

THE INTERNATIONAL
BESTSELLING SERIES

THE RULES OF THINKING

RICHARD TEMPLAR

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OF
THINKING
RICHARD TEMPLAR



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Introduction

‘I think, therefore I am’, as the French philosopher Descartes famously wrote. By which he meant that we know we exist precisely because we have the ability to question whether we exist. All very philosophical, however it underlines the fact that thinking is at the very root of who we are.

So it follows that the more clearly, effectively and coherently we think, the better we are able to live. Happiness and success can flow from good thinking in a way we struggle to achieve if our thought processes are muddled, messy, incoherent. Our thoughts influence our feelings, so it is important to get this foundation right. Once you can think well, you have the basis on which to build the rest of your life.

This is not a book of tips and ...

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THINK FOR YOURSELF

If you want to be a top-notch thinker, you have to do the work yourself. That is to say, you have to do the thinking. You can't let anyone else do it for you. That might sound obvious, but you'd be surprised how often we take the convenient shortcut of adopting other people's thinking.

All right, I'll let you off working out the theory of relativity for yourself. There are specialist areas where you don't have the skills to do the relevant thinking, and you're allowed to let scientists, mathematicians, top-flight economists and statisticians and engineers do your thinking for you.² Even so, don't take their word for anything until you've established in your own mind that they know what they're talking about and have no ...

RULE 1

Avoid echo chambers

When you're a child, you don't know any better than to think as your parents tell you to. If they say it's bad to put your elbows on the table or good to change your underwear every day, you believe them. It's part of being a child to absorb your parents' values and systems. As you get older, you start to find that your teachers have a slightly different set of rules, and your school friends may have values or opinions that are different again. So you start to modify your earlier views and incorporate others that you acquire from fellow students or friends who might think very differently from your parents. And when you're young you probably think about these quite carefully.

Of course, it's easy and comfortable to hang out with other people who broadly think the same way as you. As you form your values, you look for other people who are like-minded. It means you have plenty in common and you don't have endless arguments. When someone else says what you were already thinking, it makes you feel validated, makes you feel you must be right, reinforces your view, makes you feel like you belong. It's a good feeling and you can all spend time together validating each other's beliefs and making yourselves feel right and valued. You can find a partner who thinks the same as you, can have friends like you, can work in a place where there are other people who think the way you do.

And this is what we call an echo chamber. Yes, it's comfortable and affirming, but it makes it very difficult to be your own person. Everyone

in your world votes the same way, supports the same causes, has the same beliefs, prejudices and values, and all belong to social media and online groups that reinforce them.

And it gets harder and harder to think in any other way. For one thing, you've virtually cut yourself off from being exposed to different ways of looking at the world, except perhaps so you and your friends can all agree on how wrong they are, in a self-congratulatory way. And that means you don't want to change your views or, presumably, your friends will all agree how wrong *you* are, and that's not going to feel very nice.

And yet, and yet ... the world is full of people, lots of them lovely people, who don't agree with you about everything. You may rarely encounter them, but can they really all be wrong? Some of them are just as clever as you and have arrived at their beliefs in as valid a way as you have. Maybe more valid – because you've stopped thinking for yourself and moved in to a groupthink where your views are the collective ones, where you don't really ever have to challenge yourself any more. You're no longer an independent person. You've unwittingly become a bit of a sheep.

If you want to be a Rules thinker, you need to change this, shake things up, force yourself to broaden your views, listen to other ideas with a genuine open mind. About the best way to do this is to cultivate friends based on who they are, not what they believe. Aim to have friends of all ages, from other cultures, varied backgrounds, different classes from your own. Between them, they'll make you see the world in a more nuanced way and, if your beliefs can't match up with all of them – because they're not all the same – you'll have to think for yourself.

**CULTIVATE FRIENDS BASED ON WHO THEY
ARE, NOT WHAT THEY BELIEVE**

RULE 2

Don't be scared

It can be frightening to start thinking for yourself. Who knows where it could lead? You could end up with any number of principles and beliefs that don't sit comfortably with the people you spend your time with. You could find yourself out on a limb. You could have to face up to realising you've been wrong about things, or at least not been right about them. One of the barriers to being an independent thinker is the fear of being different.

Look, that's understandable, of course it is. But you can take things gently. There are no thought police out there – not yet anyway. No one else has to know what you're thinking until you're ready to let on. You don't have to sit your whole family down and say, 'I need you all to ...

RULE 3

Consider the motive

Some people are more persuasive than others. Whether they're trying to sell you a car, persuade you to adopt their plan at work, convince you to come to their party, or point out why plastic bags are bad for the environment. You need to avoid being sucked into following their line of thought blindly without engaging your own brain.

Now, that car might not be what you need at all. On the other hand, plastic bags really are bad for the environment. So if someone wants you to adopt their belief or follow their advice, you can't deduce from that alone whether it's a good idea. You have to know why they're seeking to persuade you.

It's always a good idea to understand what this person wants you to believe and why. Sometimes they want you to do something as a result of their persuasive efforts – buy something, join something, agree to something, attend an event, sign a petition. Not always though. Sometimes they're simply passing on an opinion and would like your agreement – maybe they want to persuade you it's a good thing the council are building a new car park. It's a nice bonding feeling when someone agrees with you, but beyond that they may not be after much at all.

Once you've established clearly in your mind what they want, it's much easier to decide whether you want it too. Your friend is telling you how great the party will be because they want you to go. They're only guessing

it will be great. Do you agree? Do you want to be there? If so, do you want to be there because it will be great or because you want to support your friend? It's much easier to inure yourself to your friend's persuasive methods once you can see them for what they are.

Of course, that might be the perfect car for you, whatever the salesperson's motive for telling you so. You can't dismiss it out of hand just because they have a vested interest in you buying it (if that ruled it out, no one would ever buy a car from any dealer). Identifying the motive isn't a reason to reject someone else's thinking. The point of doing it is to give yourself a sensible dose of wariness, of where you should double-check their assertions and make sure their arguments are the ones that matter.

A car salesperson might get you really excited with their infectious enthusiasm about how fast this car is or how comfortable it is in the back seats, but don't get swept along mindlessly. Are those things actually important to you? Your colleague might persuade you that this exhibition is just the way to reach all those small engineering businesses out there. But how big a proportion of your customers are they ever going to be? So why does your colleague care so much about reaching them? Only by recognising the motive can you know how much importance to attach to the facts you're being fed.

**IDENTIFYING THE MOTIVE ISN'T A REASON
TO REJECT SOMEONE ELSE'S THINKING**

RULE 4

Beware self-interest

Never mind other people's motives for a moment – what about your own? What do you stand to gain from thinking as you do? It's easy to think in a way that feeds your own self-interest without ever being aware that you're doing it. It's possible that your way of thinking will lead you to a decision that will make you better off financially, or give you higher status, or enable you to live in a better area. This is something that I notice often affects politicians, who are very good at thinking in a way that is likely to get them re-elected. Most of them find it quite hard to reach conclusions that won't sit comfortably with the voters.

We've all met vegetarians who stopped eating meat because of their ethical views, ...

RULE 5

Keep hold of your heartstrings

If you're serious about resisting other people's manipulations and thinking for yourself, it helps to be alert to how they're trying to influence you. If you can spot it, it's much easier to resist. So next time someone seeks to persuade, convince, cajole you round to their perspective, think about the strategies they're using. Generally speaking, they'll use emotion rather than logic. Your job, as a clear thinker, is to resist.

From the other person's perspective, empathy is a good starting point. If someone can convince you that you both *feel* the same way, it seems like a much shorter step to *thinking* the same way. So a natural persuader will try to convince you that you're both coming from the same point. They'll emphasise similarities in your situation or values. They'll tell you they know what it's like to have kids, or work in an office, or struggle to pay the rent, or enjoy buying clothes, or own a cat. The shared experience puts you both in the same place, so now they can metaphorically take you by the hand and lead you to the conclusion they've chosen. Listen to them, but don't let them lead you blindly. Question the route and the destination to be sure it's really where you want to go.

If they can get you emotionally engaged, they will. For one thing, emotion is a powerful force, so they'll want to get you angry about the injustice they're campaigning against, or excited about the clothes they want to sell you, or anxious at the idea of overstretching your budget. And for another thing, it's much harder for you to think rationally once you start to become

emotional. So the higher they can crank up your emotions, the more you shut down your rational response to what they're saying. Aim to resist the emotional response so your thinking stays rational and measured. You'll be a much better judge of how valid their point is.

Another favourite ploy is to use weighted words. This can be more insidious and subtle, and tends to work at an unconscious level. We all do it – yes, you too – and it's wise to recognise it in yourself. There's more than one way to describe most things, and the adjectives you use can be powerful. Suppose you read two newspaper descriptions of the same politician. If the papers are from opposite ends of the political spectrum, they're inclined to use different words to depict them. One might describe them as brave while the other says they're foolhardy – both descriptions of the same thing, but they give a very different impression. Is the politician firm or hardline? Are they socially aware or woolly? These word choices can build up to create a persuasive picture that suits the person (or newspaper) in question. I'm always interested in how the media decide who to describe as terrorists, who are rebels, who are freedom fighters, who are resistance forces. Often the only difference between these terms is the way the person using them wants you to respond. So notice the word choices the other person is making and substitute your own, neutral words in your head so you can think more clearly.

Bear in mind that, consciously or unconsciously, you employ these same techniques yourself when you want to persuade someone else. So not everyone who tries to convert you to their way of thinking is knowingly manipulating or tricking you. Whether you agree with them or not, they're entitled to hold their view and they're entitled to express it. And you are entitled to resist it, or not, once you've thought it through rationally for yourself.

**IF YOU CAN SPOT IT, IT'S MUCH EASIER TO
RESIST**

RULE 6

Don't be gullible

If you believe everything I've told you so far, just because it's written down in black and white, then think again. Yes, *I* believe it all, but you should be thinking it through for yourself. How do you know you can trust me? You've never met me, you don't know who I am, you don't even know what I look like. Just because I've had a book published doesn't mean I know everything.

Look, you can't go through life never trusting anyone, but neither is it helpful to be too trusting. And the best insurance against going too far either way is to think for yourself. So thank you for buying (or borrowing) my book and please feel free to read it. I hope you'll find, when you think it through, that it makes enough sense that you ...

RESILIENT THINKING

One of the absolute foundations of healthy thinking is resilience. Some of us start out naturally more resilient than others, but the good news is we all have some resilience to begin with. And the even better news is you can teach yourself to be more resilient by training your mind to think in the right way.

Let's just establish exactly what resilience is. The more resilient you are, the faster and better you will bounce back from anything bad, negative, traumatising. Most of us can come to terms with missing the bus, but not everyone recovers well from bereavement or abuse or redundancy or serious illness. Of course they don't, but it's still the case that some people cope better than others. So what are they doing that means they're able to come to terms with life's tragedies?

Resilient people have higher levels of belief in themselves and their power to control their own lives. This gives them confidence that they will overcome their difficulties in time.

In my experience, the people who cope best with disaster are usually the same ones who cope best with missing the

bus. That's really useful because it means you can practise being resilient every time you miss the bus, or burn the food, or have a bad cold, or can't afford a new item of clothing you fancy. Once you believe you can cope with the little things, it gets easier to believe in your ability to cope with the bigger things when they come along. So let's look at the kinds of thinking that will make you a more resilient person.

RULE 7

Know who you are

A friend of mine was diagnosed with a very serious illness. Of course people kept asking her how she was, what was happening with the treatment, what she was and wasn't able to do and how could they help. She found this very frustrating and in the end she sent round an email to everyone saying that she really appreciated their concern and their offers of help, but she didn't want to talk about it thank you. She explained to me that it wasn't that she actually minded talking about the illness per se, it was that she felt she was starting to be defined by it.

Now this particular friend of mine is amazingly resilient and had an instinctive recognition that in order to cope with her diagnosis she had to separate it from ...

RULE 8

Seek out support

The resilient among us are much more likely to be surrounded by a good support network. This may or may not include professional help but will certainly involve friends or family who genuinely want to help you overcome your problems. That's not enough in itself though – they have to be reasonably good at it. Some people, bless 'em, are always saying the wrong thing even when they're trying to help. However much of a friend these people are when things are going well, make life easier for yourself by quietly steering clear of them when times are tough. Think about which friends you want around you and which you don't.

And think about the kind of help you need. Support from friends isn't something you just have to suck up. If it isn't helping, it's not actually support in any useful sense and you don't have to accept it. You've got enough on your plate without having to absorb negative input just because it's well meant. You don't have to tell people to their face, 'I don't want your so-called help.' You can just politely turn down invitations to meet up until things are better or, even – and here's a ploy I've used many times – not tell them about the scenario in the first place. Tricky with some problems but easy with others. If you know they'll make you feel worse if you don't get a particular job, think ahead and don't even tell them you've applied for it.

So who are you going to give a bit of a wider berth to when things are going badly? Well, you'd be best off avoiding anyone who is negative,

who revels in doom and gloom, who keeps banging on about all the things that could make your problems even worse (although they probably won't). You want positive people around you.

Although not so positive that they keep telling you your feelings are wrong. You know the type: 'It's fine! Stop worrying!' You want empathy, not denial. If anyone behaves like this, refuse to feel bad. Listen, anyone whose response makes you feel worse is not a good support. Make a mental note for next time. If they don't make you feel better, even if only a little bit, that's them, not you.

Avoid people who try to solve your problems for you too, either by supplying a solution, making a decision on your behalf, or actually enacting it themselves. This is not helpful and will not improve your resilience. It gives you the subconscious message that you can't think or act for yourself. That's not true and it's exactly the belief you are trying to avoid. You value input, but you can make your own decisions and run your own life thank you.

Once you think about what you need and who can provide it, it's much easier to surround yourself with genuinely supportive people when you're in trouble. And tell them what you need – do you want someone to help with the kids and take the pressure off? Someone simply to listen? Someone who can help you with daunting paperwork? Someone to cook you some meals to stick in the freezer? People who genuinely want to help – and you know this from your own experience as a supportive friend – want to know the best way to do just that.

**YOU CAN MAKE YOUR OWN DECISIONS AND
RUN YOUR OWN LIFE THANK YOU**

RULE 9

Take control

When it comes to interpreting what happens in your life, people fall broadly into two camps. Those who believe that it's all down to fate and you can't change it, and those who believe that you have free will and control your own life. Science has not yet agreed which is the case, but it has established that people who believe they control their own lives tend to be happier.

Believing you control your life is crucial to resilience as well. Apart from anything else it motivates you to find ways of coping or at least new ways to think about your problems even where there's little you can do on the face of it. You can't bring back someone who has died, but if you believe your thinking and your decisions will influence the ...

RULE 10

Be flexible

Why do engineers use steel and not iron as a structural frame for buildings? Iron is really strong, after all. But steel has one crucial advantage – it's flexible. It doesn't snap because it can bend. Indeed it can be quite disconcerting being at the top of a tall building as it sways in a high wind, but that swaying is the reason it doesn't break. Steel, you see, is resilient.

In scientific terms, resilience in materials means their ability to spring back into shape, their elasticity. And we're no different – we need a degree of elasticity to help us to bounce back in the face of adversity or high winds.

When you're buffeted by metaphorical storms, you have to have a bit of give. You might think that standing firm and giving no ground is the best approach but, if it doesn't work, your ability to recover will suffer. Suppose you've set your heart on buying a particular house. You've been saving up for a deposit for years and you've found the house of your dreams, your offer has been accepted and you've started planning it all out in your head – how you'll use each room, where your furniture will go, how you'll decorate. And then – disaster – the sale falls through. Maybe the chain breaks, or your own buyer pulls out, or you get gazumped.

How you cope with the fallout from this will be down to how resilient you are. Almost anyone will find this stressful, but how stressful and how long

before you recover? If you can't imagine any other house but that one, you'll be more stressed and take far longer to get over it than you will if you are flexible enough to recognise there are other options. Either way, you're going to end up somewhere other than this dream house. The only difference is how you adapt to that idea. The more elasticity there is in your thinking, the sooner you'll be out there househunting again, getting excited about a new house, and the quicker you'll finally be ensconced in a lovely new home.

This is a skill you can practise frequently on smaller issues, ones that are frustrating rather than devastating. You've planned a lovely meal out with friends and then discover at the last minute that the restaurant you wanted to go to is closed. Do you get upset or do you think 'Hey, it's the people that matter, let's eat elsewhere, or stay in, or go to the movies'? Next time the shop has sold out of the item you wanted, or you just miss the train, or you come down with a bug just as you arrive on holiday, think flexibly and be prepared to adapt. What have you got to lose? If you can take the minor upsets in your stride by rewriting the script a little bit, you'll be far better placed to do the same thing when life's big dramas come along.

**RESILIENCE IN MATERIALS MEANS THEIR
ABILITY TO SPRING BACK INTO SHAPE, THEIR
ELASTICITY**

RULE 11

Be self-aware

However bad an experience you're going through, you can always learn from it. If you don't, why would things change? If they're bad this time, they'll be bad next time. I spoke to someone recently whose partner had just died. She had had a tough life, having lost her mother at the age of 15. She told me that she'd coped really badly with that and was messed up for a long time. So this time she wasn't going to make the same mistakes again. Now that's resilience.

Think about the things that have gone badly in your life in the past and reflect on how you dealt with them. When new traumas come along, think about how you can handle them. If you keep approaching everything in the same way, you'll keep getting the same results. ...

RULE 12

It is what it is

When I have a stinking cold or a nasty bug, I confess I have a bit of a tendency to mention it.³ Negatively, apparently. Well I'm not going to be positive about it, am I? However I really must learn to stop doing it. Not because it irritates other people, although I'm told that's a thing, but because it makes me feel worse. Every time I mention it, it reminds me how rubbish I feel. I hear myself saying words like 'I've felt better' or 'Pretty rough actually, since you ask', and ping! I feel pretty rough. What a surprise.

My mother-in-law, who is beyond stoical, takes the opposite approach. When asked how her cold is, I've actually heard her reply, 'What cold?' She'll insist she's fine. The striking thing here, and the reason I must change my habits, is that she copes way better than I do with a cold. She either ignores it completely or tells anyone who asks that she's fine. That's what she hears herself saying, so that's how she feels.

This is the kind of acceptance that builds resilience. She is much more resilient than I am in the face of colds which is, I admit, my loss. When you're facing a much bigger challenge than the common cold, it's even more important. Acceptance is not about giving up.

It's not that my mother-in-law doesn't ever buy a box of tissues or make herself a hot honey and lemon drink. She'll do things to help herself. But if she ran out of lemons it would only be a minor irritation because she's

telling herself she doesn't really need it anyway. The important thing is that she accepts she has a cold, she does what she can and she lets go of the rest of it. Railing, moaning, fighting, bitching, don't help. The cold will be there until it has run its course and she lives with that.

You can't deal with a challenge until you recognise it. If, in your mind, you're trying to change the inevitable, fight the unbeatable, you're stuck in that place. That's a pain if it's a cold and agonising if it's something far more serious. Sure, change things when you can, but a lot of bad stuff can't be changed. It's unavoidable or it's already in the past. In that case sooner or later you have to accept it before you can move to stage two. The one thing you do have some control over is how soon you do this. I often remind myself of the lines in the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (as translated by FitzGerald):

'The moving finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on: nor all thy piety nor wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a line,
Nor all thy tears wash out a word of it.'

You could see this as depressing I suppose, but I've always found it deeply reassuring, as I'm certain it was intended to be. It's a waste of effort fighting so you might as well join the moving finger and move on.

ACCEPTANCE IS NOT ABOUT GIVING UP

³ It's been said I do this with a mere sniffle, but I deny it.

RULE 13

Don't get over-distracted

'Don't dwell on it,' people say when you're going through tough times. The idea is that it's bad enough as it is, without focusing your mind on it all the time. Better to distract yourself if thinking won't change anything.

There's a lot of sense in this. It's hard to be positive and feel resilient when you're wallowing in misery. A break from thinking about it, maybe some fresh air or just time with friends, is a sensible idea. You want to minimise the stress you're going through, so it makes sense that any stress-reducing activity will help.

There is a 'but', though. Give yourself a break, yes, but don't play hide and seek with your troubles. If you try to run away from them, you solve nothing right now ...

RULE 14

Like yourself

There's a strong correlation between resilience and self-esteem. If you like yourself, you'll cope better with adversity than if you don't. So everything that you can do to build your self-esteem now will make you more resilient when trouble strikes.

Self-esteem is about how much worth you believe you have as a person. It's not the same thing as confidence – which is more to do with the skills and abilities you feel you have. This is about the big stuff, about whether you believe you have intrinsic value.

If your self-esteem is low, you will focus on those qualities in yourself that you believe are negative: 'I'm a rubbish friend', 'I'm always getting things wrong', 'I'm stupid, boring, useless ... ' If you tell yourself, 'I'm *always* selfish', that's a clear sign your self-esteem is low. If any of these opinions of yourself are things you were told as a child, the low self-esteem will be even more entrenched.

Look, I can't raise your self-esteem in a couple of pages of text. I wish I could. You'll notice however that it is called *self*-esteem for a reason. It's no kind of measure of your actual worth, it's just the way you see it. So only you can change it.

We're talking about a spectrum here. Your self-esteem may be up towards the higher end, which is great (you wouldn't want it too high, which is

where you find afflictions such as narcissism). But within reason, any improvement will improve your resilience too. If your self-esteem is low, please believe me that it's not a true reflection of your value as a human being, and seek out ways to help yourself match your perception more accurately to the truth.

So change the way you think. Stop comparing yourself with other people, or with some kind of image in your head of what you 'should' be like. You 'should' be you. So don't focus on the standards you think you can't meet. Instead look for the positive. At least once a day, consciously remember all the positive things you've done, whether large or small. All the times you've been kind, all the goals you've achieved. Deny headspace to any negative thoughts. So if you walked four miles, tell yourself, 'I walked four miles!' Do *not* even think about how many more miles you didn't walk. Four is good.

Don't look at what someone else can do and berate yourself for not doing it too. If it's important, resolve to work towards it (at your own speed, not anyone else's). If it's not, who cares what they can do? Bet they can't cook as well as you, or play football, or organise stuff, or fix a puncture, or comfort a crying child. There's a whole picture here. If we compared each thing we could do with one person who could do it brilliantly, we'd all have a worryingly low sense of self-worth. But everyone has their own mix and none of us can do everything.

Finally, surround yourself with people who will reinforce your positive thoughts and avoid anyone who is inclined to tell you you're not good enough. Their opinion probably isn't true and it certainly isn't helpful.

**IT'S NO KIND OF MEASURE OF YOUR ACTUAL
WORTH, IT'S JUST THE WAY YOU SEE IT**

RULE 15

Be ready to cope

There are lots of coping mechanisms that will help when you hit hard times. They will make it easier for you to bounce back from whatever hits you – in other words they will enable you to be more resilient, which is what we want.

If you've just found out that your father is terminally ill, or you've had another miscarriage, or your partner has gambled away your savings, or you haven't got the grades you need, or your child needs a major operation, or your new boss is a nightmare – this is probably not going to feel like a good moment to start learning lots of new skills. And yet there are plenty of skills – some we've covered, some we'll get to in a bit – that will really help you cope.

So the answer is to make sure ...

RULE 16

Better out than in

In the midst of a crisis, you often find that your head is crammed with thoughts, feelings, worries, stress. You can't see where to begin coping because your thoughts are swirling about so fast and erratically that you can't catch them. You're overwhelmed.

One of the most helpful things you can do at this point is to get your thoughts out of your head and on to paper. Research has shown that people who are able to do this report that they feel less stressed afterwards – in other words they can rebound faster from the trauma.

Part of the problem with coping is that you can't get your thoughts to keep still. But they stay still on paper. Whether you splurge it all out at once, or whether you want to go back and re-order it later, you can stop carrying the thoughts and feelings round in your head once you have them safely recorded elsewhere. You don't have to show them to anyone – that's up to you.

Maybe there are things you don't want to forget. You can write down everything you loved about someone who has died and keep adding to it whenever you think of something new. That removes the anxiety that over time you won't remember the important things.

If someone else seems to be the cause of your problems, you can write them a letter – maybe the boss who didn't promote you or the partner who

left you. I'm not necessarily advocating posting the letter – that's a different question entirely – but getting your feelings down on paper can be hugely cathartic. I would always advise doing this on paper simply because emails are dangerous. It's so easy to hit 'send' in an unguarded moment and regret it afterwards. No, much better to do it the old-fashioned way on paper. And then wait at least 24 hours before re-reading it. Only then should you send it, if you still feel the need. If you're not certain, wait another 24 hours. And another. Before you put it in the post, think about what the effect will be and how this will help. No point sending it if it won't make you feel better in the long run.

There are lots of ways to get your thoughts clearer on paper. For some people, writing poetry helps. For more prosaic problems, there are more practical ways to put your thinking in order. If you have major financial problems, perhaps a budgeting spreadsheet will help you to see your money worries in a more visual way, which may help you get back on top of them.

If you're swamped by work or home demands and can't think straight, there's nothing wrong with a list. Several lists if you like. Again, you're liberating your mind by taking thoughts out of it and putting them somewhere else so your brain can safely jettison them. All you need is fewer thoughts swirling and roiling and this has got them out of the way.

**YOU'RE LIBERATING YOUR MIND BY TAKING
THOUGHTS OUT OF IT**

RULE 17

Cut yourself some slack

Let's try a couple of quiz questions:

1 You have invited several people for a meal. You put lots of effort into cooking a complicated dish. Unfortunately it spends too long in the oven. It's fine, but not as good as you'd planned. Do you think:

a Who cares? It's the people that matter and they've all had a good time.

b I should have set a timer. I must practise cooking it before I serve it up again.

c I'm useless at cooking. I don't know why I bothered.

2 You apply for a new job and you don't get it. Do you think:

a That's a shame, but I'll find something else. I'll get some feedback and incorporate it into my next application.

b It's my own fault, I messed up the interview. ...

HEALTHY THINKING

Our thoughts and our feelings are intrinsically linked. If you want to feel good, happy, relaxed, capable, you have to adopt the right patterns of thought to achieve it. This is the basis on which most mental health treatment is based. Yes, there can be medication and other means of support, but most of the help out there is about learning to think in ways that will lead you to feel better.

Some people's lives make this a particularly tough process. But all of us will feel better if we think in helpful ways. A lot of this is about habits of thinking and learning the thought patterns that will ensure that day-to-day life is good.

The last section focused on the ways of thinking that are essential in building resilience, so that when an emotional trauma comes along and derails us, we can recover faster.

This section is about looking after yourself mentally between those big life events, although of course following these Rules will lead to a healthy attitude that can only help at those times. But you want to feel as good as you can all the time, and the people you know who always seem chilled and easy going and happy are people who follow these Rules. Sure, some of us are naturally healthy to begin

with and others have to work a bit harder, but these Rules make strong mental health and a positive outlook an option for all of us.

RULE 18

Think yourself happy

We all know people whose default setting is cheerful. It's not that their lives are any better on paper than anyone else's. It's all about their attitude. Indeed if you go to some of the poorest or most war-ravaged places in the world, you'll still be able to find people who are positive despite everything. If they can do it, why can't we?

The answer to this is that being positive is not about our circumstances, it's about the way we think. Of course, the most positive people have moments when they don't feel very cheerful, but they still cope better than they would without their positive attitude. I've seen several elderly people lose their husbands or wives after decades of marriage, which is always horribly ...

RULE 19

Focus on other people

In a way this Rule follows on from the last, because one of the best ways to avoid self-pity is not to think about your own problems too much. Don't sit at home moping, get out there and think about other people's problems instead.

We all have friends and acquaintances who are going through hard times. Think about how you can help, what support they might need. It might be practical or just be a listening ear. You could drive them to their hospital appointment, do their shopping for them, help them with their CV, look after their kids for a day, help get their report written on time. Or they might just appreciate a phone call every week or an evening out so they can talk through their problems.

This is a great distraction for you and a big support to them, and it's so much more than that too. When you help other people, it puts your own troubles in perspective and it makes you feel good about yourself. That builds your self-esteem because you feel worthwhile (rightly) and over time that helps you to feel more positive and better able to cope with your own hardships.

You're not limited to looking around your own group of friends to find someone who needs a bit of bolstering. Lots of people volunteer with charities or other groups in order to focus on other people and be genuinely useful while making themselves feel good at the same time.

Almost all of us have some time to do this if we want to. You might have to give up regular visits to the gym, or the odd night out with your friends, or the odd night in with the TV. We can all tell ourselves we have no spare time, but that's usually because we've chosen to fill it up. You can choose how you fill your time and you can give up one thing to make room for another. You have to decide which makes you happier in the long term.

If you decide to do this (and I really recommend it) you can give up anything from an hour a week to as much time as you like. You can pick a role with little responsibility or one with a great deal. You might spend an hour one evening a week helping at a local sports club or put in several days a year as a school governor. You could organise a jumble sale or just help run one of the stalls. You could even find a role where you only help at certain times of year – volunteering at the local half marathon or an old persons' home Christmas party. The more people-focused the better. It's fine to spend time at home stuffing envelopes for a good cause, but to get the full benefit of volunteering you also need to interact with the people you're supporting.

Remember, this will help you as much as it helps them – it's a win/win. It takes you out of yourself and gives you a huge positive boost that you can then carry over into the rest of your life.

There. See? You haven't thought about your own problems for nearly two pages.

IT MAKES YOU FEEL GOOD ABOUT YOURSELF
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RULE 20

Be in the present

Where do you tend to live – past, present or future? Most of us have a tendency towards one or the other, and they all have their pros and cons. Even if you are inclined to live in the present, however, you tend to do it unconsciously most of the time.

There's a good deal of research to show that if you practise what is known as 'mindfulness' it can reduce anxiety, stress and depression. In part this is because you are more likely to become aware of these feelings sooner so you can address them before they become entrenched. Mindfulness in its basic form is an exercise you set aside some time each day to do. However the greatest benefit is that – like other thinking styles – the more you do it, the more of a habit ...

RULE 21

Stress is optional

Here's a Rule I learnt from my son when he was sitting his GCSE exams at school aged 16, and for which I am extremely grateful. This particular son is a very laid-back character, not overly inclined towards effort if he can see a less effortful approach. He would describe this as economical. (I have in the past come up with other descriptions.) Either way, the effect of this was that he approached his exams in a calm, relaxed fashion, without anxiety. He told me, 'I just don't understand why everyone else gets stressed about exams. Exams are bad enough already, and getting stressed only makes it worse. So why bother?'

I patiently pointed out to him that not everyone was born as chilled and easy going as him. People aren't *choosing* to get stressed, I explained. It's something that happens to them and they can't avoid it.

But it set me thinking. Maybe he was right. Maybe stress *is* a habit we can unlearn. I looked around all the people I knew who were either highly stressy or notably relaxed, and I wondered if my son might be on to something. Now, I'm one of those people who is intermittently stressed. That is to say I can get stressed fairly easily but once I'm over it my stress rating resets back to zero – until the next time. I'm not in permanent state of underlying stress. I decided to try out the Rule for myself.

So I did. And I've hardly been stressed by anything since – the results have been dramatic. I discovered that whenever something frustrating or

upsetting or otherwise stress-inducing happened, my brain just flipped into stress mode without waiting to be asked. Interesting to observe. My thoughts immediately started to revolve around how much worse everything now was, and all the bad ramifications of the thing that had stressed me, and how much time it had wasted, and how difficult it would now be to sort it out.

My brain was *looking* for reasons to feel stressed or to justify it. It would head off down thought streams whose sole purpose was to ramp up the stress (‘And another thing ... ’). Suppose I had to phone the electricity people about a miscalculation on my bill – a very minor frustration in the scheme of things. My stress would ramp up thinking, ‘It’s taken them 10 minutes to answer the phone ... *and* now they’ve put me on hold ... *and* if they don’t sort this out the electrics could be cut off ... *and* I have to go out in 20 minutes and I won’t have time to deal with my emails first ... *and and and* ... ’ Fascinating. Because it’s all quite unnecessary. Half of it hasn’t even happened and probably won’t – I was just constructing worst-case scenarios and then reacting as if they were already true.

So now I just stop the thinking. If I can solve the thing, I do. If I can’t, I block all those pointless thoughts. I refuse to think them, and I tell myself that life is bound to have glitches and here’s one right now (a bit like mindfulness, eh?). No need to make it worse by getting stressed. I don’t do stress any more, I remind myself. My mantra, if I need it, is ‘All the people I love best in the world are fine, and that’s what matters.’ So now stress – as long as all the people I love are OK – is a thing of the past. And if I can do it, so can you.

**LIFE IS BOUND TO HAVE GLITCHES AND
HERE'S ONE RIGHT NOW**

RULE 22

Normality isn't normal

I have a friend who sleeps for only four hours a night. That's all he needs, and he wakes up bright and refreshed. I know someone else who bursts into tears over the slightest thing. And someone who is phobic about hot water bottles. One woman runs three separate businesses, and another counts things obsessively. And I know several people who are deeply uncomfortable unless they're sitting with their back to a wall. All of these people are lovely, cheerful, popular, and as normal as you or me.

It's easy to worry about whether you 'should' or 'shouldn't' be a certain way. Do you work too hard? Wear the wrong clothes? Have the wrong accent? Worry too much? Are you weird because of your quirks and foibles and eccentricities? ...

RULE 23

Evaluate your emotions

Thoughts and feelings are not the same thing, and you don't have to be able to rationalise your feelings in order to justify them. It's perfectly fine to feel angry or sad or frustrated or depressed without having to be able to explain why. Feelings are always OK, because they just are. What you do with them might not always be acceptable – the fact you feel frustrated doesn't justify rudeness – but the frustration just is what it is. People who say, 'Don't feel like that, it doesn't make sense' are making no sense themselves. I've heard comments like, 'Calm down, there's no need to be angry ...' but anger isn't driven by logical need. It's a thing that just happens sometimes.

Nevertheless, while no one should expect you to justify your feelings, actually it's in your own interests to be able to understand them. It's not compulsory, it's just helpful. If you can think rationally about your feelings while you're feeling them, you're much better placed to find ways to ameliorate the ones you don't enjoy having.

The first step is to work out what you're feeling. By which I mean give it a name. No, not Eric or Bubbles. Think about which word best describes it. Try to be as specific as you can – don't just stick with happy or sad. Are you frustrated, or disappointed? Is it fear, or anxiety? Are you grumpy, or irritated? This not only identifies the feeling, it also gives you that sense of detachment from your feelings that mindfulness can, that enables you to

separate your deeper self from the temporary emotions you're experiencing.

Now you understand what you're feeling, can you think through *why* you're feeling it? I mean the real reason, which isn't necessarily obvious. For example you might be annoyed with your friend for turning down your suggestion of an evening out, but it could be the sense of rejection that has really upset you, not simply missing out on a trip to the pub or the movies. Or not – I don't know, but you might if you think it through.

Making sense of your feelings like this can help to calm them. It's not about having any expectation of them – they're feelings and they'll do what they like – but thinking them through at least distracts you and tends to give them some perspective. You're also likely to notice if you're particularly prone to certain emotions. Do you often notice that you're feeling disappointed, for example? Or pessimistic? Or regretful?

Now that's useful information. If you have a tendency to feel disappointed, that suggests to your rational, thinking mind that your expectations tend to be too high. After all, disappointment is about failing to meet your expectations. So now you can actually work on being more realistic in what you expect from people, or from situations, or from whatever it is you've noticed tends to disappoint you.

Another benefit of separating your thoughts from your feelings is that you're more likely to wait until the worst of the feeling is over before you do anything about it. Feelings may not be rational, but actions can be thought through. And your thoughts can take control of whether you fire off an angry email, or shout at your mother down the phone, or spend the evening at home sulking when you could go out and have fun.

IT'S NOT COMPULSORY, IT'S JUST HELPFUL

RULE 24

Laugh at yourself

It's interesting how many of the Rules for a healthy mind involve being able to detach, to separate yourself out, to observe your own thoughts and feelings. It's great to stand back and look at yourself from a distance – it puts things in perspective.

Many years ago, I volunteered with a charity which was all about listening to people who were going through hard times. It's hard to describe just how much I learnt about life in general from this, about how people cope with adversity, and about the ways we can help, or inadvertently hinder them.

One of the things I observed was that there was a high correlation between people who coped and those who had a good sense of humour. Those were the people who were able to ...

RULE 25

Keep learning

Anything that gets clogged up and becomes stagnant is going to be unhealthy, and that applies to your mind as much as it does to anything else. If you want to stay healthy you have to stay active, in mind as well as in body. And that means learning new skills, gaining new knowledge, having new experiences.

If you don't do this, you'll become set in your ways and life will be repetitive, dull, unstimulating. 'As though to breathe were life,' as Tennyson said.⁵ I fully appreciate that some people enjoy the routine of a predictable life and have no wish to travel the globe. That's fine, but there's still plenty of room within that to stretch and exercise your brain.

Humans thrive on challenge – you, me, everyone. We may all enjoy different kinds of challenge and that's fine. You might enjoy running a local club, I might have fun doing a crossword, someone else might be stimulated by learning Spanish or visiting far-flung countries. Find the thing you enjoy and do it. Better still, find several things you enjoy and do all of them.

But don't get stuck in a new rut. Once you start to find the crossword easy, or your Spanish is really good, go and find something different. All these things exercise different parts of your brain, so mix it up a bit. Don't just move from crosswords to sudoku. I mean, that's fine, but also do

something else very different. Organise an event, or learn to paint, or start a small home business.

When you find yourself responding to a suggestion with, ‘I don’t know anything about that’ or ‘I’ve never done that before’, those are reasons to try it. Too many people see them as excuses to say no, when it should encourage them to say yes. That’s exactly what we all need – things we know nothing about and have never done before. Otherwise we’re forever going over old ground and where’s the point in that?

Expanding your knowledge is as important as learning new skills. Pick a subject you’re interested in and learn all you can about it. You don’t have to become a world authority (unless you want to) but it’s really not that hard to reach the point where you know way more than your friends or your average person in the street. I have lots of friends who have areas of knowledge (outside their work) about which they know significantly more than anyone else of my acquaintance: medieval weaponry, typeface design, political history, wild flowers, modern art, twentieth-century computing, eco-friendly building techniques ...

What are the things people call you up about to say, ‘I wanted to pick your brains ...’? The topics about which if anyone knows, it will be you? That’s not the point of learning – you’re doing it for your own edification to exercise your mind and keep it healthy – but the answer might give you a clue to how far down this path you are. Loads of people don’t ever get those calls or texts. Maybe their specialist subject is so niche no one else ever wants to know about it. Or maybe they have just never taken their knowledge of anything to a higher level.

HUMANS THRIVE ON CHALLENGE – YOU, ME, EVERYONE

⁵ In his poem *Ulysses*. Please find it and read it. If it doesn't galvanise you into seeking out new experiences, knowledge, skills, nothing will.

RULE 26

No one likes to be incompetent

I don't like to bang on about psychological theory (I'm certainly not knocking it – I just like to stay firmly focused on the practical). There is one piece of theory however that you might find helpful. It relates to how you feel when you're learning a new skill, and says that there are four stages to learning:

1. *Unconscious incompetence*:⁶ that's when you don't even realise that you can't do a thing. For example, before you start learning to drive you have no idea what's involved.
2. *Conscious incompetence*: which is when you are aware that you're not good at it. You start driving and discover you can't steer properly, or you always brake too slowly, or you keep stalling.
3. *Conscious competence*: you can do ...

RULE 27

Practice makes progress

I'm guessing that if you're reading this book, you're one of those people who enjoys learning new skills. That's good news – you'll get far more out of life with that attitude. Mind you, I enjoy learning some things more than others. I learnt a new language a few years ago and I really enjoyed that. I'm far from fluent but I can communicate, which is what I wanted. The lessons were fun and, even though I-was-rubbish-and-I-knew-it to begin with, I could tell I was steadily improving.

I hated learning the violin as a child though. It's a shame, but not only did I not see myself improving (because back in those days I wasn't watching), I also hated how my arm ached for 30 minutes holding the thing in position, and I just longed for every lesson to finish so I could finally drop my arm down to my side and rest it.

The thing about learning is the '-ing' at the end of it. It's an ongoing process, not a magic wand. And your enthusiasm won't last unless you enjoy doing it. It's almost impossible to be sustained solely by the beacon of what you'll finally be able to do at the end of it. Months of miserable, gruelling, time-consuming, horrible training you hate, just so you can run a marathon at the end of it? I don't think so. You have to enjoy going for a run, enjoy the challenge, enjoy setting a new personal best, enjoy feeling fitter, enjoy your training partner's company.

If you enjoy learning for its own sake, it stands to reason that you won't be nearly so bothered about how long it takes to reach you're-good-and-you-know-it, because you're having fun in the meantime. And that positive frame of mind will help you to be realistic about setbacks or sticking points or timeframes and not to feel inadequate when you don't master everything instantly. Forget 'practice makes perfect'. Progress is all you need.

If you choose to learn a thing and then you don't enjoy the process, see if you can find a more fun approach to learning it. Maybe in a class with other people, or at a different time of day, or with an app, or a change of teacher, or alongside a friend, or on a crash course.

The other thing that makes learning more fun is to think about how you're progressing. However aware you might be that you're-rubbish-and-you-know-it is normal, you still want a sense that you're on your way to the next stage. So monitor your progress within that stage, check back to see how much ground you've already covered, and focus on what you've achieved so far. Some people like to keep a progress diary of some kind, so try that if you think it might work for you. The important thing is to think about your learning and to recognise and correct any tendency to focus on mistakes. They're briefly useful to highlight learning points, and that's it. You gain nothing by dwelling on them. Much better to count your successes, however small.

**IT'S AN ONGOING PROCESS, NOT A MAGIC
WAND**

RULE 28

Turn off the action replays

Don't you hate it when you can't stop going over something in your mind endlessly? A problem you can't solve, or an irrational fear, or a situation you wish you'd handled differently, or something someone has said to you. You keep going back to it again and again, however hard you try to stop, until it feels as though your thoughts are controlling you instead of the other way round.

This obsessing, or overthinking, feels very negative and often leads to stress, anxiety, depression. Indeed it is often associated with these conditions but all of us, regardless of our underlying mood, can fall prey to it from time to time. At its worst it can make you feel physically ill and can leave you exhausted and unable ...

RULE 29

Sidestep bad habits

Oh how our minds enjoy repetition! It's so reassuring, doing the same thing over again. It gives your mind a lovely sense of security. That's absolutely fine if the thing you keep repeating is good for you – cleaning your teeth twice a day or exercising regularly. And it's fine if it's neutral and doesn't get in the way of the rest of your life – watching the 10 o'clock news, or having to put your left sock on before the right one. But what about all those habits that don't benefit you and sometimes get in your way – needing to eat at 6 pm sharp, or traipsing back downstairs after bedtime to check you really did lock the front door, even when you know you did?

All of us get into habits we come to regret and some people are prone to the more intrusive ones – like double-checking you locked the front door, or biting your finger nails. Even the most innocent habit, such as washing your car every Sunday, becomes intrusive if you start feeling compelled to do it. If these compulsions become obsessive and dominate your life, you'll need professional help to break free of them. But many of us tend to milder versions of this, behaviours that are at their most insistent when we're feeling anxious or worried.

That's because they calm your mind – those reassuring, regular, secure habits. Just what your brain needs when it's feeling disrupted. But not necessarily what you need. I can always tell when my wife is feeling stressed or anxious because she starts straightening objects on the

mantlepiece or the shelves.⁷ Straightening things is less intrusive than some responses – it's worse if you feel you have to check all the doors in the house are properly shut or make sure there's an even number of teabags in the box. And there is no end to the strange little habits your mind will have you running around after if it's feeling anxious and wants you to calm it down.

So how to stop when it's getting in your way? If your habits – rituals even – are worse when you're anxious, clearly reducing the anxiety will reduce the habits. So the first thing is to address your underlying stress and worry, which obviously is a good idea anyway.

Distraction is of course ideal if you can do it. If that's too much to start with, an alternative is to replace one habit with another. Replacing smoking with vaping is a very obvious example of this, but when your brain demands you rearrange the bookshelf yet again, you can try to deflect it into straightening the mantlepiece instead – which is much less disruptive to your life because it's quicker. You might be happy with this new displacement activity for your anxieties or you might decide to reduce the habit again after a while. It becomes a habit in itself to distract yourself with the lesser habit.

The most useful strategy of all however, from now on anyway, is to recognise these habits as soon as they start to form and take avoiding action. The easiest time to break a habit is before it starts. So the very first time you're about to go back downstairs to check you locked the front door, catch yourself about to form a habit and stop it right there. Distract yourself, sing a song, take a bath – whatever is going to work best, now is the moment to do it.

THE EASIEST TIME TO BREAK A HABIT IS BEFORE IT STARTS

7 She spent literally years trying to work out how I knew. I had to tell her in the end.

RULE 30

Appreciate semantics

One of my family is such a perfectionist that he finds it really hard to deliver anything on time. He's forever spotting tiny flaws in his work that no one else can see and then having to fix them even though he's up against a deadline – or has already missed it. He likes every piece of work to be absolutely perfect. I can see an inherent flaw in this, which I have had to point out to him: when someone asks for a piece of work, they want it both up to standard *and* on time. So being on time is part of what constitutes being perfect, and the overall package doesn't meet the criteria for perfection if it's late.

Redefining perfection like this makes it easier to deliver work on time. Once you broaden the definition, ...

RULE 31

Keep the bar steady

A teacher once told me that one of the trickiest things to manage with ambitious students is that they work hard towards a goal and, as soon as it's in sight, they formulate a new, tougher goal and aim for that instead. Now that might sound like a good thing because the students get ever higher grades. Indeed if grades were all teachers were interested in, it would be a good thing. However, a good teacher cares about the student's welfare too, and the problem with this approach is that the student never feels good enough because they never attain their goals. By definition, they're always falling short. You can see how this can paradoxically diminish their self-esteem as their achievements increase.

A lot of us did this as students⁸ and continue to do it as adults. Some of us didn't do it at all as students⁹ but still manage to adopt the habit as adults. Whether it's at work or in our personal lives, we keep raising the bar so we can never quite reach it. And then we berate ourselves for not reaching the bar that we deliberately moved because we were about to reach it. How bonkers is that?

If this is you – and I think you know very well if it is – you need to recognise how daft it is and change your thinking because it's not making you happy. And it's not actually making you achieve any more either. Remember Rule 27 and focus on the journey. You'll progress at least as fast as you would if your eyes were on the prize and you'll be less tempted to keep raising the bar.

Think of a flight of stairs. Let's say there are 30 steps. It could be a steep set of stairs heading straight up to the top. But it isn't. This flight has 10 steps and then a small landing. Then another 10 steps before the next landing. So every 10 stairs you can pause briefly and get your breath back. OK, fix that image in your mind.

Now, here's the important thing: *don't move the bar*. The bar is set at the first landing and it stays there. When you reach the first landing, congratulate yourself. Well done, you've achieved your aim. You can look back down the steps and see how much ground you've covered. Enjoy the feeling of success for a moment. You deserve to feel good about yourself.

Right, now you've proved you can do that successfully, how about a *completely new bar*? Let's see ... why not put it at the next landing, 10 steps up? Repeat the process and enjoy the feeling of success in 10 steps' time. And keep repeating it.

This is simply a fresh way of thinking about a task, an ambition, a challenge. It doesn't slow you down, it doesn't make you achieve less in the end, it just changes your attitude to yourself as you go. Breaking the task into sections is a good practical approach, but you need to separate out the bars that go with those sections in order to keep feeling good about yourself as you go.

<p>THE BAR IS SET AT THE FIRST LANDING AND IT STAYS THERE</p>
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8 I'm using the word 'us' here in its loosest possible sense.

9 Ah, that's more like it.

RULE 32

Look for the spin

It's clearly not intelligent or clear thinking to jump to conclusions. When you're listening to an argument or working out a practical problem, you know you need to guard against it. But socially it's an easy trap to fall into in ways that make you feel unnecessarily bad about yourself.

Every so often, I'll remember that I haven't been in touch with one particular friend or another for what seems like a long time. Whenever this used to happen, I would mentally tick myself off for being a bad friend and think how unappreciated they must be feeling. Not any more though, because I now remind myself that if we haven't spoken for six months, that means they haven't tried to contact me either. I'm not feeling forgotten ...

ORGANISED THINKING

When you're under pressure, you don't want to waste thinking time. The more streamlined you are in terms of planning and organising your thoughts, the less you have to dither about and the more time you have to get on and do what needs doing.

Of course, the idea is not to run around randomly doing stuff. Lots of us are inclined to do this, because it makes us feel busy and therefore productive. But busy *isn't* necessarily productive. You can run around randomly until you're exhausted and still not get anywhere.

So you have to invest some time in thinking, to make sure that when you start doing, you do the right things in the right way, and don't waste time on things that don't need to be done, or at least not now.

The people who understand the value of thinking in an organised way are the ones who put in the least effort for the maximum effect. They are the people who run large families, hold down senior posts, and still have time to socialise, volunteer and indulge their hobbies – all with a calm, cheerful demeanour – because they're not wasting any time through unorganised thinking.

If this doesn't describe you, and you wish it did, don't despair. There's no magic spell. You just have to learn a few tricks of the trade. Read on.

RULE 33

Believe in being organised

This is probably the hardest Rule in this section. Once you've mastered this one, the rest come pretty easily. There's an argument that some people are naturally organised and some just aren't. There's a modicum of truth in this, but it's really not the point. Some animals are born swimmers – dogs, for example – and some aren't. For example I wasn't, but I still learnt to swim and was pretty good at it (a long time ago). Just because you weren't born organised, that's not an excuse: 'I wish I could be more organised, but it's just not me.' Well, make it you.

People use this as a justification for being unorganised, but it is entirely in their control. You're not a victim, you're quite capable of learning ...

RULE 34

Learn to love a list

If you're a keen list-maker, you can skip this Rule. It will all be obvious to you, because it's here for people who don't make lists (yet). So what's wrong with making a list? What stops you? There are two main reasons people give me – either that it's a waste of time because you can work it out as you go along, or that a long list is too daunting.

So let's start with the first of those. It doesn't matter how well you think you can multi-task, it's always more time-efficient to do one thing at a time until it's finished, and then move on to the next. And the best frame of mind for planning and thinking is not the same as the one you need for doing. Indeed different tasks on your list may require their own approach, which is why it makes sense to deal with all your emails at the same time, or to do all the laundry at once.

It's actually quicker to think through all the things you need to do, and write them down, while your mind is in organised thinking mode. You'll remember more of them, and in that frame of mind you'll also be able to organise them into efficient groups as you go. So for example, you'll list all the things you need to do while you're out, rather than getting back and realising that you forgot something. Of course something may come to you later, and you can obviously add it to the list, but there will be far fewer accidental omissions, because you started by focusing on the list itself.

Once your list is written you can switch into doing mode and stop trying to hold in your head the things you need to do, because they're all down on your list. So you can get on with the task with a clearer head, which means you can do it faster and better. The key thing here is that you have actually saved time in the long run by sitting down to write a list before starting. Both because you've streamlined your mental approach and because you've got more of the tasks right first time.

I'm glad we've got that sorted. Now, in terms of a long list being daunting ... yes it can be, so why have a long list? What you need is several short lists. A long list with subheadings if you like, but feel free to put them on separate bits of paper if that helps. Suppose you're preparing for a big trip abroad. You could have a list of things you need to buy, a list of admin you need to deal with, a list of things to pack, and so on. Lots of manageable lists. And – if you don't enjoy making lists – just remind yourself how much less daunting that is than arriving at the airport to find you left your passport at home (we all know someone who's done it).

A relative of mine always said that a good list should start with the following items:

- something quick
- something you enjoy
- something you've already done.

That way you'll have the first three tasks ticked off in no time and you'll feel you're making real headway.

**THE BEST FRAME OF MIND FOR PLANNING
AND THINKING IS NOT THE SAME AS THE ONE
YOU NEED FOR DOING**

RULE 35

Think outside your head

It's very hard to operate effectively and efficiently when your head is cluttered. You're so busy trying to hold onto those important thoughts, there's barely any head room left for thinking through the current task. And you keep catching yourself short, thinking, 'Oh, I must remember to call so-and-so ...' or 'Oops, I need to check we have enough of those ...' or 'Actually this will need to be done before Thursday ...' All those thoughts jostling for space make it much harder to focus on the task in hand. Either you forget things or you keep jumping from one thing to the next without finishing anything properly. Or both.

If you're running a big project at work, or organising a local event, or launching into a house ...

RULE 36

Don't overload your RAM

Following on from the last Rule, it's hard to exaggerate how much brain space is taken up with everyday planning, logistics, mental to-do lists. As well as those jobs or projects that you're consciously aware need a lot of planning (and that you'll now be writing down in detail after reading the last Rule¹¹), there's the rest of life in general.

However avid a list-maker you are, there'll always be things you won't write down. For example, you need to think through which order to go around the shops: you want to drop off the dry cleaning first so you don't have to lug it around, and you want to do the food shopping last because there's stuff you need to get back to the freezer quickly. But the post office will close at half past, and it's quite a detour to the pharmacy to collect that prescription ... You're unlikely to plan that out on paper, but it's still using up your brain.

Maybe you're putting up shelves at the weekend. You'll be thinking about what length screws to buy and where to get them – maybe you could do it when you collect your mum from the station? Although actually, perhaps if you went to a different store you could get the paint and the timber at the same time. But you'd have to do that before your mum turns up ...

Phoning the bank, inviting people to a party, getting the kids ready for a new school term, changing electricity supplier, planning meals, updating your CV: life is full of things you need to think about. This all appears to

sit invisibly alongside the rest of your life, except at times of significant overload, so it's easy to underestimate how exhausting it is. Actually, however, it's a big thing and the more of it there is, the more mentally exhausted you will be. To use a computer-based analogy, this is RAM – working memory – and the more information it has to hold, the less efficiently it will work.

Most of us are used to juggling these things around in our heads most of the time, but when we get overloaded they can cause enormous stress. You need to understand this, because then you'll be able to work around it better. Clear those little tasks out of the way if you've got a busy time coming up – or save them for later – and cut yourself some slack.

Recognise that if you're getting to the culmination of a big project at work, it's not reasonable to expect yourself to stay on top of myriad minor things at home too. Give yourself some empty-head time to help you cope (go to the movies, meditate, play computer games, have a cup of tea in the sunshine, play with the dog).

And always remember that this applies to other people too, especially your family. Don't expect your kids to tidy their room at exam time¹² – if they take a break, it needs to be a proper break. This Rule, by the way, also explains why many traditional fathers don't understand why mothers are so knackered; it's not so much the physical effort of looking after the kids, it's the mental exhaustion of keeping on top of everyone else's diaries and logistical requirements as well as their own.

**THIS ALL APPEARS TO SIT INVISIBLY
ALONGSIDE THE REST OF YOUR LIFE, EXCEPT**

AT TIMES OF SIGNIFICANT OVERLOAD

11 Won't you? 'Course you will.

12 Or, unfortunately, at any other time in my experience.

RULE 37

Make deadlines your friend

I love Douglas Adams's comment about the whooshing sound that you get as a deadline flies past. I think we all recognise that. And most of us miss deadlines, at least from time to time, if only because we've been so busy organising our lives around some other, even bigger deadline.

Mind you, if life had no deadlines, I'm not sure I'd ever get anything done. Whether I'm trying to finish writing a book when I promised it to my publisher, or simply trying to get dinner cooked before the family have fallen asleep from hunger and exhaustion, deadlines are not just unavoidable – they also motivate us to get on and do things.

So it helps to recognise that a deadline is not necessarily a bad thing. They may make ...

RULE 38

Don't indulge decision making¹³

Sometimes, organising gets seriously heavy-duty. Perhaps you've got a big house move to orchestrate, or there's a huge product launch at work, or you're planning a wedding. There will be literally countless decisions you have to make. There's the big stuff: should we hire in a removal company or do it ourselves, what date should we hold the launch, how many guests should we invite? And it goes right through to the small stuff: do we need to keep this chipped mug, what's the best font for the name badges, would Aunt Eliza like to be seated next to Louise?

You can spend ages agonising over every one of them, researching them, discussing them, listing their pros and cons, considering all the options. This takes up time – a commodity that is in short supply when you're this busy – and it can also mess up the whole operation. You can't book the removal firm until you've decided if you want one; you can't write the press release until you've finalised all the relevant details; you can't send out the invitations until you've agreed on the design.

And boy, does it mess with your head. Even with everything we've covered in the last few Rules, these things make you feel your brain is under a constant barrage of things to remember, people to call, tasks to tick off, deadlines to meet, decisions to make. So you need to clear as much space as you can in your head, as we know by now (if we've been reading these Rules in order). And improving your decision making is one of the best ways to do that.

The fewer decisions you have to wrangle with, the clearer your head, the more time you free up and the less you delay the process waiting for information you haven't yet agreed or established. Decision making is a luxury you can't afford when time and schedules are this tight. So don't do more of it than you absolutely must.

This takes a conscious mind-shift, a recognition that any decision (within reason) is better than one that wastes time and effort you haven't got. Sift out the really important decisions and give them the time they deserve. Hopefully plenty of them will be quick, however if it's important you need to give it due consideration. Of course. I'm not suggesting you toss a coin to decide your wedding venue. But, you know, you can decide a lot of other things on the toss of a coin. Shall we box up all the half-used soap and bath oils and shampoo for the new house, or buy new when we arrive? Does it matter? If you don't know the answer, it's more helpful just to get on with it and not waste time and head space thinking about it.

It matters that the guest name badges at your product launch look right, but once you've narrowed it down to two colours, or three fonts ... oh, just hurry up and do it – any of those will look fine. There are more important things to move on to.

This has to be a conscious shift because the decisions you're glossing over are ones you would have given more time to in other circumstances, so it seems natural to focus on them now. However – think about it¹⁴ – they're not the best use of your time right now.

**ANY DECISION (WITHIN REASON) IS BETTER
THAN ONE THAT WASTES TIME AND EFFORT**

YOU HAVEN'T GOT

13 Yes this is an organised thinking Rule, not a decision-making one. No clues here about how to actually make the decisions.

14 But not for too long, obviously.

RULE 39

Get creatively organised

Lists, calendars, notes, online diaries, pop-up reminders – people use lots of standard methods to organise themselves. All of them work for some of us, or for some of the time. Just don't be fooled into thinking these are your only options. If none of them works for a particular purpose, find another way to organise yourself.

One member of my family has a foolproof and unorthodox technique for reminding himself of those things you only think of just before getting into bed. He turns his toothbrush upside-down. When he gets up in the morning he sees the inverted toothbrush and instantly remembers the thing. Apparently it's never failed. Personally I think I'd just stare at the toothbrush for ages wondering ...

THINKING CREATIVELY

This is the fun stuff. You're designing a new product, or organising a party, or decorating a house, reorganising your workload, planning a holiday, or producing a piece of music. You're waiting for your muse to appear ... However, while you're waiting for inspiration to strike, you could actually think your way there instead. As Thomas Edison said, 'Genius is 1 per cent inspiration and 99 per cent perspiration.' You don't need my help with the inspiration, but I can point you in the right direction for the other 99 per cent.

I've watched some brilliant creative thinkers at work, I've talked to them, I've seen how they operate at first hand. And over the years I've come to understand the unspoken Rules they follow to free up their minds so that the 1 per cent of inspiration can find its way in. Indeed, I've learnt to use the Rules myself. Because while creative thinking comes naturally to a few lucky people, the rest of us aren't excluded. We simply have to train our minds. Once you've established the right thinking habits, you'll find they come naturally to you, too.

Creative thinking is all about seeing where your thoughts take you. You might know where you're starting from, but

you have no idea where your destination is. So you need to think in a way that opens you up to possibilities, or plays with ideas, that you might not have considered. If you use your brain in the best way, and open enough doors, you make it so much easier for your muse to get in.

RULE 40

Train your brain

If you have a current project you want to get creative about – you might even have turned to this page for that reason – I hope you'll find the next few Rules useful. However, what you really want is to become a true creative thinker who comes up with ideas big and small on a daily basis. Whether you're launching a business or just getting experimental with a recipe, you want this stuff to be second nature.

Of course, that means you need to practise. It's no good reading a Rule or two here, coming up with a genius idea, and then not using your creative brain cells again until the next big challenge comes along. That's like teaching your dog to sit and then never asking it to sit until, years later, you need it to sit ...

RULE 41

Feed your mind

Einstein is a bit of a hero of mine, and he reckoned that imagination was more important than knowledge. That's even more true now when almost all knowledge is out there in the ether waiting for you to call it down at the tap of a keyboard. You really don't need to be storing it in your head. But imagination – you can't download that, and imagination is the key to creative thinking. So what you really need to do is expand your imagination any way you can.

Einstein also said the way to have intelligent children was to read them fairy tales. To increase their intelligence further, you should read them more fairy tales. When you hear the words of a story, the plot might be provided for you by the writer, but your imagination supplies the pictures. When you read it to yourself, your imagination supplies the voices and the sounds too.

Do me a favour – go and read the prologue to Shakespeare's *Henry V* if you don't already know it (it's out there in the ether waiting for you). He describes perfectly what the imagination is capable of and how you can use it to imagine even, for example, that the confines of the theatre 'hold the vasty fields of France'. The human imagination is an extraordinary thing, and it's almost a sin not to make our own as strong and agile and vivid as we can.

Reading fiction is essential. And, incidentally, Einstein's point is important if you want your children to develop brilliant creative minds. Read to them as often as you can and give them a love of books. It's no good just watching a movie, where all the imagining is done for you. That's great, but it's an entirely different thing and no substitute for reading. And encourage them to make things up. Small children will believe in magic, and in Santa, and the tooth fairy, for years if you help them. I had friends whose children firmly believed that the family cat could actually fly, and it was a delight to find that their parents had sensibly allowed them to continue in this belief, where many parents would unthinkingly have said, 'Don't be silly. Cats can't fly.'

If I had to put one activity at the top of my list for developing the imagination that you need in order to think creatively, it would be reading. Fortunately, however, I don't have to put one thing at the top, and there are lots of other ways to feed your creative mind. Reading poetry, writing anything, music of whatever kind you enjoy (and remember to shake things up occasionally – don't get stuck in a rut). Plenty of very clever comedians, especially the more surreal ones, force your mind to make unexpected leaps and twists and jumps, and knock your thinking out of its ruts, along with comedy shows from Monty Python onwards.

If you think about it, loads of jokes are based around catching your brain unawares, setting up a pattern and then unexpectedly breaking it. And immersing yourself in this kind of humour, hanging out with friends that make you laugh, watching funny shows, is one of the most enjoyable ways to encourage your mind to think more creatively.

**WHEN YOU HEAR THE WORDS OF A STORY,
THE PLOT MIGHT BE PROVIDED FOR YOU BY
THE WRITER, BUT YOUR IMAGINATION
SUPPLIES THE PICTURES**

RULE 42

Get in the mood

Most of us can't simply switch on our creative brain at the drop of a hat. If you're rushing to an appointment you're late for, and it's pouring with rain but you forgot to bring a coat, and you can't stop worrying because the budgie's not eating properly, this is not the moment you're going to get your best thinking done.

We need to coax and cajole our brains a bit to encourage them to be creative. It's not our normal state of mind – we spend most of our time doing something, not simply thinking. Just consider how often you're focused on a practical task: talking, cooking, messaging, showering, watching TV, digging something out of your wallet, choosing veg in the supermarket. We don't spend a great deal of time just ...

RULE 43

Open up

Let's do some warm-up exercises now shall we? If you were about to launch into some kind of physical exertion you'd do a few stretches first. Well, it's the same with mental exercise. You've got yourself in the mood, now limber up a bit before you focus on your current creative exercise.

There are lots of exercises you could do, and it doesn't really matter which you choose – except you don't want to get stuck in a new rut, so don't always pick the same thing. There are lots of suggestions online and in books, or you could be properly creative and invent your own. What you're after is anything that forces you to think divergently for a couple of minutes to set your mind working in the right way.

Divergent thinking means taking a starting point and heading off in as many unexpected directions as you can – which is what creative thinking is all about. It is the opposite of convergent thinking, where your thoughts bring the necessary strands together into a single answer. Convergent thinking is exactly what you need to solve a maths question, for example, and exactly not what you need to generate ideas.

If you ask a naturally convergent thinker how they would use a brick, they're likely to tell you that they'd use it to build a house. A divergent thinker, however, might tell you that they'd use it to prop a door open, or to weigh down an empty bin so it doesn't blow away, or to smash a window, or stop a car rolling down a hill, or to break into chunks and put

in a flowerpot to help the water drain from it, or to stand on to see over a wall that's just too high for them.

Now, while most of us tend to lean towards being either convergent or divergent thinkers, of course we're all capable of either when necessary. Every time you check your change in a shop, you're thinking convergently. When you try to answer the question 'What would you like for your birthday?' you're probably thinking divergently. And when you want to get creative, you definitely need to be in a divergent frame of mind.

The brick question is a really good example of an exercise to open your mind in readiness for thinking imaginatively. Try to think of ten uncommon uses for a common object within two minutes: a tissue, a mug, a phone, a book, a hole punch ...

If you always start your thinking sessions this way, changing the object each time, you'll just get stuck in a fresh rut. So check out other quick creative exercises and just use this one occasionally. The idea is to stimulate the creative part of your brain and prepare it for the real task, in the same way that a vocal warm-up prepares you to sing or getting your hair wet prepares it for the shampoo.

**IF YOU WERE ABOUT TO LAUNCH INTO SOME
KIND OF PHYSICAL EXERTION, YOU'D DO A
FEW STRETCHES FIRST**

RULE 44

There are no rules

Fasten your seat belt, we're about to do some serious thinking. On second thoughts ... don't fasten your seat belt. If you start putting constraints on your thoughts, you can't let them roam freely however and wherever they choose. And that is the key to creative thinking. Even the most unlikely paths, the most unpromising ideas, the most unexpected thoughts can lead to that moment of enlightenment that you're after.

Listen, if you save one part of your brain to run a commentary on your creative thoughts – 'That's a stupid idea', 'That'll never work', 'Yeah, right, how will you get anyone else to agree to that?' – you're doomed. Time enough for all that later, once you've arrived at an idea (or several) worth analysing ...

RULE 45

Spot the box

Lots of people will exhort you to ‘think outside the box’. There are plenty of strategies for doing so and lots of them are great, productive, really helpful. What most of them fail to do, however, is to identify or describe the ‘box’ you’re supposed to be removing yourself from.

In broad terms of course we know what it is. The box represents rigid thinking along the usual furrows that will lead to the same places those furrows always lead to. But what is it, specifically – in terms of the individual project or creative exercise you’re engaged in right now?

The answer to that question is going to be different every time. But do you ask it? That’s where the strategies seem to be missing a page, and it’s an absolutely crucial question. It’s hard to describe how much easier it is to think outside a box when you know where the box actually is. So make that your starting point.

This works really well in business because it gives you a competitive edge. All the local retail bakeries round my way (and yours, I’d guess) are in towns – that’s where all the people are, so if you want to open a bakery with maybe a café attached, you open it in the middle of town. But a couple of years back someone here decided to think outside that box: they opened a bakery, with a café, on a small out-of-town trading estate. Not enough units on the estate itself to keep the business going, so you might not have great hopes for the business. However, it’s now the best-known

bakery in the area and the café is regularly packed. Why? Apart from the great food, parking is way easier on the trading estate than it is in town, so it's a much better place to meet up. Those bakers spotted the 'be in town' box and climbed out of it.

Don't forget that you might be thinking inside several boxes at once (I don't really know what that looks like – I suppose they must be like Russian dolls). Maybe you're trying to design a wedding reception in your village hall. So there's a box you're stuck in that says 'village hall' – maybe you could hold it somewhere else? But hang on, you're also in a box that says 'wedding reception'. Try thinking outside that one too. And of course there's a box marked 'getting married'. Of course you might still end up getting married and having the reception in the village hall. But you could elope, or get married and take everyone for a slap-up meal afterwards, or go to a registry office with two friends, then have a honeymoon (that's a box too, of course), and then throw a big party for everyone when you get back. Or not.

Just because you've got out of the box, it doesn't mean you can't climb back into it again if you choose to. But at least take a peek outside and decide if you really like the box or if you were just thinking inside it because it was there. You see, even if you get back into the box, your horizons will be wider for having spent a bit of time outside it. The box has become transparent now you know what's beyond it. And the chances are that the ideas you generate will be more creative, interesting and exciting than if you'd sat firmly and blindly inside it from the off.

**IT'S HARD TO DESCRIBE HOW MUCH EASIER
IT IS TO THINK OUTSIDE A BOX WHEN YOU
KNOW WHERE THE BOX ACTUALLY IS**

RULE 46

Think like someone else

So you're sitting in a candlelit room with gentle music playing, or maybe you've gone out for a run, or to do a bit of gardening – whatever gets you in the right mood for thinking imaginatively. You've worked out where the box is, and you've climbed out of it. You've primed yourself to be non-judgemental and give every idea a chance. So what now?

Where are you going to start? If you empty your mind completely, you're likely to fall asleep or start thinking about irrelevant nothings. You need to kick off your thoughts in some direction and then follow them. And you want them to wander in a direction they don't usually go – obviously, to give them a chance to arrive somewhere new, interesting, original, intriguing. ...

RULE 47

Make connections

You're aiming to open up new channels in your mind, routes your thoughts have never previously gone down. One way to do that is to give yourself a start point and an end point that you've never travelled between before, so you'll have to take a new road. If you've never been to Timbuktu, you can't get there – even from your own front door – without taking some roads you've never used.

Same thing with your brain. Make it travel a new route. Not only will this help with your current creative challenge, it will also exercise your creative juices more generally, so you win on two counts. Now, as with going from home to Timbuktu, it makes no difference if one of the two ends of the journey is familiar. So make one of the points the project you're thinking about – redecorating your living room, or writing a piece of music, or planning an event, or designing an ad campaign. Now, what are you going to pick for the other point?

Fish. Happiness. Balaclava. Global warming. The philosophy of Karl Marx. Postage stamps. Just open a dictionary at random and pick a word. Yes, really – try to find a connection between your project and *anything*. Just pick something random and let your mind go a-wandering. What do the words 'postage stamp' make you think of? It's very small, it adheres to something, it's often in shades of one colour only, it has scalloped edges, it comes in a perforated sheet ... Now try to apply some of these to your project. I'm not saying you should redecorate your room in postage stamps

– that would take ages. But you could introduce scalloped edges to the curtains or cushions, or stick to shades of one colour, or use decals that adhere to the walls.

Were you going to come up with these ideas going down your habitual routes? See? You might end up developing one of these ideas so much further that only you can still see the connection with a postage stamp. Doesn't matter. The point is you've opened up possibilities your brain wouldn't have arrived at without forcing itself to forge a route between two previously unconnected points.

Of course you won't end up using every idea that is sparked by any aspect of postage stamps – the room would look a mess if you did. In fact, you won't come up with the same tumble of ideas that I would if I tried the same exercise. Or even if you'd tried it yourself yesterday when you were in a different mood. So what? The purpose of the exercise is to force yourself to think creatively and originally and differently. Not only will you end up with a much more original and inspiring living room (or ad campaign/event/piece of music) but you will also have encouraged your mind to think in a more creative and free-flowing way.

**FISH. HAPPINESS. BALACLAVA. GLOBAL
WARMING. THE PHILOSOPHY OF KARL MARX.
POSTAGE STAMPS**

RULE 48

Make mistakes

When 3M was trying to develop a new, strong adhesive, someone made a mistake and produced a glue that was less adhesive than usual. When you stuck things together with it, they just peeled apart. So was that a useless, hopeless, idiotic mistake? No, it was the origin of the Post-it® Note.

Alexander Fleming was having trouble cultivating bacteria in a petri dish because a particular mould had a habit of growing alongside the bacteria and destroying them. A frustrating mistake that kept ruining his experiments? Nope – when he decided to study the ‘mistake’ more closely, the mould turned out to have a use after all. He called it penicillin.

One of the biggest bars to being creative is that we’re afraid to make mistakes. ...

RULE 49

Forget about other people

I've observed over the years that the most creative thinkers I know tend to have a non-conformist streak. It's not an absolutely hard-and-fast rule – there are a few exceptions on both sides – but it does make sense to me. The human race needs innovators to drive progress, from discovering how to harness fire or make a spear right through to the inventions of the modern world. However, too many innovators would be unworkable because they'd all be arguing for their own ideas instead of taking up each other's. The world also needs people – a majority of people – who are happy to adopt these ideas collectively and make them work. These people may not go out on a limb creatively, but they are the backbone of a society, the ones who actually implement the changes and establish progress.

This majority of people mostly derive satisfaction from fitting in, belonging, conforming. That's why they can respond collectively to adopt new ideas, to use them in the same way as each other, and to work as a team to implement them effectively.

However, if you're a natural innovator (or a self-created one) you can't always be worrying about what other people think. Most people resist change, so if you listen to them you'll be dissuaded from your exciting, creative new ideas. In Dr Meredith Belbin's studies of team roles, the creative ideas person is termed the Plant. Belbin recognises that these people often struggle to fit into a hierarchy, or to cope with rigid systems

or bureaucracy. They can be independent, maverick, even disruptive. So in simplified terms, an effective society that is able to progress needs a majority of conformers and a small minority of non-conforming ideas people.

Just because someone doesn't have a conformist nature doesn't mean they never conform. Almost no one *never* conforms. If you get dressed in the morning, clean your teeth, drive on the correct side of the road, you're conforming. However these people don't conform simply for the sake of it, because they don't get as much of a kick out of belonging and fitting in as most other people do.

This is important in terms of their ability to generate ideas, because they need to be free of the constraints it would place on their creativity. If you didn't want to voice any ideas that didn't fit in with the norm, that you thought others might disagree with or be unhappy about, your ability to innovate would be severely hampered.

So if you're serious about developing your creative thinking skills, you need to be prepared for this. If you're naturally quite conformist and enjoy that feeling of going along with everyone else, you'll need to develop a bit of a thick skin. You don't have to hurt other people's feelings, or act without kindness, but ideas lead to innovation, and innovation leads to change. And, while most people will accept a change for the better in the long term, often they will resist it in the short term. You can't let that put you off.

**YOU CAN'T ALWAYS BE WORRYING ABOUT
WHAT OTHER PEOPLE THINK**

PROBLEM SOLVING

If you're facing a real problem, you have to think in a creative way to solve it. I've separated this section out from creative thinking, however, because what makes problem solving different is that it's reactive. It's not optional. You have to do it because there's some kind of obstacle looming that you have to get past, over, through, around. And to do that, you have no choice but to get your thinking cap on.

The last section was about having fun with ideas and seeing where they take you. This time, you know exactly where you need to be – the problem is how to get there. You know you need to reduce your costs, or fix your relationship, or deal with an overload of work, or resolve a diary clash that demands you be in two ...

RULE 50

Clear your emotions out of the way

Whatever your problem, you need a clear and uncluttered mind in order to address it. We saw in Rule 42 how you have to be in the right mental state in order to think creatively. Well problem solving is a branch of creative thinking, so the same thing applies here. What makes it more difficult is that, if you have a problem, it's more likely that your mind is buzzing with negative emotions, which will only get in the way.

Quite apart from what's going on in the rest of your life, the very problem you're trying to solve may be making you upset, angry, worried, stressed, unhappy. Unfortunately – indeed unfairly – those very feelings will make it harder to come up with a solution. You want to set the creative side of your brain to work without distractions, and negative emotions are a big distraction.

I know that if you're feeling worried, the worst thing anyone can say to you is 'don't worry'. Likewise 'don't be angry' or 'don't be upset' or 'calm down'.¹⁸ In fairness it's a bit easier to take from yourself than from someone else, but it's just as hard to do. There's no magic wand, but I can give you a few tips.

For a start, it still helps to create the right atmosphere. However pressured you are to come up with a solution, you're more likely to do it if you can remove as much pressure as possible. So go for a run, or sit in a quiet room, or play upbeat music. If these aren't an option, at least turn off your

phone alerts, or your email, or shut the door, go and sit in the car – create a bit of space for yourself.

There are things that may clear your mind in the short term. Music perhaps, or a crossword or sudoku, or meditation in one of its many forms (I include gardening, yoga, painting ...). Activities that distract your mind from the emotions that are interfering.

If there's any sensible possibility of buying yourself time, go for it. Time is a big pressure, and will exacerbate anxiety and stress. So even if alleviating the time pressure doesn't make everything all right, it will at least help. Waiting works well for certain problems, and certain emotions. If you're angry, for example, it's likely that you'll be a bit calmer tomorrow or next week. And time can give you perspective too. Sometimes a problem that looks intractable now might seem easier to solve – or just less important – once a measure of time has passed. And sometimes if you wait long enough, a problem may even solve itself. I'm not advocating procrastinating, but if waiting doesn't create worse difficulties, why not?

If you're too emotional to come up with a solution you're really happy with, at least come up with a stopgap, a plan B, if you can. You haven't stopped looking for a better idea, but knowing there's a good enough solution out there reduces the pressure in itself, as well as being an adequate alternative.

And finally, believe there is a solution. You'll feel much happier, calmer, more relaxed if you think help is on its way, just as soon as the solution pops into your brain. And if you think there's a solution, there will be (see Rule 39).

**YOU WANT TO SET THE CREATIVE SIDE OF
YOUR BRAIN TO WORK WITHOUT
DISTRACTIONS**

18 I doubt that, in the history of humanity, this phrase has ever calmed anyone down.

RULE 51

Make sure there's really a problem

Years ago, a friend of mine got into terrible financial problems. It was during a recession and he ended up owing a huge mortgage which was double the actual value of the house, and with credit cards bills, utility bills, and a business that had just gone under.

Every time I saw him he had more stories about bailiffs turning up, or threatening letters from the bank, or final demands on his doormat. And he couldn't work out how to sort it all out. He'd paid off all his small creditors, so now just owed large sums to the bank, building society and big utility companies. I suggested to him (and I certainly wasn't the only one) that he declare himself bankrupt. That way he'd write off all his debts and ...

RULE 52

Check you're solving the right problem

The starting point for a great deal of skilful thinking is to define clearly in your mind what it is you're doing. Messy thinking is the enemy because it's unproductive at best and, at worst, can lead you into more trouble than you started with. This is never more true than when you're thinking your way out of a problem.

You have to know exactly what the problem is and why it needs solving. Look, suppose you're off on holiday, you have all the family's luggage loaded into the car ready for the journey, you've locked the front door, and you're ready to go. Then, to your extreme frustration, the car won't start. How are you going to solve that problem?

Hang on – which problem? I can see two key problems here: the fact the car isn't working, and the fact that you're supposed to be somewhere else. If you think you're solving the first problem, you'll get out your tools and lift the bonnet, or you'll phone the garage. Might work, or it might turn out you need a part that won't arrive before tomorrow at the earliest. So you'll have to start phoning around everyone and anyone else that might be able to fix it, phone your destination and postpone your arrival until tomorrow or the day after, unload the car, go shopping (there's no food in the house because you weren't supposed to be here) ...

Or you could solve the other problem. The problem that you're here and you're meant to be there. In that case, as soon as you establish the car

can't be fixed quickly, you need to focus on another way to get to where your holiday is waiting for you. You can sort the car out when you get home, by which time the part you need should have arrived. Or even leave someone with instructions to fix the car while you're away. Now, can you afford to hire a car? Maybe you can borrow one? Do you even need a car once you've arrived, or could you travel by train or coach? You've got a whole different problem here.

It's up to you which problem you need to solve but, if you don't think it through properly, how can you be sure you're solving the right one? A lot of problems are messy in this way – several frustrations or mini problems become conflated into one big messy problem. And the only way to arrive at a solution that works for you is to be very clear about untangling the knots to see which is the problem that you really need to get to grips with, or at least get to grips with first. Solving that issue often will take care of at least some of the others, or put you in a better position to address them.

One of the easiest ways to lose sight of this is when one of your component problems is urgent. Our instinct, when the car breaks down, is that it must be fixed as soon as possible and everything else must go on hold while we sort it out. However, if you create a situation where you don't need the car for a few days, does it matter if it's not fixed for a few days?

MESSY THINKING IS THE ENEMY

RULE 53

Loosen up

I remember a group discussion at work where we were supposed to be brainstorming ways to help our staff feel appreciated. The idea with brainstorming, of course, is that all ideas are welcome as a jumping off point and now is not the time to be negative. One member of the group, however, responded to almost every suggestion negatively. His favoured expressions were, 'That wouldn't work' and 'We've always done it this way before'. When I asked him for ideas of his own he didn't have any.

For some reason this sticks in my mind because it was one of the most extreme examples I've seen of this kind of inflexibility. The colleague in question simply couldn't see beyond his current mindset, was unable to imagine solutions he'd ...

RULE 54

Don't settle for your first answer

Most problems have more than one solution. If I'm wearing a coat and the weather heats up so I start sweating, I could cut the sleeves off the coat to cool myself down. It's *an* answer, but that doesn't make it the best one. If I thought about it for a bit longer, it might occur to me to remove the coat.

Your money problems, or your work dilemma, or the fact you and your kids keep shouting at each other, or the question of what to do with your mum now she can't really live alone any more, also have more than one solution. And the best one won't necessarily be the one you think of first.

The first answer you come up with is really useful, mind you. I alluded to this earlier – having a plan B is fantastic for taking the pressure off, which frees your mind up to think more creatively. So definitely make a note of any solution you think of, until a better one materialises. Even if that better one still only really warrants becoming the new plan B.

Listen, it can take time to come up with a really good answer to your problem. Don't expect it to be instant or you'll assume the instant answer is the best one. That's a recipe for muddling through life. Every time you hit difficulties, you take an option that's good enough but no more. Is that really how you want to live? Do you think that's the route to success and happiness?

Sure, when the problem is a minor one, it may not matter that much. But remember, we're getting into good thinking habits. If you train your mind to think the best way every time, it will think the best way when it really matters. And the best way to think is the one that leads to the best – not the quickest – outcome.

So how do you know when you've found the real, best solution? There's no simple answer but there are pointers. You're looking for the one that ticks the right boxes – not just the most boxes, but the ones that matter most. So for example, when you're deciding what to do with your elderly mum, her happiness is (I hope) an essential box to tick. Solutions that don't provide for this aren't going to make the grade. You'll need a list (mental or physical) of the essential components of a good solution, and also the preferable ones.

And adopt this principle: whatever solution you come up with, say to yourself, 'That's a good starting point. Now where can I go from here?' In other words see every idea as a beginning and not an end point. Always look for ways to develop your first thought into something even better. Assume it can be improved on. Just don't let this take you down a one-way tunnel. Remember there might be other ideas, other jumping-off points, that would take you in a different direction and that are also worth considering. If there's room for improvement, it can't be the best solution yet.

Sometimes, if you're lucky, you'll just *know* when you find the right solution. Even so, although it might feel like a gut response, your gut will have been informed by the thinking you've done before. That's how it recognises the right answer when it sees it.

**SEE EVERY IDEA AS A BEGINNING AND NOT
AN END POINT**

RULE 55

If it's plausible, it's worthwhile

If you can solve a nagging problem, it doesn't matter where your ideas come from. So don't limit yourself. Of course you'll do a lot of your own thinking, and you'll quite possibly ask experts, or the same trusted colleagues, family or friends you always ask. Remember though that it's extremely hard to avoid thinking in ruts, and you and I aren't the only ones who fall into this trap. Your best friend, your boss, your partner, your workmate, your mother – they're thinking in their own ruts too.

Suppose, whenever you're troubled by a problem, you always ask your partner's advice. It's true that this will help nudge you out of your personal thinking rut, but it will only nudge you into theirs. So now ...

RULE 56

Find a way in

I started writing this book in the middle. The thing is, as you probably know yourself, however familiar you are with your subject it can take time to get into the headspace to write. I could have started at the beginning, but I usually write the introduction last. That way, I know what it is I'm introducing because I've already written it. So yes, in that case, I could have started with Rule 1. But it wasn't grabbing me that day, and I knew the important thing was just to get going, get into it. So I picked a Rule I was in the mood for and began there.

Sometimes, getting into the right headspace is the problem you're trying to solve. Whether you're writing a book, planning an event, looking for a house, designing a product, writing a report, the biggest problem can be knowing where to start.

This often leads to stalemate and procrastination. You're not sure how to start so you don't start at all. After a while you add a second problem to this: time is slipping away. So now you can't get started *and* there's a deadline looming. Extra stress which certainly isn't helping.

I'm not sure I believe in writer's block. I don't think it's an affliction that descends on creative souls and there's nothing they can do but wait for it to pass. I suspect it's the result of poor thinking – it certainly is with me. As a writer, you have the luxury of managing your own time so you can get away with claiming the muse hasn't descended. I don't see many

middle managers claiming writer's block when they can't get going on a crucial report. They wouldn't get away with it.

Whether you're a writer, a manager or anyone else, the trick when faced with a major exercise you're struggling to get going with is to think about it differently. You don't have to start a book at the beginning. You can start anywhere you like. The same goes for everything else. Just find *anywhere* you can start, and get the thing kicked off. The problem tends to be worst when you're not feeling confident or knowledgeable about the project. So pick an element you feel is in your comfort zone, or which you have firm opinions about, and begin. Maybe you've never organised a big event before, but at least you know what you think it should *look* like. Great – start there, and let the rest of it fan out from that point. Stuck on a major presentation? Plan your conclusion first if it helps, or think about the visuals you want to use if that's your forte.

It might be that once you get properly stuck into the project, you go back and modify, delete, edit, change, remove the bit you started with. Doesn't matter. It's served its purpose now. It's not wasted work because it did a brilliant job of getting you under way, regardless of whether it's still in place at the final cut.

**YOU DON'T HAVE TO START A BOOK AT THE
BEGINNING. YOU CAN START ANYWHERE YOU
LIKE**

RULE 57

Don't get bogged down

It doesn't matter how free your thinking is, how well you've managed to step clear of the ruts, there will still be times when the solution to your problem just doesn't seem to be forthcoming. You've focused your mind as much as you can, and it doesn't seem to have worked. Well, if that's the case, stop focusing. Put your hands in the air and step away from the problem.

I occasionally like to do a crossword. I'm not very good at them, and one of the reasons is that I'm not naturally a patient person. I'll puzzle away at a clue for a minute or two, and then decide there are better things to be doing so I'll go and do them instead. Sometimes, though, I might go back to the crossword again later in the evening.

RULE 58

Try a new angle

OK so you've tried focusing, you've tried not focusing, the problem's still there. It happens – if this was easy, it wouldn't be a problem in the first place. So what next?

Well, the sky's the limit. You can try anything next. Just one rule: it has to be something you haven't tried before. By definition, the things you tried before didn't work or you wouldn't still be looking for answers. So move on, pick something different to maximise the chance of arriving somewhere new.

You're aiming to activate your creative mind so you can bring it to bear on this problem. So maybe do something creative. Draw your problem. No, I don't know what it looks like either, but that's not important. Just draw it anyway – it's bound to look different from before and that's what we're after. Plus, it's looking different with your creative head on, so that has to be good. Mind you, if drawing your problems gets to be habit, there's a danger it could become a rut, and we don't like those. So if it doesn't work, how about singing the problem instead? You can compose your own melody or use an existing one, it's up to you.

Of course it's important to keep surprising yourself by forcing your mind to approach things in new ways. So make sure you use a variety of techniques depending on the nature of the problem, your mood, what you tried last time, whether you toss heads or tails.

A friend of mine lives opposite a park and likes to work through tricky problems by walking around the park while talking them out with himself. I've seen him marching round, lost in his thoughts, gesticulating wildly (while his teenage kids cower behind the curtains desperately hoping no one thinks he's with them). Talking a problem through out loud can be very effective – doing it in a public space is optional. Apart from anything else it slows your mind down to talking speed which can be a helpful change.

You can argue with yourself too. Play devil's advocate and try to persuade yourself to adopt different options. It's not that you want to follow those routes necessarily – you might talk yourself round of course – it's that you'll have to reframe your view of the problem and look at it from different angles.

Mind mapping is another approach that helps ring the changes with some problems. It's especially good for the ones where you don't know how or where to start. Mind mapping is brilliant for just starting anywhere at random, and again helps you to focus visually and conceptually on the problem.

**IT'S IMPORTANT TO KEEP SURPRISING
YOURSELF**

RULE 59

Don't panic

There are two problems with panicking. First, it feels horrid. Second, it interferes with your thinking process and makes it much harder to be creative or even rational. By its nature, panic takes over your mind and pushes everything else out, and that's the last thing you need when you're facing a big emotional or financial problem. Once you start panicking you're lost, until you can get things back under control – whether that takes minutes or weeks.

Not that easy though, is it? And it doesn't help that panicking can sometimes seem strangely tempting, in a Fine!-I-don't-care-why-not-just-ruin-my-life-it's-rubbish-anyway kind of a way. There's almost a sense of relief at giving into panic and abdicating any attempt to ...

RULE 60

Get help

Some of us just don't like asking for help. Or rather, most of us don't like asking for help some of the time. Personally, I'm happy to ask for help assembling flat-pack furniture, but I hate asking for help with map-reading. This is because I hate putting together flat-pack furniture and I don't care who knows it, but I like to think I'm a good map reader and I don't want to admit to any weakness at it.

I say weakness – of course it's not really a weakness. That's just my perception.²⁰ If I'm as good as I think I am, it must be a very tricky bit of orienteering for me to need help. The truth (my family would tell you) is that I'm not as good as I think. I'm a very good map reader on paper (which is where maps traditionally are) but I have a tendency to think I've memorised the route so I toss the map to one side ... and then can't find it when the route doesn't look quite as I expected.

This is all about self-image and perception. All of us are happy to ask for help in areas we have no ego about. I'll readily take my car to the garage when it breaks down because I don't see myself as a mechanic and I don't expect anyone else to. However I don't like to let on if I'm struggling with my writing, for example, because I'd hate anyone to think I didn't know what I was doing.²¹

If you're struggling to solve a problem on your own, it's only logical to ask for advice. So you have to overcome your feeling that you're in some

way admitting defeat. That doesn't actually make sense. You wouldn't expect the government to take action without consultation, or a multinational company to launch in a new territory without taking any advice. So why expect yourself to raise a child, for example, without ever asking for anyone else's input? And yet countless mothers and fathers like to see themselves as good parents, and think that if they ask for advice they're broadcasting to the neighbourhood that they're useless. That's not how the neighbourhood sees it.

Listen, being able to ask for advice is a strength. It's a skill in itself, to recognise when two heads will be better than one. You'll still make the final call when it's your problem that needs solving. And you're not collapsing in a sobbing heap telling everyone you can't cope. You're approaching a fellow expert so you can pool ideas. If you were a car mechanic or a computer engineer and couldn't fix a particular technical problem, wouldn't you go and ask another engineer if they had any thoughts or experience that might help? So what's the difference?

All the skills you ever use – cooking, installing software, raising kids, appointing staff, wrapping gifts, calming down angry customers – fall into one of three categories. One: you're happy to ask for help because you don't see yourself as skilled. Two: you never ever need help ever. Or three: everything else - all the things where you sit between being halfway decent and absolutely outstanding. Be honest with yourself about the areas where asking for advice doesn't feel comfortable and remind yourself that it's a sign of strength, not weakness. If you want to solve this problem, and you can't do it alone, this is a barrier you need to overcome.

**ALL OF US ARE HAPPY TO ASK FOR HELP IN
AREAS WE HAVE NO EGO ABOUT**

20 You see – I know this stuff! And I still won't ask!

21 Just a handy example. Of course this never happens.

THINKING TOGETHER

Learning to think well on your own is a challenge. Of course it's achievable, but not without effort. And once you start trying to think along with other people, the challenge gets more interesting still. It's not only your own brain you need to manage, but everyone else's too.

When it doesn't work, thinking with other people is frustrating, irritating, unproductive. We've all been there. However, two or more brains working in harmony can be far greater than the sum of their parts, and it's a joy to be part of a group that thinks well together. Whether it's you and your partner, your team at work, a social group or any other combination of people, several minds can generate ideas and solve problems that none of the individual ...

RULE 61

You're better together

My father-in-law was a brilliant ideas person. If I was looking for suggestions for any kind of scheme, work or home, I often used to pick his brains. Once we started talking about things, the ideas would flow from both of us and I always found it hugely productive. At the end of the conversation, I would sometimes say to him, 'If anything else occurs to you later, give me a shout.' To which he would invariably reply, 'It won't.'

I have to say, in all the years I knew him, he was right. He never called me later to say, 'I've had another thought ...' He wasn't trying to be difficult, he just knew how his own mind worked. He thought best by sparking ideas off other people, and any idea that hadn't arisen during that process wasn't going to come to him later.

That's not to say that he didn't have original ideas of his own – on the contrary, he never stopped having them. However, not only were those his own ideas and not mine, but he would get to a point where he would want someone else to talk it through with in order to build it up to a workable level. He had several people he used to talk to for just this purpose, and he would pick the most appropriate ones each time.

In my experience, there are very few people who can go from the germ of an idea right through to a working model without any input from others. Almost all of us think much better – at least when it comes to generating

ideas – when we work together. Other people can knock your mind out of a rut and set it on a fresh path, while you do the same for them. The right person can help you think in whole new ways you never knew you could.

When I first conceived the idea for *The Rules of Work* (the very first book in this series) I had little more than a title and a vague gist of what it might be about. Instead of developing the idea further in my head, I immediately talked it through with my editors and we built the concept for the book, and indeed the series, together. I honestly don't recall how the conversation went or who suggested which bits, and I'm sure they don't either. I just know that by the time we'd finished we had a fully formed idea that was far better than anything I'd have arrived at on my own. Or, I think they'd agree, anything either of them would have come up with alone.

You should have worked out by now that it matters who you ask. You can talk to more than one person of course, and you can talk to them each separately or all together. You need to learn who to talk to about which kind of ideas or problems, and maybe look for more people to add to your list. Different people can be useful for different projects.

Another thing I've learnt over time is that people like being asked for their input and they enjoy discussing ideas – at least those who are any good at it. I've never had anyone turn me down when I've asked if I could pick their brains because their thoughts would be valuable to me. They're generally flattered (rightly) and enjoy the conversation. So why wouldn't you ask?

**OTHER PEOPLE CAN KNOCK YOUR MIND OUT
OF A RUT**

RULE 62

Play to everyone's strengths

Have you ever been to an escape room? You know, you pay to get locked in a room with a group of people and have an hour to solve a series of puzzles that will eventually unlock the door. I did one a few years back in Helsinki with four of my family. We had no idea what to expect and consequently we only just completed it, and only with the help of a couple of strategically provided clues from the organisers. Why didn't we do any better? I'll tell you: because we completely failed to think as a proper team.

In our defence, I would reiterate that we had no clue how it was going to work. I must get around to doing another one because if we approached it differently I'm sure we'd do better. In the event, we ...

RULE 63

Think like a hive

This Rule follows on from the last one. I know plenty of people whose mental abilities I am in awe of. People who can think like lightning, or who can solve problems intuitively, or generate ideas like turning on a tap, or get their heads round massively complex logistical concepts, or add up big numbers in their head, or make sideways leaps, or see clearly where the moral compass is pointing.

I have also worked with people who think slowly, are hyper-analytical, or who put facts and data before the human angle. These are all things that I personally can find somewhat frustrating. However it's important to recognise that these ways of thinking have their place, and there are times when they can be more valuable than anything I bring to the table.

When there's a group of you working together – thinking together – try to see yourselves as some kind of hive brain. Each one of you is a single component of a greater entity. Between you, you have all the thinking skills you need.

Even when you're alone, you bring different parts of your own individual mind to bear on whatever you're doing. You're not using the same part of your mind when you're cooking as when you're doing your accounts. You don't fire off neurons in the same bit of your brain to read the newspaper as you do when you're listening to your kids' emotional outbursts. You

need all those skills, functions, nerve centres, without needing them all at once.

The same is true of your colleague who is always focused on details, or your friend who endlessly wants to understand how things work when you just want to know what they can do for you. When a big group project comes along and you're busy generating ideas, or organising logistics, or adding up the figures, or whatever it is you enjoy and are good at, the hive is also going to need someone who will reliably keep an eye on the details, or understand how things really work.

So have some patience, tolerance, understanding of those in the group who think in ways that you don't. Appreciation even. Because without them, the hive can't function properly in the face of whatever comes along. All thinking styles have their place, and it's up to the group as a whole to moderate which ones are needed when.

**BETWEEN YOU, YOU HAVE ALL THE
THINKING SKILLS YOU NEED**

RULE 64

Leave your ego behind

An effective team of thinkers should listen to everyone's ideas. However they can't follow through on all of them. Inevitably some ideas fall by the wayside as you start working through them. Others will be developed into something new so you can't recognise the original idea at all, although you needed it to arrive at the destination.

If you're looking for one answer and you have a hundred suggestions, that's great, but in the end 99 of them won't feature heavily in the final result. That's just common sense. However it can feel frustrating if one of those 99 was your suggestion. It's even more frustrating if there were only two viable suggestions and the one that didn't get used was yours.

It's natural to feel ...

RULE 65

Keep an eye on the quiet ones

Whether you're leading the group – or, indeed, whether anyone is – we've established that you have a vested interest in making it work. Otherwise why be there? Even if it's a work group you've been told you have to be in, it's still going to be more enjoyable if it's successful. So you want to give it the best chance of working.

Some teams are handpicked and everyone is there because they have relevant and useful skills. Other groups come together by chance – an organising committee for a community event, for example, is likely to comprise anyone who was prepared to put the time in, regardless of what skills they offer. Likewise, some people will be there for their thinking skills – idea generation, problem solving, analysis, organisation, figure work – while others will have been included for their practical skills.

Even someone included because they're enthusiastic about making cakes or fixing computers may also be good at thinking. Plenty of people (myself, for example) won't be shy about sticking in their two pennyworth. But not everyone is so confident. And yet, if this group is going to think as effectively as possible, it needs the benefit of everyone's thinking skills, not only those of us who don't wait to be asked.

So always have an eye on those people who don't say much. It's possible they don't have a lot to contribute at this stage, but it's also possible they have just the ideas or solutions the team is looking for and are waiting to

feel it's OK to say so. If they're not confident enough to speak, the whole group will miss out. Never assume that people who are silent have nothing to say.

This is especially true when there are two or more vociferous people in the room. If ideas and comments are flying back and forth – even if it's always fun and friendly – it can be quite daunting to people of a shyer persuasion, or those who consider themselves junior or less qualified to speak. And yet sometimes the sharpest observations can come from people who have a fresh eye, unsullied by past experience.

Make it your job to help these people open up. Ask for their view, champion their promising ideas, make room for them to speak and ensure they're listened to. I worked with one person who literally never spoke until the group collectively started to do this – someone set the example and everyone else followed – and he turned out to be immensely valuable to the team and a fund of clever ideas and acute observations. Until we encouraged him to voice his thoughts, we'd been without the benefit of them. What a loss.

**NEVER ASSUME THAT PEOPLE WHO ARE
SILENT HAVE NOTHING TO SAY**

RULE 66

Question groupthink

I was in a work team once which was great fun because all of us were hugely positive and enthusiastic about what we were doing. We had all become good friends and sparked off each other beautifully when we were thinking together. I have to admit though that not all our fabulous and frequent ideas turned out to be as successful as we'd anticipated. They could sometimes be a bit hit and miss.

After a while we brought someone else into the group. We all liked him and were surprised to find that, although he was a very upbeat person normally, when it came to throwing ideas around he could be quite negative. We'd all get fired up about something and he tended to put a damper on our ideas a bit. It was slightly frustrating ...

RULE 67

Conflict is OK

Here's a Rule to pick up where the last one left off. We established that it's not helpful if you all think alike and agree with each other most of the time. So it follows that the most useful group is one that thinks differently and whose members often disagree with each other.

You can see the risk here. If you convene a group of people who keep disagreeing with each other, what's to stop every session descending into acrimony, name-calling, sulking, animosity and – ironically, given the reason for it – dysfunctional lack of progress.

So avoid groups where everyone agrees, and avoid groups where you all disagree. What does that leave? Not so fast ... I didn't say you mustn't argue with each other. You just have to argue productively. The group has to find a way to express disagreement without it becoming a problem.

The single most important way to achieve this is for everyone in the group to understand that it's their job to say if they disagree, and that it's necessary to ensure the group collectively thinks at its very best. Once you know people are briefed to challenge your thinking, and that you're likewise expected to question theirs, it becomes much easier to take. It de-personalises it.

There have to be rules within the team – often it helps to spell them out from the start and reiterate them from time to time. You might customise

the rules but essentially they should include these:

- No personal comments.
- Disagree with the thought, not the person expressing it.
- Don't raise your voice.
- Let everyone's view be heard.
- It's not a competition (for whose idea 'wins').
- Don't become emotionally involved.

This last rule is much easier to follow if the previous ones are respected. Indeed, respect is the key word here – you don't all have to like each other, but you must respect each other.

Positive conflict – and no, that's not a contradiction in terms – is what you need. It makes a strong team even better. Being challenged stretches you. Having your ideas questioned makes you work harder to justify them, or to acknowledge that they have flaws. Remember you're a hive – the whole team succeeds or fails together, because the whole team approves or rejects any idea or course of action. It's not important who first came up with the idea. Oh OK, if it was you, you can permit yourself a little private pat on the back, but only when you're sure no one is looking.

If you're part of a group where, even after setting out the rules, it is impossible for everyone to work effectively together, things have to be shaken up. Either the people within the group have to change, someone has to leave, or the group might as well be disbanded if it can't work productively.

**YOU DON'T ALL HAVE TO LIKE EACH OTHER,
BUT YOU MUST RESPECT EACH OTHER**

RULE 68

Think up a storm

Brainstorming is a very specific way of thinking as a group. Generally you brainstorm at the beginning of a project or when there's a collective problem that needs solving. It's very much an early part of the ideas process and involves a group of people throwing out as many ideas as possible. The idea is not to arrive at the answer, but to create options for working towards it. So it's just stage one in the project.

In some ways it's seen as the classic style of group thinking. It was first formulated as a technique back in the 1930s by Alex F. Osborn, although one imagines people must have been doing something similar for millennia before he refined the process. Osborn had become frustrated by how few ideas his staff ...

RULE 69

Have stupid ideas

Never underestimate the creative abilities of the people around you. One of the reasons brainstorming works so well is because one person's daft idea can be the next person's genius solution. If you don't voice the daft idea, they'll never get the chance to convert it into something viable.

My wife and I work as a particularly effective team in this respect. I tend to make somewhat off-the-wall suggestions. Instead of rejecting them out of hand, she reins them back to create something more achievable. My suggestion might be wildly expensive, or time-consuming, or otherwise impractical. She practicalises them.

I'll give you an example. We were lucky enough to have a stream at the bottom of our garden. The only downside was that it had banks that were too high to get decent access into it unless you were aiming for total immersion. This was a bit of a shame as the kids were still small and would enjoy paddling in the water. Instead of just putting up with this and being grateful for what we had, I wanted to improve on it. So I suggested we re-route the stream into a flat area to create a big loop where access would be easier. My wife rightly observed that this would be hugely costly, take considerable effort, and might not work because natural waterways can be unpredictable. However she thought about it, and it led her to a much better solution: why not just dig out a small section of the bank to create a little 'beach'? Perfect. And she'd never have thought of it without me.

I've known a few actors in my time. And directors will tell you that it's much easier to get a well-judged performance by reining in an actor who is going a bit over the top, than by trying to coax more from an actor who isn't giving you enough. Touching your foot on the brake is far simpler than revving up and accelerating. So ideas that seem to be extreme or off-the-wall are often the easiest to turn into good ideas.

You must have – or find – the confidence to make suggestions even when you think other people might judge them negatively. I have a line I like to use in this situation: 'I've got a stupid idea but I'm going to say it because someone might turn it into a good idea.' This works for two reasons. First, you don't have to worry people will judge you for having a stupid idea because you've already made it clear you recognise it as such. And second, instead of rejecting it out of hand (hopefully they wouldn't but who knows), the rest of the group is likely to give reasonable consideration to whether there's the kernel of a good idea they can build on.

Similarly make sure the people around you know that they are always allowed to air 'stupid' ideas without fear of censure, and make sure you listen to see if you can think them into more practical ones.

**TOUCHING YOUR FOOT ON THE BRAKE IS FAR
SIMPLER THAN REVVING UP AND
ACCELERATING**

RULE 70

Keep in synch

When you're part of a group that thinks together – long term or short term – you are unlikely to spend all of your time together. You might be together from nine to five, but it's unlikely you'll be focused on working as a group for all that time. You might be in the same room but working on separate tasks. Other groups come together for just for an hour a week or a month.

So there will be time apart, and perhaps lots of it. Up to a point this is a good thing. Obviously it helps you avoid getting on each other's wick, plus it gives you all time to assimilate after your group thinking sessions. Sometimes ideas, problems, issues, thoughts will come to you after a group session because you have a bit of space to think alone. ...

MAKING DECISIONS

In practical terms, the crunch times for your thinking skills come when you have to make decisions. Especially the big decisions: changing jobs, moving house, spending large sums of money, living with someone (your partner, your parents, a friend), starting a business, starting a family. Being able to think clearly enough to get these decisions right is essential. A lot of less significant decisions still affect your quality of life and, anyway, they're good thinking practice for when the big ones come along.

It's obviously going to matter to you that you get these decisions right. And, more than that, it matters that you *know* you're getting them right. Your own confidence in the choices you make is really important – you're unlikely to regret a decision you believe deep down was right, and the upheaval of changing jobs, moving house, getting married, going to uni, getting the builders in, or whatever, is going to be far less stressful if you do it with an underlying self-assurance that it's the right thing.

The fact is that only you can make decisions for yourself.

You can solicit any amount of advice from friends or experts, but in the end these big choices will always have an emotional and subjective component which only you

understand. So you have to be able to think your way through these things for yourself, if you're going to arrive at a decision that you have real confidence in. The following Rules will enable you to do just that.

RULE 71

Decide what you're deciding

Well, duh! No, hang on. Actually it's surprisingly easy to make the wrong decision by mistake. Usually that's because we fall into the trap of focusing on the means rather than the end. I worked with someone who was quite sure she wanted to leave her job and go freelance. We had a long chat about it. She was unhappy and felt that working for herself would be a way of avoiding the problems she encountered as an employee. As we talked, however, it became clear that she hadn't fully considered the implications of being freelance. Once she thought about it, she realised that the insecurity that goes along with freelancing really wouldn't suit her. In the end she decided the best solution to her problems was ...

RULE 72

Don't start at square two

Most of us, a lot of the time, start our decision making at square two. You know you want to change jobs; the question is what kind of new work should you look for. Or you need to move house to somewhere bigger, but where? Or which university course should you apply to?

These all seem like reasonable challenges to set yourself, but you need to go back to square one with all of them. Maybe square one still leads to square two, but think it through consciously to be sure it does. Here is square one for the examples I've just given you:

- Are you sure you want to change jobs? Or could you change whatever you don't like about your current job – ask for a pay rise, or transfer, or go part time, or work from home, or sit at a different desk?
- Need to move house? It might be cheaper to extend your present house if space is the problem. Or rent out rooms if running costs are the issue.
- Heading to uni? Have you consciously ruled out going straight into a job, or taking time out, or doing an apprenticeship of some kind?

Square one means sticking with what you're currently doing, with adjustments. Of course very often square two does turn out to be the next

step. Not always though, and the status quo – square one – is almost always the cheapest, simplest, quickest option. Even if it needs a bit of tweaking. This is where clear, logical thinking is so important.

I remember a friend who was setting up a business from home, and was about to build a cabin in the back garden because she needed somewhere to run it from and store her stock. This was going to cost a fair bit, as the cabin would need heating and lighting and so on. She was busy getting quotes from builders and trying to minimise the costs, when she realised that she had a room in the house that almost never got used. With a bit of rejigging she could free it up completely and run the business from there instead. Not only cheaper but also much more convenient. She'd started at square two: 'I need to build a space to run the business from' instead of square one: 'Do I need to build a space to run the business from? Or do I already have one?' It can be hard to look at your living space in a whole new way, but this kind of thinking process can save you huge stress, upheaval and expense.

It's surprising how few people routinely practise this kind of thinking skill. To a Rules thinker, however, this should be instinctive. Any time you are about to embark on a change that will be costly or stressful, always make sure you really need to do it. I'm not arguing against change in itself – it can be fun, exciting and shake us up in a good way. However this is about decisions that are prompted by some kind of dissatisfaction with the way things currently are, or an enforced change such as leaving school, or redundancy. The tendency can be to think you need much bigger changes than maybe you do. Doing nothing – with a few tweaks – should always be one of the options on the table if it's available.

**THE STATUS QUO IS ALMOST ALWAYS THE
CHEAPEST, SIMPLEST, QUICKEST OPTION.
EVEN IF IT NEEDS A BIT OF TWEAKING**

RULE 73

Set yourself boundaries

You're moving house. Money is no object and you don't mind where you live, even abroad. You could choose somewhere really large, that maybe needs renovating. Although a little country cottage would be sweet. Or perhaps a city flat or a maisonette. Hey, it could be fun to convert a windmill! Or maybe build your own place from scratch ...

How wonderful to have so many options. Except, actually, where on earth do you start? You could move *literally* anywhere. It would be much easier to have a few constraints really: being within an hour's commute from work, or near your parents, or within a certain budget, or in a village, or with a garden. Of course most of us have constraints whether we want them or not, but you ...

RULE 74

Untangle the knots first

Some decisions are especially complicated because they're interwoven with other decisions. You don't know what to do about A until you've sorted out B, but B is dependent on C. Sometimes they intermesh so that you've no idea where to start, let alone what to decide. One couple I know was trying to decide whether to move to London (150 miles away), where to send their child to school, and she was considering cutting her working hours to free up time to retrain. And if so, what should she retrain as? They couldn't see how to make any of these decisions until after they'd made the others. This kind of knotty problem often leads to stalling and procrastination,²⁴ simply because it's so overwhelming.

However, if you muster all your thinking skills you *can* untangle this kind of knotty problem. Trust me. First of all, put any of the elements you can into series. There may be no point thinking about where to send your child to school until you know where you'll be living. If you don't move to London, the options for retraining will be limited by what courses are available locally so, again, the 'London or not' decision needs to come first.

Not only will this clear things a bit, it will also show up whether you need to reprioritise. Perhaps, when you look at it like this, you'll realise that your choice of school is really important to you, and you don't want it to be reliant on where you live – you'd rather fit your location around the school, not the other way around.

Good. You're making headway. Some decisions are on hold until you know where you're living and you've gained a sense of priority about the decisions that will come first. Suppose this train of thought made you realise that the choice of school is the most important thing. That has now become a parameter for your other decisions: must be near a suitable school. Maybe even a specific school – in which case the location issue is solved too.

OK, that all helped, but there are still some interlinked decisions left. So the next thing to do is to think through each one in isolation. Suppose – for the sake of argument – the other complications weren't there. In an ideal world, what discipline would you want to retrain in? It's much easier to think this through when your head isn't cluttered with all the other stuff. It may be that you don't end up with your ideal solution, but I can't emphasise enough the importance of knowing what that ideal answer is. That way you'll make a conscious decision – on the balance of benefits – about how far you're compromising on it.

You should find that by the time you've gone through this sequence – put the decisions you can into series, prioritise those you can't, then think through each in isolation – everything will start to become clear. My friend did this and realised that she'd nearly made a decision she'd have regretted (retraining in a discipline because it was available, not because she really wanted to do it). Separating out the thinking process had given her the clarity she needed.

**IT'S MUCH EASIER TO THINK THIS THROUGH
WHEN YOUR HEAD ISN'T CLUTTERED WITH**

ALL THE OTHER STUFF

24 Let's deal with procrastination later. It can wait ...

RULE 75

Go for Goldilocks

Most decisions of any size will need some research – in other words collecting information. Costs, timescales, options, opinions and so on. I say most because there are a few very subjective decisions (do I want kids?) where collecting your thoughts is more use than collecting information. For everything else, you need catalogues, job adverts, prices, prospectuses, lists of contacts, technical information.

And don't forget that a lot of decisions will rely to some degree on other people's feelings. How do the team feel about a new management structure, what do the children think of moving house, will the neighbours object if you put in for an extension, is your business partner OK with you going part time, would your ...

RULE 76

Vet your advisors

When a big decision comes along, we generally ask other people for their input – colleagues, family, friends, professionals. People who don't have a vested interest in the outcome, but who we reckon will be able to give us a balanced, unbiased opinion.

Ah, if only. But there's no such thing as an unbiased opinion, by definition. Facts may be unbiased (although which facts? I'll come to that in a minute ...) but an opinion is always a personal standpoint, and everyone has their own take.

Suppose you're thinking of investing in the property market and you know someone who has done the same thing themselves. Ideal! They'll be able to give you the lowdown, won't they? Well yes, they will, but only from their perspective. If it worked out well for them, they're likely to advise you to go ahead. But that's their personal biased opinion. If it didn't work out for them, they'll probably advise you the opposite. And yet you and I both know that some property investments go well and others don't, so their standpoint isn't going to be the only one.

I'm not saying don't consult them. They will probably have some useful insights. But don't think just because they have more experience than you that their advice is necessarily right. If you can find someone with a different track record, that will help to balance things. However what you

have now is two personal opinions from people who have more experience than you. Neither might be right for you. Just remember that.

This brings us back to facts and whether they're biased. Assuming the facts you collect are true,²⁶ whoever is presenting them will have chosen which facts they consider relevant, and that process contains an inherent bias. You only have to look at how political parties argue over facts to see this process taken to its logical conclusion. Usually (although perhaps not always) both will present true facts that seem to support opposite arguments. That's because they pick different data, or present it in different ways, so it appears to say what they want it to.

You might be consulting someone who has no intention of doing this, but it's unavoidable. People have deep-seated and sometimes unconscious beliefs about things that influence their perception of the facts. Imagine asking advice about property investments from someone born into wealth and then from someone who grew up in a council house. They might well have very different values around the ethics of housing, and these are likely to be reflected in their advice. They may not realise it, but they are likely to quote the facts that back up their beliefs (see Rule 92).

Look, I'm not saying you can't ask anyone's advice. I'm just saying be aware of this stuff. A Rules player thinks about these things before asking advice and weighs them against the advice itself.

**AN OPINION IS ALWAYS A PERSONAL
STANDPOINT, AND EVERYONE HAS THEIR
OWN TAKE**

26 But obviously don't just assume it.

RULE 77

Be your own advisor

Some decisions are less about facts, more about feelings. From what colour to paint the bathroom, to whether to hit send on your stinky email to your landlord, these are ultimately decisions only you can make. Of course you know that, but it's still good to get advice from other people.

Who to ask though? Maybe your mum, or perhaps your best friend. Or a work colleague, your partner, your brother ... how are you going to choose? Well, I know how most of us choose a lot of the time.

I had a lightbulb moment about this a few years ago. I can't even remember what the decision was, but I decided to call a particular person. When I couldn't reach them, I figured I'd better call someone else. There was an obvious alternative ...

RULE 78

Don't jump to conclusions

I was called in once by a company that made high-end one-off pieces of furniture to sell locally. They showed me some of it – lovely big kitchen tables, handcrafted wardrobes and armoires, solid traditional dressers. Beautiful. Their problem was that they were struggling to sell the stuff. They had discovered, somewhat late in the day, that most local people were looking for side tables and little cupboards and wall shelves, and there was almost no demand for the big luxury furniture their workshop was filling up with.

It's a pretty good example of how big a hole you can dig for yourself by making false assumptions. Want another one? I know a couple who decided they wanted to move back to the area they grew up in 40 years previously. They bought a house, got planning permission for a new build in the garden, built the new house, sold off the original house – all of which took literally years – and then realised, when they were finally able to move, that actually they didn't want to be that far away from the grandchildren and all their friends. They had just assumed they'd be happy back in their old stomping ground without thinking through that assumption.

When you consider it, most big decisions are based on a whole series of choices or mini decisions. So you might decide that you want to start your own business. Now you have to decide what sort of business, where you'll run it from, how you'll raise the funds, and so on. You'll draw up a

business plan, which will entail putting together estimates of costs and income and likely sales. The problem comes when you sort of forget they were only estimates and treat them as firm figures. Or assume there's a market when there isn't – or at least not without adjusting the costs, price, or products or service you offer. You could end up ploughing all your savings into a doomed business – pretty much what my furniture makers had done.

Want to change jobs? Once you've made that decision, you'll go on to decide whether you want to stay in the industry or change careers, and then what jobs to apply for, and even whether to relocate. But hang on ... suppose the original decision was wrong? You started at square two and assumed a new job was the answer to all your problems – a classic form of jumping to conclusions. Those early wrong assumptions are especially dangerous, because so many of your subsequent mini decisions are predicated on them.

If you don't want to make this kind of mistake, you need to ask yourself right from the start 'Why do I think this? What's my evidence for it? How do I know it's true?' Get other people's opinions as well as your own. Ask as many people as you reasonably can to interrogate your plans, cross-examine you on where you're getting your information from, query your assumptions, question why you're so sure this is the right decision. Just make sure you don't dig yourself a big deep hole through not thinking properly.

**MOST BIG DECISIONS ARE BASED ON A
WHOLE SERIES OF CHOICES OR MINI**

DECISIONS

RULE 79

Understand your emotions

Emotion certainly has a part to play in making good decisions (I'll come on to that in the next Rule).²⁷ However, emotions are the culprit in a huge number of bad decisions. My own personal fault is making snap decisions for no good reason. Frankly, how much can it matter when you're choosing which chocolate bar to buy, or which evening to go to the cinema? But it's a whole different story when you're buying a house or a car or booking an expensive holiday or deciding whether to take a job, or indeed whether to hand in your notice in a fit of pique.

If this describes you, just stop it (I'm talking to myself here too). I understand, I really do, but it's only a matter of time before you do something you really ...

RULE 80

Balance logic and emotion

So it's not good to let your emotions get the better of you if you want to make the best decision. But interestingly, it's not good to remove all emotion from the exercise either.

Research has been done with people who have suffered brain damage that makes them unable to feel emotions. And one thing they all have in common is that they can't make decisions. They can rationalise all the arguments, but they don't know how to plump for a particular choice. Neuroscientists have concluded that this is because very few decisions are without any kind of emotional component. Even choosing between coffee and tea, or cereal and toast, becomes almost impossible if you can't bring your emotions into play. So where does that leave you when you're choosing a job or a house or a car, let alone whether to have children or whether to end a relationship?

There's a common fallacy that emotions are irrational, and decision making should be a rational process – therefore leaving no room for emotions. The last Rule made it very clear how it's possible for emotions to get in the way of good decisions, but so does an absence of emotion. Your feelings do several important jobs when it comes to deciding what to do.

For one thing, without any emotional input, it's very hard to know how much importance to attach to all your research and information. Does this

factor outweigh that one? Is this data as relevant as that? Is it worth taking an exciting and career-enhancing job in the USA, given that you won't be able to buy Marmite there? Should you buy this perfect flat that ticks all your boxes, even though it's three floors up and there's always a possibility the lift might break down? I'm using extreme examples to make my point: without emotion, how can you balance your career against Marmite?²⁸ In the same way, how can you assess the risks accurately without any emotional input? (We'll look at risk in more detail in Rule 91 by the way.)

Emotion can be a key part of the overall question too. Suppose that flat ticks all the practical boxes, but you're afraid you might be lonely that far from your friends? That fear – and that potential for loneliness – are important considerations. They can't be quantified rationally either. Are you slightly anxious that you might be a bit isolated until you've made new friends or are you dreading the possibility you might be permanently unhappy? Those are answers only you can give, and only on an emotional level. And they're just as important as all the practical factors (as you'll have established by using your emotional judgement to weigh them up).

Another important reason for making decisions with an emotional ingredient is that you'll feel (yes, an emotion word) much more investment in the decision if you have considered it emotionally. You'll buy into it, be far more committed to making it work, and your approach to it will be more positive.

So you have to balance emotional and rational thinking. The crucial thing is that you are self-aware about this, and you understand the role your emotions are playing.

**THERE'S A COMMON FALLACY THAT
EMOTIONS ARE IRRATIONAL, AND DECISION
MAKING SHOULD BE A RATIONAL PROCESS**

²⁸ I'm implying here that the choice should be obvious, but actually I suspect my editor would follow the Marmite. [*Yes, I would! – Ed*]

RULE 81

Learn to compromise

You can't always have what you want. My mother used to tell me that and – much as I hate to admit it – she was right. In fact, you very rarely get *exactly* what you want. Not when it matters. If you're not prepared to settle for less than perfect, you may end up with nothing at all.

A friend of mine has a mother who has been trying to move house for 15 years, but won't buy a house that doesn't tick every single box.

Unfortunately she sold her last house 15 years ago, and the money sitting in the bank (from which she has to pay out rent) has not increased in value as much as house prices have risen over that time. So in fact, it becomes harder and harder to find the perfect house because her ideal house is no longer ...

RULE 82

Find option C

Suppose you're not happy with any of the options, but you can't sidestep the decision? Maybe a member of your team has left and you have to appoint someone new. Or perhaps you can't afford to stay in your current house and need to move. Or you and your partner are getting married but have widely different views on how many people to invite to the wedding.

These are decisions that have to be made and where you can't see a good option. They can be hugely problematic and can even feel like stalemate if you're in conflict with someone else. Making a good decision can feel exhilarating. Failing to make any decision can be miserable, depressing, fraught, frustrating and overwhelming.

So don't let it happen. This is where you have to get properly creative. If none of the options on the table will do, clearly you will have to find another option. I've noticed that the people who are best at doing this are the ones who approach it in a positive frame of mind. As Henry Ford said, 'Whether you think you can, or you think you can't – you're right.' If you believe there's another option out there, you'll find it. If you think this is it, and what's the point looking, and nothing will solve the problem, and it's all a waste of time ... I'm willing to bet that a new and workable option will never present itself to you. Or if it does, you won't recognise it.

Let's see where we can get to with the example I started with. You've lost a team member, you've advertised and you've interviewed, and you can't find a suitable replacement. So how about advertising somewhere new and maybe unexpected? How about taking on someone less experienced than you originally wanted (so a lower salary) and investing in training them (with the money saved)? How about reallocating roles in the team so you can recruit someone with a completely different set of skills? How about just not recruiting at all? Look, that's just a fraction of the possible solutions that might exist. Not all of them will be viable, but some will, and so will others I haven't suggested.

If you can't agree a decision with someone else, getting creative can also be a way to save face. Suppose you're at a stand-off where you insist on option A and they demand option B (I know this is unlikely if you're a Rules player, but it can happen even to us occasionally). You might both privately wish it hadn't come to this, but not feel ready to capitulate. What you need is option C. Something you can both agree on without backing down from your original veto of the other one's preferred decision. So you want a small family wedding and your partner wants to invite 150 people? (I'm assuming you've both vetoed inviting 75 people and having a wedding neither of you really wants.) What if you eloped romantically? Or got married in a tropical paradise where fewer people can afford to attend but, well, you'd be in a tropical paradise, so who really cares? Or don't get married at all, at least for now – again, the possibilities are almost infinite. You just have to find the one that works.

<p>IF NONE OF THE OPTIONS ON THE TABLE WILL DO, CLEARLY YOU WILL HAVE TO FIND</p>
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ANOTHER OPTION

RULE 83

Assess the cost of a bad decision

I well remember talking to a friend once who was agonising over a tricky decision. He had been losing sleep over it, worried he might get it wrong. I asked him, ‘What’s the worst-case scenario?’ and had the delight of watching the relief palpably spread across his face as he realised that although it was a big decision, the worst that could happen wasn’t that bad.

You’d be surprised how often this is the case. In that instance, he was trying to decide whether to change jobs. He worked in an industry with a buoyant jobs market, and had valuable skills, so actually if he hated the new job he could just move again. Not ideal, but also not a catastrophe, not that likely, not worth losing sleep over.

RULE 84

Regret is a waste of energy

There are few more pointless emotions than regret. It's all about feeling sad over something you did – or failed to do – in the past, so by definition there's no way you can change it. You could not think about it I suppose. If you *can* change an outcome you don't like, you will do. If you can't, regret can seem like the only option.

It's a bit self-indulgent though, isn't it? In the end, you're bound to end up feeling sorry for yourself. And who does that help? Much better to resolve not to be a regretter because, in all honesty, it makes no sense.

The fact is, you have no idea what would happen if you made a different decision. Listen, if you'd taken that job after all, that now looks so perfect through your rose-tinted glasses, perhaps you'd have been so excited on your first day that you forgot to look as you crossed the road, and got hit by a car. No, I know it's not likely, but you don't *know*. The colleague at the next desk might have been a nightmare to work with, you might have been headhunted by a client and then hated *that* job ... each example may be unlikely, but there are infinite possibilities and the ones that actually happened might not have been nearly as good as you imagine. So it's just pointless regretting your decisions, whatever they are, because the alternative always *could* have been worse.

Even if you've gone through bad times as a result of your past decisions (which might still have been better than the alternatives, see above) well,

those experiences are what made you the incredible person you are now. Without hardship or trauma or frustration or grief, we wouldn't grow into the complex and fascinating people we all are. Take those experiences away, and you have to give up part of yourself with them. So let go of the regret, and value what you've learnt and who it has made you.

There is something else you can do too – not about past regrets but to avoid future ones: make really strong decisions and make them consciously. If you think through every decision you make from now on, following these Rules and any practical strategies you can find in books or online, then you will know that each decision has been the best one you could have made at the time. You'll be able to look back and know that in the same circumstances, you would do the same thing again. You would collect the same information, consider the same options, consult the same advisors, make the same compromises, come up with the same options, set yourself the same parameters, allow your emotions the same weight, and come down in favour of the same course of action.

It's pretty hard to regret a decision that you would still make in the same situation. You may occasionally wish things had turned out differently, but you won't kick yourself for it.

**MAKE REALLY STRONG DECISIONS AND
MAKE THEM CONSCIOUSLY**

RULE 85

Be honest about procrastinating

Oh, yeah, I said I'd mention procrastination at some point, didn't I? Might as well do that now I guess. Um, yes ... I seem to have covered everything else in this section.

Best get on with it then.

Sometimes waiting to see what happens is a good call. But it has to be a deliberate, conscious choice – a decision in itself. Usually with a time limit. For example, you might decide you'll wait a year to see what business rates do, or wait six months before handing in your notice in case a likely promotion comes up. Or delay getting married until after you've found somewhere to live together.

The rest of the time, doing nothing is just an excuse for avoiding or sidestepping the decision. So why do you need ...

CRITICAL THINKING

Your mind needs to be honed and trained to think healthily, to be organised, to make decisions, to be creative and to solve problems. And there's one last group of skills the true Rules thinker has to master. You need to be able to think critically – that's in the old-fashioned sense of criticism, which is not about being negative but simply about evaluating.

These Rules will enable you to evaluate arguments, to think logically, to form balanced and valid opinions, to make connections, to detect inconsistency. You will be able to listen to someone else's viewpoint, read an article online, or study a book, and then evaluate it, assess data, analyse statistics, and form your own intellectual view on its merits. So it follows you'll also be able to analyse and assess your own opinions, which is always fun. If you find your position on any topic is indefensible, you don't have to tell anyone, but you can quietly modify it.

Valuable as facts and information are, they're of limited use without critical thought. This is what enables you to use the facts, to exploit the information, to critique and build on your creative ideas. If you can do this, you will be far more

useful to yourself and others, not to mention far more valuable to an employer.

This section is about intellectual rigour, not about emotions. So keep in mind Rules 50, 79 and 80 and others about not letting your emotions get in the way of rational thought. When it comes to analysing data, evaluating arguments, considering options, you need your rational, incisive, logical brain firmly in control.

RULE 86

Read John Donne

It doesn't have to be John Donne, although I can't think why anyone wouldn't want to read him. He was a seventeenth-century English writer of poetry and sermons (you can enjoy them whether or not you share his beliefs). Perhaps his most famous line is 'no man is an island', which is part of an eloquent sermon justifying this viewpoint. He's an easy writer to read because many of his poems are short and you can dip in and out of them, or read one a day.

You want to know why you have to read Donne? Well, the thing about Donne is that not only are his writings beautiful, brilliantly crafted, moving and still relevant today, they are also thought-provoking. To appreciate them fully, you have to engage your brain. He uses ...

RULE 87

Don't be played for a fool

The world is full of people and organisations who want you to do or believe what they tell you. From advertising campaigns to fake news, we're all surrounded by manipulative information intended to push us into buying this tin of beans, listening to this music, wearing these clothes, voting for that candidate.

I don't know about you, but I don't much care for being told what to do, and even less for being told how to think. I like to make my own decisions, form my own views, thank you very much.

Then again, I do have to buy tins of beans, and wear clothes, and indeed I choose to listen to music and to vote. And some of those messages that I read or hear or see online do sound quite appealing. Maybe they really are as good as they seem – are they? How on earth do you gauge whether you're hearing fake news or being sold false promises?

By asking some pertinent questions is how. You think for yourself these days, remember, so be conscious that everyone is selling you their product, their ideas, their beliefs for a reason. You need to know what that reason is before you can decide if you want what they're pushing. So don't be a sucker, do some serious thinking before you commit yourself.

Remember Rule 3? This is the critical thinking application of that Rule.

Start by asking yourself who benefits and how from the information you're being given. If you're looking at an advertisement, it's probably obvious who's behind it. But what about broader messages? Is that campaign telling you to wear a cycle helmet being funded by the health service or by helmet manufacturers? Do the people telling you how dangerous unpasteurised milk is have a political agenda? The answer doesn't necessarily invalidate the information, but it does shed more light on it.

Some people will try to fool you by giving you partial information and hoping you won't notice. My wife remembers being told years ago by a nurse that a certain percentage of pregnant women who eat soft-cooked eggs contract salmonella, which can harm the unborn child. Even if that percentage is pretty low it would probably still deter you – it's meant to. But hang on, there's relevant information missing from that data. Did you notice? Of course you did. You also need to know how *likely* it is to harm your child. If their mother contracts salmonella, how many babies are actually harmed – 1 in 10? 1 in 100,000? That has to make a big difference. You might still decide that any risk is too high, and I'm not advising you to eat soft-boiled eggs if you're pregnant – I'm advising you to think for yourself. Including questioning why this information isn't included. There might be a very good reason, but if you're serious about being a Rules thinker, you'll want to know what it is.

Keep an eye out for emotive language too. Organisations, political parties, advertisers, they do like to use emotionally charged words and images to persuade you to think their way instead of your own. Guilt trips, fear, emotional blackmail – learn to spot when they're used against you. Charities will almost always show you a picture of an *attractive* starving

child, or a *cute* furry animal.³¹ Even if it's a good cause and you choose to give to it, you should still be aware that you're being manipulated.

**EVERYONE IS SELLING YOU THEIR PRODUCT,
THEIR IDEAS, THEIR BELIEFS FOR A REASON**

³¹ I'm never sure if this is ethical – there's an interesting question to think about.

RULE 88

Stand back and take in the view

A senior manager applied for a job running a big wildlife charity. The interview process was very thorough and spread over a couple of days. It involved tours and interviews and presentations and so on. She spent ages researching the requirements of the job, the structure of the charity, how they spent their money, and put together loads of evidence that she could handle a budget, manage an organisation and had the kind of management style they were looking for.

Finally she wrote her presentation. When it was drafted, she asked a friend of mine to take a look at it for her. He told me that she had set out a really clear vision for the future of the organisation and how she would make it happen ... but ...

RULE 89

Look for what comes next

One of the things that sets the best thinkers apart is the way they keep on thinking where other people stop. School teachers will tell you that this is a classic way to identify the brightest students, but you can learn to do it now even if you didn't do it as a child.

Don't just passively accept the information – or the ideas – you're given. See them as a starting point and not an end point. Where can you go from here? If this is true, what else might also be true? Or indeed what else has to be true? Or what follows on? Look for deductions, extrapolations, correlations, inferences.

Obviously you can't be doing this all the time. Or can you? Actually, we all do it in a small way and it's just a matter of thinking bigger. If I suggest we go to the movies, and I tell you what time the film is on, you'll use that information to work out whether you can get back home and change after work or whether you need to go straight there. If I tell you the film's running time, you'll deduce whether this is the last showing of the evening.

A friend of mine was buying a pedigree puppy. She knew you were supposed to make sure the breeder was reputable and raising the puppies indoors around people, not outside in a puppy farm. But how could you tell from a website? She soon noticed that a lot of the websites had loads of photos of the puppies indoors – sometimes as many as a thousand

photos. The dodgy breeders might fake a couple of indoor pics, but they weren't going to bother with that many. So she realised she could trust the websites with loads of photos.

These are simple calculations and natural trains of thought. But you couldn't manage even this level of thinking if you weren't taking one piece of information and using it to lead you to the next. Now what you need to do is get your brain into the habit of questioning the next steps, seeing the logical progression, making predictions, whenever you read a report, or watch the news, or hear a presentation, or listen to someone air their views.

Many entrepreneurs have started successful businesses because they read or heard something that made them think, 'Hang on, if that's the case, surely people would like this or that product ...'

Back in 2005, one car insurer made just such a leap. Everyone knows that women drivers are statistically less of a risk. And women's behaviour typically can differ from men's in other ways – for example they are likely to carry more personal possessions around with them. This was common knowledge, but only one insurer thought through the implications of this and set up a car insurance company aimed specifically at women, with lower premiums, and handbag insurance as standard.

Whether you're making a connection that explains someone's behaviour, or recognising that language similarities between two countries suggest a historic link, or noticing that people boarding the subway train all have wet umbrellas so it must be raining up top, you're actually thinking, 'Oh, I get it, so if this is the case then that must follow ...'

**SEE INFORMATION AS A STARTING POINT AND
NOT AN END POINT**

RULE 90

Don't bother your pretty little head

When you're trying to assess information and draw conclusions from it, one of the hardest things can be having too much data. Maybe you're researching a particular option and there's a huge amount of stuff out there, more than you could possibly want, so which do you need and which can you safely ignore? You have to be able to sift information, and you have to be sure you're getting it right so you don't discard anything you should have kept hold of.

Facts are all very well, but how do you know if they're relevant? What if they appear to conflict with each other? If you have two similar sets of data doing roughly the same job, which one should you use?

First of all, recognise that there's such a ...

RULE 91

Consider the odds

Generally speaking, we're rubbish at calculating risk. Which is a shame, considering how useful it is to know the risk when we're assessing options and making decisions. For example, if you're afraid of flying, you'll think your flight is more likely to crash than the seasoned and relaxed flyer sitting next to you thinks. You can't both be right. What's more, you'll think the flight you're on is much more likely to crash than you would have done if you were still safely on the ground. I say 'safely', but statistically you could be much less safe on the ground – if you were driving, or crossing a road, or playing rugby. You won't take that into account though.

We're all the same, and to some extent it goes with being human. In any case even experts don't always know exactly what the risks are. So I'm not suggesting that you can think your way to being perfect at calculating risk every time. However it is important to understand the pitfalls when it comes to assessing the risk of taking a particular course of action. You need to be aware of your own perception of risk, and also that of people around you who are trying to persuade you towards, or away from, a decision.

One of the critical considerations is balancing risk against gains or losses. A small risk that will, at best, bring a minimal reward and, at worst, be catastrophic is probably not worth taking. On the other hand, a significant

risk might be worthwhile if it promises huge gains at the risk of minor losses. So when you're thinking through risk, take this into account.

And bear in mind that people (yes, that's you) are more inclined to take risks that promise big benefits, even if the potential losses are also significant. Also we underestimate risks that involve an activity we enjoy compared with the risk of an activity we don't. You're more likely to underestimate the risk of doing something you have control over, such as driving or skiing or running down stairs. In fact you're more likely to underestimate any risk when you're in a good mood compared with when you're feeling upset angry or scared.

Here's a risk in itself: if you don't keep your brain primed and alert, you can fail to spot risks that you should be aware of. That's especially true if you're focused on a bigger risk. So if you're worrying about your (perceived) risk of flying, you might overlook the risk of leaving your passport at home.

Keep an eye on cumulative risk too. Some decisions involve a series of potential risks – the risk of the costs increasing, the risk of crucial people leaving, the risk of it taking longer than planned, the risk of the quality falling short. If you underestimate all of these slightly, you could have significantly underestimated the risk of the whole project. And some of these may make others more likely to happen.

**YOU NEED TO BE AWARE OF YOUR OWN
PERCEPTION OF RISK**

RULE 92

Facts are neutral

You need to avoid all the pitfalls of sloppy thinking, and that means you need to be on the lookout for them. These are the little errors that make us believe our thinking is sharper than it is. We don't want to feel smart, we want to *be* smart. We want to spot the traps so we can take avoiding action before we fall into them.

I mentioned in Rule 76 that one of the big errors of thought is believing that the facts, the data, the stats are backing up your own viewpoint. This is known as confirmation bias, when you search out information that supports your argument, or interpret the facts that you're presented with as backing you up. It's a very comfortable thing to do – it makes you right, and saves you the effort or ...

RULE 93

Don't trust statistics

Eighty-seven per cent of statistics are made up on the spot – a fact I often quote. Although sometimes I say it's 56 per cent.

You can't really understand statistics until you understand the ways in which people can manipulate them in order to get you to agree with their way of thinking. Stats are a very appealing way to back up an argument because they look deceptively like facts. It is perfectly possible to represent actual real facts in statistical form, but you should never assume that's what you're seeing until you've checked them out thoroughly. You're a serious critical thinker and you're not going to let anyone take you for a ride.

For a start, always check where the information has come from and who is paying for it. Are you confident it's neutral? What's the size of the sample – is it a survey of 10,000 people or 8 people? Who were they? If it's a poll, what questions were asked? Suppose you were asked these two questions:

- Do you believe in freedom of choice?
- Do you believe the government should prevent people drinking to excess?

I imagine more people would answer ‘yes’ to the first question than to the second, and yet either could be included in a survey into attitudes to alcohol – depending on what impression it wanted to give.

Here’s another common manipulation of the facts. If you own a bookshop that had 10 customers last year and now has 20, you could say you’d doubled your number of customers. True, but you’ve only gained 10 actual customers, and for a typical bookshop I’d say you’re in trouble. Similarly if you’ve gone from 100 to 150 customers, you could say that last year you had only two-thirds of the customers you have now, or you could say your customer base has increased by 50 per cent. Both true, but somehow they give different impressions.

Graphs and charts give those pesky statisticians even more scope to mislead you. The most obvious example of this is where the figures up the left-hand side of a graph don’t start at zero. Imagine 2 columns, one showing 155 units of whatever and the other showing 160 units. They will be quite similar heights, right? Now imagine your bar chart starts, in the bottom left corner, not at 0 but at 150, so it shows only the tip of each column. Now one of them is showing 5 units and the other shows 10: double the height. This technique, and variations on it, are designed to fool you. Don’t fall for it.

And one more thing – no one is going to present you with statistics that contradict their argument. So always consider, and indeed research, whether there are other stats out there that put a different perspective altogether. Oh, and which of course might also be presented in a misleading way.

**NO ONE IS GOING TO PRESENT YOU WITH
STATISTICS THAT CONTRADICT THEIR
ARGUMENT**

RULE 94

Understand cause and effect

Sometimes someone will try to persuade you that two pieces of data are related. They'll even show you charts and graphs to prove it. And often they'll be right – but not always. As a skilled critical thinker you won't take this at face value, will you? You'll pick it apart to make sure the correlation is real.

Stage two of the argument is to reason that, if these two things correlate, there must be a causal relationship between them: one must cause the other. A genuine example of this would be that the more people smoke in a given group, the higher the incidence of lung disease will be. That's because, as we all know, smoking causes lung disease.

You might be more surprised to learn that the rate of divorce ...

RULE 95

If you can't prove it's true, that doesn't mean it isn't

Do you believe in telepathy – that some people can tell what others are thinking when they're not even in the same room?

One of the most pervasive elements of pseudo-scientific thinking is to believe a thing can't be true unless you can prove it is. Many people will tell you that, as there's no scientific proof for these things, they can't be true. But remember, there was a time when science couldn't yet prove that the earth went around the sun. Didn't stop it doing it though.

I'm not saying that I believe in telepathy. But I don't pooh-pooh it either. Sadly I don't believe in magic (I wish I did) so personally I reckon that if it's true, there is a rational scientific explanation that no one has yet found. I have had some experiences that would seem to support the argument for telepathy, but I can't prove they weren't just surprising coincidences.³³

So don't get tricked into ruling things out just because there's no proof. Clearly you have to apply your intelligence here. Almost all of physics is ultimately unprovable, as physicists will tell you, and operates on the principle that once the weight of argument becomes overwhelming, scientific theories have to be assumed to be true. Also, looking outside the world of science, it's reasonable for me to assume my family love me, even though I only have their word for it.

On the other hand, don't mistake evidence for proof. I know a few people who can quite exasperatingly mix up their own experience for proof. If you tell them that research shows, for example, that more people with brown eyes are good at maths (yes, I made that up) immediately they will try telling you that it can't be so because their friend is really good at maths and has blue eyes, so there! Or their other friend has brown eyes and is rubbish at maths.

A good thinker understands that this means zilch. The data (that I made up) didn't say *all* brown eyed people are good at maths. Nor did it say that *no* non-brown-eyed people were good at maths. Just that being good at maths correlated more highly with brown eyes than other eye colours. One person's experience might be unexpected, but it doesn't negate all my (meticulous and hard-earned) research results. Also, many people presented with this data will tend to notice the exceptions because they stand out. So while they might immediately think of a blue-eyed friend who is maths-minded, it may actually be that if they surveyed all their friends the results would bear out my own research. If I hadn't made it up.

So don't be guilty of muddling up evidence and proof, or assuming something unproven can't be true. Keep an open mind and evaluate all the data you're given as neutrally and dispassionately as you can.

**DON'T BE GUILTY OF MUDDLING UP
EVIDENCE AND PROOF**

RULE 96

Don't believe it just because everyone else does

If you're one of nature's conformists, always wanting to fit in with the group, you're going to find critical thinking more challenging. There's certainly nothing wrong with being a team player, one of the gang, but it's not going to make things easy for you. That's because it's really important to understand that a thing isn't automatically so just because everyone else seems to think it is. I talked about this in Rule 1 and its importance in terms of your values and beliefs.

And it's important when it comes to critical thinking too. If we all thought the same way, all followed the same logical paths, how would anyone ever have a new thought? How would Darwin have developed his theory ...

RULE 97

Don't believe it just because you want to

I have often wondered why some people passionately believe in conspiracy theories that really don't stand up to serious inspection – or in many cases don't stand up to the most cursory investigation. Take flat-earthers for example. They have to tie the facts in knots to justify their beliefs, postulating any number of lies and conspiracies in order to shoehorn their theory into a remotely sustainable argument.

You may well be aware of Occam's razor, a strangely named scientific 'law' which states that the simplest explanation is usually the correct one. For conspiracy theorists of all kinds, however, the explanation can never be simple. Partly because if it were it would probably be true, but also I suspect because it would be no fun if it were.

I have concluded, you see, that most people who believe in improbable theories do so because they want to. Simple as that. I'm sure they wouldn't acknowledge it, because that would undermine their argument, but I've never met anyone who espoused an unlikely theory who didn't seem to enjoy it. And I have to admit, I've been tempted to get sucked in occasionally because I love a good story, and the conspiracy theories are usually far more interesting and better plotted than the rather pedestrian but disappointingly true explanations.

For most of us sceptics, the conspiracy theories look like hokum. But they are only an extreme example of something that almost all of us do from

time to time – believe a thing because we want to, rather than because rational argument tells us it is true.

We want to believe social media is good for us, we want to believe the political party we support is better than the others, we want to believe our partner isn't cheating on us, we want to believe there's a market for our product, we want to believe the dog doesn't fancy a walk today. It doesn't matter how much evidence may be piled up against us, we remain blinkered to it, and only see the few crumbs of evidence that support our theory, the theory we want to believe in.

Listen, the thoughts and beliefs and ideas you most need to question in yourself are the ones that you like, the ones that you want to hold, the ones that serve your interests in some way.

As soon as you recognise that you are thinking what you want to think, that's the signal that you need to scrutinise your beliefs and opinions extra thoroughly, and with double helpings of honesty and self-appraisal.

**THE THOUGHTS AND BELIEFS AND IDEAS YOU
MOST NEED TO QUESTION IN YOURSELF ARE
THE ONES THAT YOU LIKE**

RULE 98

Be devil's advocate

However much you want to think critically, to believe things for the best reasons, to consider all the facts, to avoid being fooled by statistics or by too much information or confirmation bias, how can you be sure your thinking is as good as it can be? What if you truly think you're persuaded by the arguments but actually you're being swayed unconsciously by what you want to believe?

The answer is to pretend you're someone else. Someone who holds a different, opposing view from your own. Go on, have a good argument. Pick holes in your idea or belief, find the loopholes, highlight the weak points. Imagine your own views are held by someone you dislike and you'd hate to agree with them so go on, take them apart, ...

RULE 99

Don't go into lockdown

What happens to your beliefs when information changes or prevailing views shift? Do you change your mind or do you accommodate it? Or do you stick with what you always thought – it was good enough then so it's good enough now?

That's the attitude a lot of people take, but it simply makes no sense. We know people generally dislike change, at least when they're not in control of it. But look, the whole of scientific progress relies on modifying or even scrapping theories when new data comes along that overrides it. Newton's theory of gravity was good enough until Einstein pointed out that it only went so far.

And it's not just science this applies to. Take social attitudes. When I was young, western attitudes to race, sexuality, women were very different from what they are now. If everyone insisted on sticking with the prejudices they grew up with, things would change even more slowly than they do. And not because the idea everyone first thought of was unassailably right. The reason society's outlook has changed is not only because the younger generation takes a more egalitarian view, but because many older people also adjusted their thinking as they went along. They were persuaded by the arguments they heard and the attitudes they witnessed and the people they met, and were broad-minded enough to recognise that their old ways of thinking were out of date. Shame even more of them didn't join in.

Social attitudes change very gradually. And unless things are going at such a slow rate you hardly notice your ideas changing, most people tend not to change their minds once they're set. I'm not just talking about long-term attitudes, but about supporting more immediate arguments. Once you've decided that you definitely need to move house, or launch this product line, or set up a local women's football team, or become vegan, or drop your prices, it's easy to fix that belief in your mind. You may have considered it closely when you were still deciding, but now you close off your thinking. It's a done deal. Time to stop thinking, lock down your decision and get on with it.

Um ... who said you have to stop thinking just because you're doing? These kinds of ideas shouldn't be set in stone. That makes no sense. If new information comes along, why wouldn't you reconsider – and perhaps revise – your view? People used to think smoking was good for you, especially if your lungs were bad (which they very possibly were if you smoked). Then scientists produced new information to show that actually smoking was very unhealthy. Do you think existing smokers should have ignored this new information? Of course you don't.

You decide to move house. Now suppose you take a big financial hit, or your adult son wants to move back in with you, or the housing market changes unexpectedly. It only makes sense to reconsider your decision. You might stick with it or you might not, but you need to be open to change. So never be sure of anything – or at least only until new information comes along. Then double-check whether your view is still valid.

**WHO SAID YOU HAVE TO STOP THINKING
JUST BECAUSE YOU'RE DOING?**

RULE 100

Opinions aren't facts

I know I said in the introduction to this section that there's no place for emotion in critical thinking. However I should point out that a lot of 'rational' arguments are in fact emotional and not rational at all. You need to be able to identify them, whether it's your own view or someone else's.

Here in the UK, the argument over whether we should be part of the European Union has been raging for about half a century. At any stage – do we join, do we leave, do we sign this or that treaty – people on both sides of the debate put forward their arguments passionately. You would have thought, wouldn't you, that by now the country would have worked out which was the right answer. Where the weight of argument fell. ...

THESE ARE THE RULES

This collection of Rules of Thinking joins the other titles in the series in setting out guidelines for various aspects of our lives. These are not commandments, no one is telling you that you *must* live this way. They are simply observations about the habits, attitudes and practices that happier, more successful people live by. So it follows that, if we adopt them ourselves, we too will be happier and more successful. They're not compulsory, but why wouldn't you want to join in?

How to use the Rules

It can be a bit daunting to read a book with 100 Rules for a happier more successful life. I mean, where do you start? You'll probably find you follow a few of them already, but how can you be expected to learn dozens of new Rules all at once and start putting them all into practice? Don't panic, you don't have to. Remember, you don't *have* to do anything – you're doing this because you want to. Let's keep it at a manageable level so you go on wanting to.

You can go about this any way you like, but if you want advice, here's what I recommend. Go through the book and pick out three or four Rules that you feel would make a big difference to you, or that jumped out at you when you first read them, or that seem like a good ...

PEARSON EDUCATION LIMITED

KAO Two

KAO Park

Harlow CM17 9SR

United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)1279 623623

Web: www.pearson.com/uk

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