? That's the hard question that matters, the question that will actually get you somewhere.

It's the question that can change a perspective, a life. It's what makes me, me, and you, you. It's what defines us and separates us and ultimately brings us together.

For most of my adolescence and young adulthood, I fantasized about being a musician—a rock star, in particular. Any badass guitar song I heard, I would always close my eyes and envision myself up on stage, playing it to the screams of the crowd, people absolutely losing their minds to my sweet finger-noodling glory. This fantasy could keep me occupied for hours on end. For me, it was never a question of *if* I'd ever be up playing in front of screaming crowds, but *when*. I had it all planned out. I was simply biding my time before I could invest the proper amount of energy and effort into getting out there and making my mark. First I needed to finish school. Then I needed to make some extra money to buy gear. Then I needed to find enough free time to practice. Then I had to network and plan my first project. Then ... and then nothing.

Despite my fantasizing about this for over half my lifetime, the reality never came to fruition. And it took me a long time and a lot of struggle to finally figure out why: *I didn't actually want it.*

I was in love with the result—the image of me on stage, people cheering, me rocking out, pouring my heart into what I was playing—but I wasn't in love with the process. And because of that, I failed at it. Repeatedly. Hell, I didn't even try hard enough to fail at it. I hardly tried at all. The daily drudgery of practicing, the logistics of finding a group and rehearsing, the pain of finding gigs and actually getting people to show up and give a shit, the broken strings, the blown tube amp, hauling forty pounds of gear to and from rehearsals with no car. It's a mountain of a dream and a mile-high climb to the top. And what it took me a long time to discover is that I didn't like to climb much. I just liked to imagine the summit.

The common cultural narratives would tell me that I somehow failed myself, that I'm a quitter or a loser, that I just didn't "have it," that I gave up on my dream and that maybe I let myself succumb to the pressures of society.

But the truth is far less interesting than any of these explanations. The truth is, I thought I wanted something, but it turns out I didn't. End of story.

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 benchpress 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.