

EGO IS THE ENEMY BY RYAN HOLIDAY | BOOK SUMMARY

Ego is the Enemy is a fantastic read about how on the road to success, we mustn't let our ego's become a controlling factor in the way we act and make decisions. The book is a great continuation on from Ryan's last book, The Obstacle is the Way.

Maybe you're young and brimming with ambition. Maybe you're young and you're struggling. Maybe you've made that first couple million, signed your first deal, been selected to some elite group, or maybe you're already accomplished enough to last a lifetime.

Wherever you are, whatever you're doing, your worst enemy already lives inside you: your ego.

Most of us aren't "egomaniacs," but ego is there at the root of almost every conceivable problem and obstacle, from why we can't win to why we need to win all the time and at the expense of others. From why we don't have what we want to why having what we want doesn't seem to make us feel any better.

PART I. ASPIRE

Here, we are setting out to do something. We have a goal, a calling, a new beginning. Every great journey begins here—yet far too many of us never reach our intended destination. Ego more often than not is the culprit. We build ourselves up with fantastical stories, we pretend we have it all figured out, we let our star burn bright and hot only to fizzle out, and we have no idea why. These are symptoms of ego, for which humility and reality are the cure.

TALK, TALK, TALK

Doing great work is a struggle. It's draining, it's demoralizing, it's frightening—not always, but it can feel that way when we're deep in the middle of it. We talk to fill the void and the uncertainty.

The only relationship between work and chatter is that one kills the other.

Let the others slap each other on the back while you're back in the lab or the gym or pounding the pavement. Plug that hole—that one, right in the middle of your face—that can drain you of your vital life force. Watch what happens. Watch how much better you get.

TO BE OR TO DO?

If your purpose is something larger than you—to accomplish something, to prove something to yourself—then suddenly everything becomes both easier and more difficult. Easier in the sense that you know now what it is you need to do and what is important to you. The other “choices” wash away, as they aren't really choices at all. They're distractions. It's about the doing, not the recognition. Easier in the sense that you don't need to compromise. Harder because each opportunity—no matter how gratifying or rewarding—must be evaluated along strict guidelines: Does this help me do what I have set out to do? Does this allow me to do what I need to do? Am I being selfish or selfless?

Think about this the next time you face that choice: Do I need this? Or is it really about ego? Are you ready to make the right decision? Or do the prizes still glitter off in the distance?

To be or to do—life is a constant roll call.

BECOME A STUDENT

As we sit down to proof our work, as we make our first elevator pitch, prepare to open our first shop, as we stare out into the dress rehearsal audience, ego is the enemy—giving us wicked feedback, disconnected from reality. It's defensive, precisely when we cannot afford to be defensive. It blocks us from improving by telling us that we don't need to improve. Then we wonder why we don't get the results we want, why others are better and why their success is more lasting.

Today, books are cheaper than ever. Courses are free. Access to teachers is no longer a barrier—technology has done away with that. There is no excuse for not getting your education, and because the information we have before us is so vast, there is no excuse for ever ending that process either.

DON'T BE PASSIONATE

Passion—it's all about passion. Find your passion. Live passionately. Inspire the world with your passion.

What humans require in our ascent is purpose and realism. Purpose, you could say, is like passion with boundaries. Realism is detachment and perspective.

More than purpose, we also need realism. Where do we start? What do we do first? What do we do right now? How are we sure that what we're doing is moving us forward? What are we benchmarking ourselves against?

The critical work that you want to do will require your deliberation and consideration. Not passion.

FOLLOW THE CANVAS STRATEGY

When someone gets his first job or joins a new organization, he's often given this advice: Make other people look good and you will do well. Keep your head down, they say, and serve your boss.

It's not about kissing ass. It's not about making someone look good. It's about providing the support so that others can be good. The better wording for the advice is this: Find canvases for other people to paint on. Clear the path for the people above you and you will eventually create a path for yourself.

RESTRAIN YOURSELF

It doesn't matter how talented you are, how great your connections are, how much money you have. When you want to do something—something big and important and meaningful—you will be subjected to treatment ranging from indifference to outright sabotage. Count on it.

In this scenario, ego is the absolute opposite of what is needed. Who can afford to be jerked around by impulses, or believe that you're god's gift to humanity, or too important to put up with anything you don't like?

Those who have subdued their ego understand that it doesn't degrade you when others treat you poorly; it degrades them.

Instead, you must do nothing. Take it. Eat it until you're sick. Endure it. Quietly brush it off and work harder. Play the game. Ignore the noise; for the love of God, do not let it distract you. Restraint is a difficult skill but a critical one. You will often be tempted, you will probably even be overcome. No one is perfect with it, but try we must.

GET OUT OF YOUR OWN HEAD

All of us are susceptible to obsessions of the mind—whether we run a technology startup or are working our way up the ranks of the corporate hierarchy or have fallen madly in love.

Living clearly and presently takes courage. Don't live in the haze of the abstract, live with the tangible and real, even if—especially if—it's uncomfortable. Be part of what's going on around you. Feast on it, adjust for it.

There's no one to perform for. There is just work to be done and lessons to be learned, in all that is around us.

THE DANGER OF EARLY PRIDE

Pride takes a minor accomplishment and makes it feel like a major one. It smiles at our cleverness and genius, as though what we've exhibited was merely a hint of what ought to come. From the start, it drives a wedge between the possessor and reality, subtly and not so subtly changing her perceptions of what something is and what it isn't. It is these strong opinions, only loosely secured by fact or accomplishment, that send us careering toward delusion or worse.

We are still striving, and it is the strivers who should be our peers—not the proud and the accomplished. Without this understanding, pride takes our self-conception and puts it at odds with the reality of our station, which is that we still have so far to go, that there is still so much to be done.

WORK, WORK, WORK

Every time you sit down to work, remind yourself: I am delaying gratification by doing this. I am earning what my ambition burns for. I am making an investment in myself instead of in my ego.

Work is finding yourself alone at the track when the weather kept everyone else indoors. Work is pushing through the pain and crappy first drafts and prototypes. It is ignoring whatever plaudits others are getting, and more importantly, ignoring whatever plaudits you may be getting. Because there is work to be done. Work doesn't want to be good. It is made so, despite the headwind.

There is an old expression: You know a workman by the chips they leave. It's true. To judge your progress properly, just take a look at the floor.

FOR EVERYTHING THAT COMES NEXT, EGO IS THE ENEMY...

What is truly ambitious is to face life and proceed with quiet confidence in spite of the distractions. Let others grasp at crutches. It will be a lonely fight to be real, to say "I'm not going to take the edge off." To say, "I am going to be myself, the best version of that self. I am in this for the long game, no matter how brutal it might be." To do, not be.

You have a chance to do this yourself. To play a different game, to be utterly audacious in your aims. Because what comes next is going to test you in ways that you cannot begin to understand. For ego is a wicked sister of success.

PART II. SUCCESS

Here we are at the top of a mountain we worked hard to climb—or at least the summit is in sight. Now we face new temptations and problems. We breathe thinner air in an unforgiving environment. Why is success so ephemeral? Ego shortens it. Whether a collapse is dramatic or a slow erosion, it's always possible and often unnecessary. We stop learning, we stop listening, and we lose our grasp on what matters. We become victims of ourselves and the competition. Sobriety, open-mindedness, organization, and purpose—these are the great stabilizers. They balance out the ego and pride that comes with achievement and recognition.

ALWAYS STAY A STUDENT

Each of us faces a threat as we pursue our craft. Like sirens on the rocks, ego sings a soothing, validating song—which can lead to a wreck. The second we let the ego tell us we have graduated, learning grinds to a halt. That's why Frank Shamrock said, "Always stay a student." As in, it never ends.

The solution is as straightforward as it is initially uncomfortable: Pick up a book on a topic you know next to nothing about. Put yourself in rooms where you're the least knowledgeable person. That uncomfortable feeling, that defensiveness that you feel when your most deeply held assumptions are challenged—what about subjecting yourself to it deliberately? Change your mind. Change your surroundings.

An amateur is defensive. The professional finds learning (and even, occasionally, being shown up) to be enjoyable; they like being challenged and humbled, and engage in education as an ongoing and endless process.

DON'T TELL YOURSELF A STORY

Crafting stories out of past events is a very human impulse. It's also dangerous and untrue. Writing our own narrative leads to arrogance. It turns our life into a story—and turns us into caricatures—while we still have to live it.

Instead of pretending that we are living some great story, we must remain focused on the execution—and on executing with excellence. We must shun the false crown and continue working on what got us here.

WHAT'S IMPORTANT TO YOU?

It's time to sit down and think about what's truly important to you and then take steps to forsake the rest. Without this, success will not be pleasurable, or nearly as complete as it could be. Or worse, it won't last.

This is especially true with money. If you don't know how much you need, the default easily becomes: more.

So why do you do what you do? That's the question you need to answer. Stare at it until you can. Only then will you understand what matters and what doesn't. Only then can you say no, can you opt out of stupid races that don't matter, or even exist.

ENTITLEMENT, CONTROL, AND PARANOIA

A smart man or woman must regularly remind themselves of the limits of their power and reach.

Entitlement assumes: This is mine. I've earned it. At the same time, entitlement nickels and dimes other people because it can't conceive of valuing another person's time as highly as its own.

Control says, It all must be done my way—even little things, even inconsequential things. It can become paralyzing perfectionism, or a million pointless battles fought merely for the sake of exerting its say.

Paranoia thinks, I can't trust anyone. I'm in this totally by myself and for myself. It says, I'm surrounded by fools. It says, focusing on my work, my obligations, myself is not enough. I also have to be orchestrating various machinations behind the scenes—to get them before they get me; to get them back for the slights I perceive.

The sad feedback loop is that the relentless "looking out for number one" can encourage other people to undermine and fight us. They see that behavior for what it really is: a mask for weakness, insecurity, and instability. In its frenzy to protect itself, paranoia creates the persecution it seeks to avoid, making the owner a prisoner of its own delusions and chaos.

MANAGING YOURSELF

As you become successful in your own field, your responsibilities may begin to change. Days become less and less about doing and more and more about making decisions. Such is the nature of leadership.

What matters is that you learn how to manage yourself and others, before your industry eats you alive. Micromanagers are egotists who can't manage others and they quickly get overloaded. So do the charismatic visionaries who lose interest when it's time to execute. Worse yet are those who surround themselves with yes-men or sycophants who clean up their messes and create a bubble in which they can't even see how disconnected from reality they are.

Responsibility requires a readjustment and then increased clarity and purpose. First, setting the top-level goals and priorities of the organization and your life. Then enforcing and observing them. To produce results and only results.

BEWARE THE DISEASE OF ME

After a team starts to win and media attention begins, the simple bonds that joined the individuals together begin to fray. Players calculate their own importance. Chests swell. Frustrations emerge. Egos appear. The Innocent Climb, Pat Riley says, is almost always followed by the "Disease of Me." It can "strike any winning team in any year and at any moment," and does with alarming regularity.

For us, it's beginning to think that we're better, that we're special, that our problems and experiences are so incredibly different from everyone else's that no one could possibly understand. It's an attitude that has sunk far better people, teams, and causes than ours.

It doesn't make you a bad person to want to be remembered. To want to make it to the top. To provide for yourself and your family. After all, that's all part of the allure.

There is a balance. Soccer coach Tony Adams expresses it well. Play for the name on the front of the jersey, he says, and they'll remember the name on the back.

MEDITATE ON THE IMMENSITY

As our power or talents grow, we like to think that makes us special—that we live in blessed, unprecedented times.

"It's hard to be humble when you're as great as I am," Muhammad Ali once said. Yeah, okay. That's why great people have to work even harder to fight against this headwind. It's hard to be self-absorbed and convinced of your own greatness inside the solitude and quiet of a sensory deprivation tank. It's hard to be anything but humble walking alone along a beach late at night with an endless black ocean crashing loudly against the ground next to you.

Feel unprotected against the elements or forces or surroundings. Remind yourself how pointless it is to rage and fight and try to one-up those around you. Go and put yourself in touch with the infinite, and end your conscious separation from the world. Reconcile yourself a bit better with the realities of life. Realize how much came before you, and how only wisps of it remain.

Let the feeling carry you as long as you can. Then when you start to feel better or bigger than, go and do it again.

MAINTAIN YOUR SOBRIETY

Sobriety is the counterweight that must balance out success. Especially if things keep getting better and better.

As hard as it might be to believe from what we see in the media, there actually are some successful people with modest apartments. Like Merkel, they have normal private lives with their spouses (her husband skipped her first inauguration). They lack artifice, they wear normal clothes. Most successful people are people you've never heard of. They want it that way.

It keeps them sober. It helps them do their jobs.

FOR WHAT OFTEN COMES NEXT, EGO IS THE ENEMY...

Instead of letting power make us delusional and instead of taking what we have for granted, we'd be better to spend our time preparing for the shifts of fate that inevitably occur in life. That is, adversity, difficulty, failure.

Who knows—maybe a downturn is exactly what's coming next. Worse, maybe you caused it. Just because you did something once, doesn't mean you'll be able to do it successfully forever.

Reversals and regressions are as much a part of the cycle of life as anything else.

But we can manage that too.

PART III. FAILURE

Here we are experiencing the trials endemic to any journey. Perhaps we've failed, perhaps our goal turned out to be harder to achieve than anticipated. No one is permanently successful, and not everyone finds success on the first attempt. We all deal with setbacks along the way. Ego not only leaves us unprepared for these

circumstances, it often contributed to their occurrence in the first place. The way through, the way to rise again, requires a reorientation and increased self-awareness. We don't need pity—our own or anyone else's—we need purpose, poise, and patience.

ALIVE TIME OR DEAD TIME?

According to Greene, there are two types of time in our lives: dead time, when people are passive and waiting, and alive time, when people are learning and acting and utilizing every second. Every moment of failure, every moment or situation that we did not deliberately choose or control, presents this choice: Alive time. Dead time.

In life, we all get stuck with dead time. Its occurrence isn't in our control. Its use, on the other hand, is.

As Booker T. Washington most famously put it, "Cast down your bucket where you are." Make use of what's around you. Don't let stubbornness make a bad situation worse.

THE EFFORT IS ENOUGH

Do your work. Do it well. Then "let go and let God." That's all there needs to be.

Recognition and rewards—those are just extra. Rejection, that's on them, not on us.

This is why we can't let externals determine whether something was worth it or not. It's on us.

The world is, after all, indifferent to what we humans "want." If we persist in wanting, in needing, we are simply setting ourselves up for resentment or worse.

Doing the work is enough.

FIGHT CLUB MOMENTS

Face the symptoms. Cure the disease. Ego makes it so hard—it's easier to delay, to double down, to deliberately avoid seeing the changes we need to make in our lives.

But change begins by hearing the criticism and the words of the people around you. Even if those words are mean spirited, angry, or hurtful. It means weighing them, discarding the ones that don't matter, and reflecting on the ones you do.

In Fight Club, the character has to firebomb his own apartment to finally break through. Our expectations and exaggerations and lack of restraint made such moments inevitable, ensuring that it would be painful. Now it's here, what will you make of it? You can change, or you can deny.

DRAW THE LINE

Ego kills what we love. Sometimes, it comes close to killing us too.

It is interesting that Alexander Hamilton, who of all the Founding Fathers met the most tragic and unnecessary end, would have wise words on this topic. But indeed he does. "Act with fortitude and honor," he wrote to a distraught friend in serious financial and legal trouble of the man's own making. "If you cannot reasonably hope for a favorable extrication, do not plunge deeper. Have the courage to make a full stop."

A full stop. It's not that these folks should have quit everything. It's that a fighter who can't tap out or a boxer who can't recognize when it's time to retire gets hurt. Seriously so. You have to be able to see the bigger picture.

MAINTAIN YOUR OWN SCORECARD

It's a harder road at first, but one that ultimately makes us less selfish and self-absorbed. A person who judges himself based on his own standards doesn't crave the spotlight the same way as someone who lets applause dictate success. A person who can think long term doesn't pity herself during short-term setbacks. A person who values the team can share credit and subsume his own interests in a way that most others can't.

Reflecting on what went well or how amazing we are doesn't get us anywhere, except maybe to where we are right now. But we want to go further, we want more, we want to continue to improve.

Ego blocks that, so we subsume it and smash it with continually higher standards. Not that we are endlessly pursuing more, as if we're racked with greed, but instead, we're inching our way toward real improvement, with discipline rather than disposition.

ALWAYS LOVE

In failure or adversity, it's so easy to hate. Hate defers blame. It makes someone else responsible. It's a distraction too; we don't do much else when we're busy getting revenge or investigating the wrongs that have supposedly been done to us.

Does this get us any closer to where we want to be? No. It just keeps us where we are—or worse, arrests our development entirely. If we are already successful, as Hearst was, it tarnishes our legacy and turns sour what should be our golden years.

Meanwhile, love is right there. Egoless, open, positive, vulnerable, peaceful, and productive.

FOR EVERYTHING THAT COMES NEXT, EGO IS THE ENEMY...

Whatever is next for us, we can be sure of one thing we'll want to avoid. Ego. It makes all the steps hard, but failure is the one it will make permanent. Unless we learn, right here and right now, from our mistakes. Unless we use this moment as an opportunity to understand ourselves and our own mind better, ego will seek out failure like true north.

All great men and women went through difficulties to get to where they are, all of them made mistakes. They found within those experiences some benefit—even if it was simply the realization that they were not infallible and that things would not always go their way. They found that self-awareness was the way out and through—if they hadn't, they wouldn't have gotten better and they wouldn't have been able to rise again.

Which is why we have their mantra to guide us, so that we can survive and thrive in every phase of our journey. It is simple (though, as always, never easy).

Not to aspire or seek out of ego.

To have success without ego.

To push through failure with strength, not ego.