Summary of The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck

Original book by Mark Manson

In *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck*, Mark Manson argues that we are frustrated in life and feel like failures because we value and prioritize the wrong things, thanks in part to society's emphasis on positive thinking, over-involved parents, and our susceptibility to superficial social media messages. This leads us to pursue emotional highs that don't lead to lasting happiness.

The solutions are counterintuitive and include: be wrong, fail, tolerate feeling bad, accept pain, practice rejection. Because we can't care equally about everything, we need to prioritize and focus on what brings us happiness and meaning. In other words, we need to carefully choose what we give our f*cks about.

The book draws from several established philosophies (Stoicism, Existentialism, and Buddhism), and we'll expand and clarify the book's messages by tracing their origins to these schools of thought. We'll also explore some of the psychology behind what motivates people's decisions, and why we're driven to give so many f*cks about so many unimportant things.

1-Page Summary

In *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck*, Mark Manson argues that our consumer culture and social media have us chasing the wrong things in pursuit of happiness and a meaningful life. We are giving a f*ck or caring about too many things that don't matter and don't make us happy in the long run.

We are urged by social media and society to **give a f*ck about everything**. We are told to always be striving for more—more happiness, money, experiences, friends, possessions. The self-help movement urges us to focus on being positive and feeling good. But all the focus on positivity actually emphasizes what we lack—and so we keep striving.

Manson argues that, as a result, we become addicted to phoniness, and we constantly pursue superficial things. This creates temporary highs rather than true happiness. We end up frustrated and feel that we are falling short in comparison to what we see in social media, which celebrates only the most extraordinary. Or, we develop the belief that we are entitled to always feel good.

But, he argues, success, fame, and fleeting self-improvement don't lead to satisfaction. The key to a happy, meaningful life is to **give a f*ck about less,** and **focus only on what is most valuable and important** to us.

This book will help you:

- Clarify what is important and unimportant to you.
- Realize that giving a f*ck about fewer and different things changes your direction in life.
- Understand that it's OK to feel bad, or for things to go badly in life.
- Accept that pain is inevitable, and you can use it as a catalyst for improvement.
- Learn how to care about fewer things (give fewer f*cks).

The advice in *Subtle Art* comes largely from three different philosophical traditions—Stoicism, Existentialism, and Buddhism. For context to Manson's advice, here's a general overview of each philosophy:

- Stoicism values reason and duty above all else.
    - In *Meditations* (one of the definitive Stoic texts) Marcus Aurelius says that **the only meaningful use of your time is to find out what you're meant to do in the world, and then do it.**
    - Aurelius also says that how you feel—and how others feel about you—doesn't matter; every action you take should be driven by rational thought and devotion to your purpose.
- Existentialism values personal choice and personal growth.
    - It's rooted in the idea that **life is meaningless, and therefore you must make your own meaning.**
    - An existentialist should determine what values and beliefs he or she holds, and then devoutly follow them. However, it's crucial that those beliefs and values are personal, and not instilled by someone else.

- Buddhism values acceptance and tranquility.
    - These values are exemplified in stories of how the Buddha dealt with the evil god Mara: Rather than fighting against him, the Buddha would greet Mara as a friend and invite him in for tea.
    - Following the Buddha's example, a Buddhist tries to meet any experience—positive or negative—with calm acceptance.

Hurdles to Giving Fewer F*cks

Manson cautions that when we choose to give fewer f*cks (that is, to reprioritize what we care about and what we don't), we'll make mistakes before we master the art, including:

Misunderstanding Happiness

Manson believes that, contrary to what society tells us, happiness isn't an equation to be solved or an achievement attained when we do the right things. He argues that being unhappy and dissatisfied is part of life, and also a necessary counterweight to happiness; therefore, happiness isn't simply the avoidance of unhappiness.

According to Manson, happiness comes from solving problems and challenges. It's an action or ongoing activity because there are constant problems to solve; each problem you solve plants the seed of another problem.

When you misunderstand how to be happy, you care too much about the wrong things; you're looking for the perfect combination of f*cks that lead to permanent happiness, when no such combination exists.

In *The Happiness Hypothesis*, Jonathan Haidt argues that we can't directly create happiness for ourselves. Instead, we should:

- **Create the right conditions for happiness.** We can't create happiness, but we can make sure that we're in a position to be happy. According to Haidt, this primarily means balancing emotional urges with reason; avoiding those impulses that bring fleeting happiness at the cost of lasting damage (drinking, eating junk food, quitting your job without a plan), and giving in to those impulses that will bring long-term satisfaction (building strong relationships, exercising, finding your dream job).
- **Be patient.** We can't force happiness—it will come in its own time.
- **Allow happiness to flourish.** Note the word "allow"; it emphasizes that happiness is something that simply happens, rather than something that we create.

Haidt's argument is, in essence, the Paradox of Hedonism (sometimes called the Paradox of Happiness), which states that pursuing happiness will make you unhappy.

Overemphasizing Emotions

Manson tells us that **the purpose of emotions is to provide feedback—to tell us that something is**

good or bad for us. However, many people over-identify with how they feel and use their feelings as justifications for whatever they do (like "I keyed your car, but I was really mad and couldn't help it"). Emotions are only part of life, not its entirety.

Instead, Manson advises you to make decisions on what to care about based on your values, not on your emotions. Making decisions based on emotions alone, without applying reason, is what kids do, and doesn't work.

The *emotional intelligence* model is a theory of psychology that attempts to describe how an "average" person develops emotionally throughout his or her life. It provides benchmarks for measuring a patient's development (similar to how IQ measures cognitive ability).

The Emotional Intelligence mode focuses on four things:

- Accurately identifying emotions in yourself and others
- Using emotions to aid thought processes (This is what Manson is referring to when he talks about using your emotions as feedback.)
- Analyzing and understanding emotions; your own and other people's
- Managing your emotions to achieve specific goals

A lot of what Manson says in *Subtle Art* is about managing your emotions, rather than letting your emotions manage you. That's why he warns against unrestrained pleasure-seeking, or simply trying to "feel good." The emotional intelligence model can give you some benchmarks for how well you're following Manson's advice.

Believing That Everyone Is Special

Manson argues that many people's problems in coping with life stem from the self-esteem/exceptionalism philosophy that began spreading through schools, churches, and business development seminars in the 1960s and 1970s. The priority became feeling good about yourself rather than **trying, failing, learning, and accomplishing things.** It has produced delusional people who can't handle challenges or adversity.

He contends that in fact, you are not special: Your experiences and problems are shared by millions of others. When you believe you're special, you feel entitled to feel good and have a problem-free life, which gets in the way of choosing constructive values.

You're Not Special—And That's a Good Thing

Therapist Lori Gottlieb's memoir *Maybe You Should Talk to Someone* discusses the fact that sometimes, a person who's going through difficulty in life can't move past it until they stop seeing their problems as unique or exceptional. In one example that she relates to illustrate this, a woman with a history of alcoholism (prompted by an abusive marriage) is unable to forgive herself for her past mistakes—she feels like she has messed up her life in a unique way and that her mistakes are worse than other people's. She's therefore unable to get involved in a new (healthier) romantic relationship. She can only move forward when she accepts that her struggles are similar to millions of other people's struggles.

Another of Gottlieb's examples shows the opposite type of exceptionalism: A man who thinks he's smarter than everyone around him continually causes problems in his relationships until he accepts that he isn't special, either.

These examples show that feelings of exceptionalism can work in both ways—they can hold people to pain that they think is special, or they can hold people to feelings of superiority that prevent meaningful relationships. It's only when a person recognizes that they're *not* exceptional (and that that's okay), that they're able to make progress in treatment and in their lives.

Trying to Avoid Pain

Manson's definition of happiness involves struggling to solve problems. The question he asks is: **What are you willing to struggle for?** What pain are you willing to endure to get what you want? The answers to those questions determine how our lives turn out.

Pain tells us what to pay attention to. From it, we learn what to do differently in the future. Therefore, when we strive for a life that's free of problems and pain, we don't get to learn from our suffering. You can't have a painless life; instead, **you must choose what kind of pain or struggle is meaningful to you.**

Mike Tyson's Daily Struggle

Often, choosing to struggle once is not enough; to thrive, you have to continually recommit to your meaningful struggle.

Mike Tyson is known as one of the greatest boxers of all time—in his prime, he boasted punching power that few people in history could equal, and skills to match. However, Tyson only became the dominant force that he was **because he was willing to go through immense pain and struggle on a daily basis.**

According to one article, Tyson's daily routine went something like this:

- Wake up at 5 A.M.
- 3-mile run
- Breakfast
- 10 rounds sparring
- Lunch
- More sparring (amount not specified)
- 2,000 squats
- 2,500 situps
- 500 elbow dips
- 500 push-ups
- 500 shoulder shrugs (holding a 66lb barbell)

- Dinner
- Exercise bike
- Bed at 10 P.M.

This routine is more than most people would subject themselves to even once, let alone every day. Tyson's willingness to suffer through it over and over again is what made him into a champion boxer.

Adopting Destructive Values

Manson says that our culture and our media often push destructive values, which crowd out positive values and lead to dissatisfaction.

Some of these destructive values include:

- **Pleasure:** It's a part of life but not sufficient for happiness in and of itself. You'll run into problems (for instance, addiction or obesity) if you make superficial pleasure your priority. It's also a value that gets in the way of relationships with others.
- **Material success**: People often base their self-esteem on what they own or how much money they make. But acquiring more wealth provides less and less satisfaction, once our basic needs are met. Also, when we prioritize wealth/success over deeper values, we can become shallow.
- **Always being right**: Research shows that we're often wrong about things. If you feel you must be right all the time, you'll be frustrated. Also, if you don't admit mistakes you can't learn from them.
- **Staying positive**: Staying positive has benefits, but it's unhealthy to deny reality when it's bad or to repress negative emotions. Sometimes life stinks. Constantly being positive is a way of avoiding problems rather than solving them.

(Shortform note: Negative values like these usually stem from what you think *other* people value. They're about how you relate to others (power and control), what you *think* they admire in you (money or status), or how they think of you (popularity, admiration, fame, and so on). Manson is urging you to instead choose values that are about yourself, because you can't control what other people think or do. Since it's out of your control, it's not worth giving a f*ck about.)

How to Give the Right F*cks

As an antidote to a life spent pursuing superficial things and living by destructive values, Manson suggests that you instead adopt these **five constructive values, which will help you give f*cks about the right things:**

1. **Take responsibility** for everything that happens in your life, whether or not it's your fault. You may not be to blame for what happens to you, but you are responsible for choosing how you respond.
2. **Admit that you could be wrong**: In order to grow, you should entertain doubt about your beliefs, feelings, and rightness. Instead of trying to prove you're right, you should look for ways you're wrong, to see where you can grow. Accept that you aren't always right.
3. **Embrace failure:** Failure is an opportunity to learn. To succeed at something you first have to fail, usually multiple times, so you can learn.
4. **Practice rejection**: Our culture tells us to always be positive and accepting of everything. But in order to stand for something you have to make choices, accepting some things and rejecting others

that run counter to the values you've chosen. In order to have a healthy love relationship, you also need to be able to say and hear "no."

5. **Reflect on your mortality** to keep your life and values in perspective. You aren't as obsessed with trivial things when you confront and accept the reality that you'll die.

He promises that, when you live by values and standards that are meaningful to you, pleasure, success, and happiness will come as a result.

Manson's Values Compared to Aurelius's Meditations

Manson's five counterintuitive values are very similar to some of the main topics of Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*:

*The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck:*

- **Take responsibility for everything in your life**.
    - However, remember that responsibility and blame are not the same thing.
- **Accept uncertainty.** Remember that you don't know everything; doubt yourself and your beliefs, and examine them critically.
- **Embrace failure.** Learn from your mistakes and use your failures as opportunities to grow.
- **Practice rejection.** Stop giving f*cks about the unimportant things in your life. Reject everything unimportant.
    - Corollary: Practice saying no to people, and accepting it when people say no to you.
- **Reflect on your mortality.** Keep your life in perspective, as that will help you develop constructive values and standards.

Meditations:

- **Be strict with yourself and patient with others.** The only things you can control are your own actions—thus, you are personally responsible for everything that you do.
    - You are *not* responsible for what other people think, say, and do; that's neither your responsibility nor your problem.
- **Embrace *logos* (meaning both personal logic and natural laws).** Aurelius believed that the universe was governed by perfect logic and natural laws, which ensured that everything would proceed in the best possible way.
    - However, people have limited perspectives and imperfect logic, which often leads them to incorrect conclusions. Aurelius argued that, if you feel unhappy or anxious, it's because you're struggling under some incorrect understanding of the world.
- **Live without fear.** Aurelius insists that the only danger in life is that which damages your *character*—in other words, **the only things you should fear are your own flaws.**
    - Thus, you should work ruthlessly and fearlessly to improve yourself.

- **Only concern yourself with living well.** Aurelius urges you to reject material wealth and pleasure, and devote yourself completely to your duty (whatever that may be).
- **Examine life and death rationally.** A person's life is finite, and insignificant compared to the world.
    - Therefore, anything you do for yourself is meaningless; every action you take should make the world better somehow.

Shortform Introduction

Despite its title, *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck* isn't about not giving any f*cks; rather, it's about giving f*cks about the right things.

Modern society tells us to care deeply about everything. We're constantly told that we don't have enough money, enough friends, enough stuff, or enough experiences—just consider how many "50 things you have to read/watch/see before you die" articles are out there.

Furthermore, the modern self-help movement teaches us that we should always feel happy and positive, and so when we *don't* feel happy, we think we're somehow failing. We feel constantly judged, both by others and by ourselves.

Therefore, the purpose of this book is to focus your f*cks; in other words, **to help you identify what's both *truly important* and *within your control.*** By focusing your energy and attention on those things, you'll find purpose and real happiness, rather than the shallow "good vibes" that the self-help movement would have you pursue.

About the Author

Mark Manson began his career as a blogger. In 2009 he published his first blog, which was focused on dating advice. In 2010 he launched a new blog called Post Masculine—however, that site no longer exists. Since 2013, Manson has maintained his blog at markmanson.net.

Manson holds a degree in International Relations and Business from Boston University.

Connect with Mark Manson:

- Website
- Facebook
- Twitter
- Instagram

The Book's Publication

Publisher: HarperCollins Publishers

Imprint: HarperOne

*The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck,* published in 2016, grew out of Manson's 2015 blog post of the same title. It was Manson's second book, preceded by *Models: Attract Women Through Honesty* (2011). *The Subtle Art* was his first bestselling hit and paved the way for a follow-up book, *Everything Is F*cked: A Book About Hope* (2019), which, building on the popularity of *The Subtle Art*, debuted at number one on the New York Times bestseller list.

The Book's Context

*The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck* pushes back against the modern self-help movement, which author Mark

Manson believes focuses too much on *feeling good*, rather than *living well*. This book argues instead that hardships are what give our lives meaning, that it's impossible to be happy all the time, and that chasing endless positivity makes us focus on all the wrong things.

Manson mainly draws inspiration from three different philosophical traditions:

1. **Stoicism,** which rejects chasing shallow emotions (such as "feeling good") in favor of living by logic and duty.
2. **Existentialism,** which focuses on personal growth through deliberate choices and acts of willpower.
3. **Buddhism,** which is rooted in the idea that suffering exists; but that it will end, and that you have the power to end your own suffering.

The Book's Strengths and Weaknesses

Critical Reception

*The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck* hit number one on the New York Times bestseller list. Many have praised Manson for his straightforward advice, and for going against the sugarcoated feel-good trends of other modern self-help books. The Huffington Post called *Subtle Art* "deeply inspiring," while Kirkus Reviews praised it as a benchmark to compare other self-help books to.

However, some have criticized the book for a lack of empirical evidence to back up its many assertions. Along the same lines, some of Manson's critics argue that he's just using his own life experiences to provide catch-all advice, which won't work for many people.

Reviewers on Amazon have also blasted Manson for what they call a shallow understanding of Buddhism and Stoicism; they argue that anyone with even a basic grounding in philosophy won't find anything new or interesting in *Subtle Art*.

Commentary on the Book's Approach

Manson takes a blunt, no-nonsense approach in this book. He tells readers plainly that they're *not* special, that they *are* sometimes going to struggle and fail, and that sooner or later they're going to die—**and that all of that is okay.**

*The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck* is a prime example of Manson's signature writing style: conversational, to-the-point, and vulgar. In terms of content, it also follows Manson's usual theme of getting what you want in life through hard work, brutal honesty, and constant self-improvement (instead of tricks, mind games, or "good vibes").

Manson's "tough love" approach isn't for everyone; some readers will find him harsh and abrasive. However, others may appreciate this book's brutal honesty and realism among all of the more stereotypical feel-good advice from other self-help writers.

Our Approach in This Guide

This guide has two main sections:

1. **Laying the groundwork** (Chapters 1-4), where we explain what Manson means by "not giving a f*ck," and why you'd want to do that in the first place.
2. **Giving the right f*cks** (Chapters 5-9), devoted to what Manson calls his "five counterintuitive good values." Those five values will help you to give f*cks about the right things, while ignoring the things

that distract or mislead you.

Since *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck* draws from several established philosophies, we'll expand and clarify the book's messages by tracing their origins to those schools of thought. We'll also explore some of the psychology behind what motivates people's decisions, and why we're driven to give so many f*cks about so many unimportant things.

Chapter 1: Striving Won't Make You Happy

Manson argues that social media, entertainment, and advertising urge us to give a f*ck about everything incessantly. **We "must" always strive for more**—more happiness, more money and success, more experiences, more friends, more possessions, greater attractiveness, and a better body. In addition, self-help "experts" unrealistically urge us to be positive and happy all the time.

But, Manson says, we feel unhappy instead because **these messages emphasize what we lack**. By constantly wishing/striving for something, we reinforce to ourselves that we don't have it. Then the self-help experts give us superficial, short-term fixes: Stand in front of a mirror and repeat affirmations, or follow 10 easy steps to become rich. The advice further emphasizes what we're lacking while failing to offer lasting solutions.

(Shortform note: There is genuine science behind self-help techniques such as affirmations; for instance, they help us to boost our sense of self-worth and decrease stress. However, Manson is correct that such techniques mostly help you to become more comfortable with who you already are—they won't help you to change your **core values**, which is what *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck* is all about.)

Manson contends that as a result:

- **We become addicted to the unreal and fake**, and constantly pursue superficial things because we believe more is better. While this is good for business, it's not good for our well-being.
- We get addicted to temporary highs.
- We become frustrated when we fall short of society's expectations, and overwhelmed with all we are urged to be and do.
- We feel entitled to always feel good, and we go out of our way to avoid dealing with pain, failure, and challenges.

The Philosophical Origins of *The Subtle Art*

The advice in *Subtle Art* comes largely from three philosophical traditions (Stoicism, Existentialism, and Buddhism). In brief.

Stoicism values reason and duty above all else.

- In *Meditations* (one of the definitive Stoic texts) Marcus Aurelius says that **the only meaningful use of your time is to find out what you're meant to do in the world, and then do it.**
- Aurelius also says that how you feel—and how others feel about you—doesn't matter; every action you take should be driven by rational thought and devotion to your purpose.

Existentialism values personal choice and personal growth.

- It's rooted in the idea that **life is meaningless, and therefore you must make your own meaning.**
- An existentialist should determine what values and beliefs he or she holds, and then devoutly follow them. However, it's crucial that those beliefs and values are personal, and not instilled by someone else.

Buddhism values acceptance and tranquility.

- These values are exemplified in stories of how the Buddha dealt with the evil god Mara: Rather than fighting against him, the Buddha would greet Mara as a friend and invite him in for tea.
- Following the Buddha's example, a Buddhist tries to meet any experience—positive or negative—with calm acceptance.

Choose Your F*cks Carefully

Manson says that we go through life giving too many f*cks. **We need to choose constructive values and standards**, use them to decide what things we care most about, **and reject the rest.**

Furthermore, we give f*cks about all the wrong things. Even if you happen to achieve success as defined by society (wealth, fame, and so on), that doesn't necessarily lead to a more satisfying life. Satisfaction comes from a life built on constructive values and choices.

Manson's point here is illustrated by the many people who've very publicly achieved material success but were still unhappy. Kurt Cobain, the lead singer and guitarist of Nirvana, provides a poignant example of how "success" as defined by society doesn't always lead to a happy life. Despite his commercial success as a musician—Nirvana is one of the best-selling bands in history—he struggled with mental health issues and addiction. Cobain eventually took his own life at the age of 27.

Manson contends that despite what self-help experts say, **feeling good all the time is impossible**. You can't attain satisfaction without experiencing pain, struggle, and failure. Anything worthwhile has a negative side (for instance, being physically fit requires painful exercise). If you try to avoid the negative you don't get to experience the worthwhile thing.

Therefore, the key to a happy, meaningful life is to **give a f*ck about less,** and **focus on what is most valuable and important** to you.

We can mesh Manson's advice to give fewer f*cks with a common rule of thumb, the 80/20 Rule (also known as the Pareto Principle), which states that 80% of your results come from 20% of what you do. Thus, the trick is to figure out **what 20% of your thoughts, actions, or values produce 80% of the outcomes in your life, and focus your energy (your f*cks) on those.**

In *Factfulness*, Hans Rosling elaborates that the 80/20 Rule applies to everything from causes of death to items in a budget—20% of the items in each dataset cause 80% of the results in that dataset. One scientific study even suggests that the 80/20 Rule might be a result of the natural law of entropy.

Trapped in a Feedback Loop

Unlike animals, Manson notes, we have the unique ability to think and examine our thoughts. This ability, combined with our fixation on being happy all the time, can create an unproductive feedback loop in which our feelings spiral out of control whenever we begin to feel bad about something.

We feel bad about feeling bad because of our culturally driven belief that we *shouldn't* feel bad—that

guilt, anxiety, fear, and other negative feelings are not OK.

According to Manson, the key to breaking the emotional feedback loop is to not take your feelings so seriously—to not give a f*ck. Tell yourself: **Things are screwed up and I feel bad, but that's okay.** This frees you to stop berating yourself because you feel bad.

In *Radical Acceptance*, psychologist Tara Brach calls this feedback loop the Trance of Unworthiness. She says that we can break out of that trance by **accepting ourselves for however we are at the present moment.**

Accepting ourselves—and thereby waking from the trance—requires *recognition* and *compassion*, which is summed up quite nicely in the sentence **"Things are screwed up and I feel bad, but that's okay."**

- **Things are screwed up and I feel bad...:** this is *recognition* of your current situation.
- **...but that's okay:** this is *compassion* for yourself and your experiences.

In other words, the key is to *accept* yourself and your bad feelings, instead of berating yourself for feeling bad or immediately trying to feel better.

What Does Not Giving a F*ck Mean?

Manson clarifies that **"not giving a f*ck" *doesn't* mean being apathetic, or not caring about anything.**

Instead, not giving a f*ck means:

- **Being comfortable with your own set of values** instead of following society's dictates. When you know what's important, you shrug off challenges and do what you feel is right regardless of what anyone might say.

(Shortform note: A recurring theme in *Meditations* (the Stoic book written by Marcus Aurelius) is that others' thoughts are neither your responsibility nor your problem. In short, the Stoics would agree with Manson: Do what you know is right, and don't give a f*ck what anyone else thinks about it. Follow your own values, not someone else's.)

- **Realizing that simplifying your priorities, rather than pursuing everything, actually makes you happier**. As you focus on the more important parts of your life—family, a fulfilling job, friends, a committed relationship—this approach turns out to be satisfying.

(Shortform note: Robin Sharma's *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari* is a parable that teaches this lesson. In it, a wealthy lawyer gives up his materialistic, workaholic life and becomes a monk. His new lifestyle is devoted to simple pleasures and self-improvement. After making this change, and simplifying his priorities just like Manson advises us to do, he becomes much happier and healthier than he'd been as a lawyer.)

- **Even for important goals, taking it easy**. Stop struggling so much for things. When you care less about something, you may actually do better at it. When you stop obsessing, the pressure is off and things often work out. Often the person who is least interested in a result ends up attaining it.

You can take it easy without being disinterested. There are ways that you can generate **positive pressure** that inspires you to do better work. Such helpful pressure is called *eustress*—as opposed to *distress*, which is negative pressure that distracts and upsets you. As long as you avoid distress, you'll feel like you're "taking it easy."

Tony Robbins (*Awaken the Giant Within*) suggests a few ways that you can create eustress, and avoid turning it into distress:

- **Announce your goal to your friends.** If you know that people are watching and rooting for you, you'll be inspired to work toward your goal.
- **Focus on your goal.** Keeping your goal in mind at all times will prompt your brain to keep seeking ways to achieve it, even subconsciously. This subconscious problem-solving is why you sometimes get a flash of inspiration while doing something unrelated to that problem.
- **Don't call it "failure" if you don't reach your goal.** While it's disappointing to fall short of your goal, you will have learned and grown from pursuing it, and you may be able to achieve something even greater than that goal in the future.

What's the Point of This Book?

Manson sums up Chapter 1 with a reflection of how this book will help you:

- Clarify what you are choosing as important and unimportant in your life.
- Realize that not giving a f*ck changes your direction in life as you choose what's important and what's not.
- Understand that it's OK to feel bad, or for things to go badly in life.
- Accept that pain is an inevitable part of life, and you can use it as a tool or catalyst for improvement.
- Be more comfortable with pain, take problems less seriously, and face your fears.
- Learn how to give fewer f*cks, by no longer striving for superficial things.

This list of goals helps us to clearly see how *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck* draws from each of the three philosophical traditions, as described in the subsection "Choose Your F*cks Carefully":

Stoicism

Values: reason and duty

Relevant goals:

- Be more comfortable with pain, take problems less seriously, and face your fears.
- Learn how to give fewer f*cks, by no longer striving for superficial things.

Existentialism

Values: personal choice and personal growth

Relevant goals:

- Make clear decisions about what's important and unimportant in your life.
- Realize that not giving a f*ck changes your direction in life as you choose what's important and what's not.

Buddhism

Values: acceptance and tranquility

Relevant goals:

- Understand that it's OK to feel bad, or for things to go badly in life.
- Accept that pain is an inevitable part of life, and you can use it as a tool or catalyst for improvement.

Exercise: Give Less of a Fck About Small Things

You probably spend too much time pursuing and caring (giving a f*ck) about superficial things. This uses up energy that could be devoted to things you value more.

Think of a time recently when something small got under your skin and you obsessed about it. What was it?

How did you react? Did it have positive or negative results?

How do you feel about it now? Did worrying about it ultimately matter in the long run?

Chapter 2: Happiness Is Misunderstood

According to Manson, our culture treats happiness as a formula that can be solved. For instance, we may think: If I get a certain thing or do a certain thing, such as marry the right person or live in the right community, I'll be happy. Or, we treat happiness as something we can earn or acquire.

However, he counters, **happiness isn't something that you get in return for an achievement** (such as a new job) or something you can find in a "top 10 steps" article from a self-help guru. It's not something that's given or that you passively receive, or that is waiting for you somewhere.

Manson says that **happiness comes from solving problems and overcoming challenges**—an activity that improves our lives, creates satisfaction, and is ongoing.

In *The Happiness Hypothesis*, Jonathan Haidt argues that we can't directly create happiness for ourselves. Instead, we should:

- **Create the right conditions for happiness.** We can't create happiness, but we can make sure that we're in a position to be happy. According to Haidt, this primarily means balancing emotional urges with reason; avoiding those impulses that bring fleeting happiness at the cost of lasting damage (drinking, eating junk food, quitting your job without a plan), and giving in to those impulses that will bring long-term satisfaction (building strong relationships, exercising, finding your dream job).
- **Be patient.** We can't force happiness—it will come in its own time.
- **Allow happiness to flourish.** Note the word "allow"; it emphasizes that happiness is something that simply happens, rather than something that we create.

Haidt's argument is, in essence, the Paradox of Hedonism (sometimes called the Paradox of Happiness), which states that pursuing happiness will make you unhappy.

We're Hardwired for Unhappiness

Manson claims that **suffering and dissatisfaction are actually part of our biology.** Dissatisfaction and insecurity spurred our ancestors to search out, build, and fight for better living conditions. They are a survival mechanism for advancing our species that is still useful in motivating us to improve our lives. As a result, we will always live with a certain amount of dissatisfaction—**we're designed to always be dissatisfied with what we have and to want what we don't have**.

Dissatisfaction in the form of physical or emotional pain tells us what to pay attention to and tells us our limits. It can be healthy or necessary—from it we learn what to do differently in the future. For instance, when we get burned, we learn not to touch a hot stove again. Pain also indicates that something is out of whack, and spurs us to fix it.

(Shortform note: Richard Dawkins's book *The Selfish Gene* goes into much greater detail about survival mechanisms (though largely focused on animals, rather than human behaviors). In summary, every trait and behavior that we have exists because the genes for those traits outcompeted other genes and survived

to the present day. Thus, as Manson says, our feelings of dissatisfaction and pain—and our responses to those feelings—must have some survival benefit (or did for our ancestors).)

Problems Are Good for You

We tend to think of problems as something we need to get rid of once and for all in order to be happy. But, Manson argues, problems and challenges are never-ending. **This is actually a good thing, because solving problems leads to satisfaction and improved circumstances.**

For instance, if you address financial hardship by getting a new job, you're creating new problems for yourself: Needing to travel to and from work, less free time, the stress of keeping your supervisor and management happy, and so on. However, you shouldn't be overwhelmed by having to solve new problems that pop up—it's all part of the journey of self-improvement.

Thus, instead of trying to solve all your problems, Manson advises you to strive for *good problems*; problems you can solve, and that you'll feel good about solving. Good problems and solutions can be straightforward—like fixing poor sleep habits by going to bed sooner—or more complicated, like fixing a relationship by having some difficult conversations. **The important thing is that solving these problems improves your life in some meaningful way.**

In *The Happiness Hypothesis*, Jonathan Haidt notes that setbacks and struggles help people to develop mental fortitude, learn new skills, and build stronger support networks, all of which make them happier in the long run.

In extreme cases, such problems can lead to what psychologists call *post-traumatic growth (PTG)*—the opposite of the much better-known *post-traumatic stress disorder*. In PTG, someone who's suffered through a traumatic event may develop a new appreciation for life, stronger relationships with others, or a newfound confidence. "Finding religion" is also a common expression of PTG.

Things That Derail People

Oftentimes, we fail to solve problems just because we get in our own way. Manson says that there are a couple of ways we can block our own progress:

- **Denying problems:** This makes you feel good for a while, but denying reality requires you to distract yourself and repress your true feelings. This makes you anxious and neurotic in the long term.

(Shortform note: Denial is a common defense mechanism—a way that people subconsciously protect themselves from stress. Common examples might be a smoker who insists that his breathing problems are due to allergies, or an alcoholic who truly believes that his health issues aren't related to his drinking. Unfortunately, denial is harmful in the long run, since denying problems doesn't make them go away.)

- **Developing a victim mentality.** To feel good in the short term, you blame others or your circumstances. But in the long term, this makes you feel helpless, depressed, and angry. Blame and denial provide a "high;" you feel morally superior because you believe that you've done everything right, and you're just a victim of circumstances. Self-help experts focus on giving you such highs through exercises that make you feel better temporarily but that don't address the underlying issue. However, that leads to worse pain later, when you're forced to confront the real issue.

In *The Oz Principle*, Roger Connors, Tom Smith, and Craig Hickman use the story *The Wizard of Oz* to teach two important lessons about the "victim" mindset:

- Nobody will simply give you what you want
- You have the power to get it yourself

In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy and her companions travel to meet the great Wizard seeking magical solutions to their problems. They eventually find out that the Wizard is a fraud; he has no real magic, and can't give them what they're looking for (a way home, a brain, a heart, and so on). However, by the end of the book, they realize that they already have what they want—they never needed someone else to give it to them.

In essence, this is a story about changing your mindset. At first, the characters believed that they were *victims*, trapped by circumstances and needing magical solutions from an external source. However, in the end, they take *accountability* for their own lives; they realize that what they're looking for is within them, and not something that anyone else can give them.

Emotions Are Just a Tool

It's impossible to be happy all the time, but we still try. Manson argues that we fixate on our emotions because we misunderstand their function, so we allow them to lead us in the wrong direction.

The purpose of emotions is to give you feedback, telling you that something is good or bad for you. Emotions point you toward useful change, but they aren't a worthwhile goal in and of themselves.

- **Negative emotions are a signal to take action**.
  - For instance, feeling sad when you're alone teaches you not to do the things that led to you being alone in the first place.
- **Positive emotions are a reward for doing the right thing**.
  - For example, feeling energized and confident after a workout encourages you to continue exercising.

The *emotional intelligence* model is a theory of psychology that attempts to describe how an "average" person develops emotionally throughout his or her life. It provides benchmarks for measuring a patient's development (similar to how IQ measures cognitive ability).

The emotional intelligence model focuses on four things:

- Accurately identifying emotions in yourself and others
- Using emotions to aid thought processes (This is what Manson is referring to when he talks about using your emotions as feedback.)
- Analyzing and understanding emotions; your own and other people's
- Managing your emotions to achieve specific goals

A lot of what Manson says in *Subtle Art* is about managing your emotions, rather than letting your emotions manage you. That's why he warns against unrestrained pleasure-seeking, or simply trying to "feel good." The emotional intelligence model can give you some benchmarks for how well you're following Manson's advice.

How We Mishandle Emotions

Here's where Manson believes people go wrong in handling their emotions:

1. They make decisions based on emotion, without applying reason, or use their emotions to justify their actions. For example, "I know I keyed your car, but I was really mad and couldn't help it." Or, "I quit my job and started painting because it *felt right.*" Emotions are part of life, but not the only important part of it.

(Shortform note: Psychologists note that emotions do provide us with important information; for example, when an aggressive person makes you angry or nervous, it's your emotions warning you to protect yourself. Problems arise when, as Manson says, when we base all of our decisions *solely* on emotion—for while emotions are useful for quick insights into a situation, they're very imprecise. For example, that aggressive person making you nervous might not be an actual threat, but just someone who reminds you a bit too much of an ex.)

2. They fixate on their emotions. This leads to failure because emotions are fleeting: What makes us happy today won't do so tomorrow, because our biology drives us to keep seeking further satisfaction. Fixating on feeling good or happy drives us to constantly pursue a holy grail, which we don't reach; not reaching it makes us feel inadequate. Psychologists call this the "**hedonic treadmill**": Even though we work hard to change something in our lives, we end up feeling the same. Further, **everything positive comes with a built-in negative or a sacrifice.** The thing that initially makes us feel good also has a negative side. For instance, the person we marry is also the one we fight with. The job we sought becomes a source of stress.

What Is Hedonism?

Hedonism (from which we get the "hedonic treadmill" referenced above) usually means pleasure-seeking and self-indulgence at the expense of everything else. This common definition carries negative connotations, since it usually implies selfishness and greed.

However, hedonism may also refer to the philosophy that pain and pleasure motivate everything that people do; in other words, that **we're driven entirely by our emotions.** That makes hedonism effectively the opposite of the Stoic-inspired philosophy that Manson promotes in *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck*, which advocates instead for a more rational approach to our desires.

In the present day, the field of philosophy recognizes and respects both schools of thought; there's no common consensus over which one is correct, or whether the truth is somewhere in between them.

3. They repress their emotions. Many people are taught to repress emotions, but by doing that you block feedback that could help you solve your problems, and you will continue to struggle with unsolved problems. (Remember, you can't be happy if you can't solve problems.)

(Shortform note: Like denial, repression is a common psychological defense mechanism. Rather than facing

difficult problems or uncomfortable thoughts, people force them down into their subconscious. In addition to preventing themselves from solving those problems, as Manson notes, this can cause people to develop anxiety and other mental health issues as a result of repressed thoughts and feelings.)

Struggle Is Part of Happiness

Most people can easily answer the question, "What do you want from life?" In Manson's experience, they mostly say the same things: They want a happy, carefree life, and to have all the things they desire.

But, because true happiness grows from solving problems and overcoming challenges, it requires struggle. Therefore, Manson argues that the better question in determining happiness is: **What are you willing to struggle for, and how much pain are you willing to endure?** Your answer to *that* question determines how your life turns out.

Mike Tyson's Daily Struggle

Often, choosing to struggle once is not enough; in order to thrive, you have to continually recommit to your meaningful struggle.

Mike Tyson is known as one of the greatest boxers of all time—in his prime, he boasted punching power that few people in history could equal, and skills to match. However, Tyson only became the dominant force that he was **because he was willing to go through immense pain and struggle on a daily basis.**

According to one article, Tyson's daily routine went something like this:

- Wake up at 5 A.M.
- 3-mile run
- Breakfast
- 10 rounds sparring
- Lunch
- More sparring (amount not specified)
- 2,000 squats
- 2,500 situps
- 500 elbow dips
- 500 push-ups
- 500 shoulder shrugs (holding a 66lb barbell)
- Dinner
- Exercise bike
- Bed at 10 P.M.

This routine is more than most people would subject themselves to even once, let alone every day. Tyson's willingness to suffer through it over and over again is what made him into a champion boxer.

Exercise: Listen to Your Emotions

The purpose of emotions is to give us feedback, telling us that something is good or bad for us.

Think of a recent situation that aroused a strong emotion. What happened? What emotion did you feel?

If you think of emotions as having the purpose of communicating something, what was your emotion saying? If negative, did it suggest an action to take in the future? If positive, did it suggest something good you should keep doing?

Exercise: Accept Pain

Don't aim for a pain-free life. When you strive for something important to you, you accept the pain necessary to get there.

What's a goal that is very important to you?

How much pain are you willing to endure to achieve your goal? What amount of pain would cause you to abandon the goal?

Chapter 3: The Entitlement Trap

Manson says that a feeling of entitlement is rampant today because many people have bought into cultural and social media messages about what it takes to be happy—which actually makes them more miserable and unable to cope with challenges in life.

According to Manson, entitlement can take one of two forms:

1. You believe that you're entitled to feel good all the time.

(Shortform note: This type of entitlement is the result of letting your emotions manage you, rather than managing your emotions. Recall the emotional intelligence model from Chapter 2—controlling your emotions to achieve your goals is a large part of emotional intelligence.)

2. You believe that you're exceptional or different. There are two ways that this belief can express itself:

- You feel different in a self-aggrandizing way, like believing that you're always the smartest person in the room.
- You feel different in a negative way, often as a response to trauma. You may think that you've suffered more than anyone else has, so you deserve pity; or you may believe that you're damaged beyond repair and there's no point in trying to improve yourself.

You're Not Special—And That's a Good Thing

Therapist Lori Gottlieb's memoir *Maybe You Should Talk to Someone* discusses the fact that sometimes, a person who's going through difficulty in life can't move past it until they stop seeing their problems as unique or exceptional. In one example that she relates to illustrate this, a woman with a history of alcoholism (prompted by an abusive marriage) is unable to forgive herself for her past mistakes—she feels like she has messed up her life in a unique way and that her mistakes are worse than other people's. She's therefore unable to get involved in a new (healthier) romantic relationship. She can only move forward when she accepts that her struggles are similar to millions of other people's struggles.

Another of Gottlieb's examples shows the opposite type of exceptionalism: A man who thinks he's smarter than everyone around him continually causes problems in his relationships until he accepts that he isn't special, either.

These examples show that feelings of exceptionalism can work in both ways—they can hold people to pain that they think is special, or they can hold people to feelings of superiority that prevent meaningful relationships. It's only when a person recognizes that they're *not* exceptional (and that that's okay), that they can make progress in treatment and in their lives.

How Entitlement Started

Manson connects our current entitlement epidemic to a trend that began in the 1960s, when the self-esteem/exceptionalism philosophy spread through schools, churches, and business development seminars. **The focus became feeling good about yourself, rather than trying, failing, learning, and**

accomplishing things.

In the sixties, researchers concluded that people who felt good about themselves tended to perform better and caused fewer problems for society. Psychologists and policymakers began promoting self-esteem in the hope it would lead to such things as better academic performance, less crime, greater employment, and better job performance. Over the next decade, self-esteem approaches were adopted by teachers, parents, policymakers, and therapists, and were integrated by schools.

Can You Have Too Much Self-Esteem?

The late Dr. Nathaniel Branden is often credited as the founder of the self-esteem movement of the 60s. He defined self-esteem as both confidence that you can handle life's challenges and a belief that you deserve to be happy.

Furthermore, Branden argued that a lack of self-esteem led to various neuroses—in other words, that people suffered from mental disorders because they didn't believe that they were competent, or didn't believe that they deserved to be happy.

Branden neatly summarized his ideas in his 1984 essay *In Defense of Self:*

"I cannot think of a single psychological problem—from anxiety and depression, to fear of intimacy or of success, to alcohol or drug abuse, to spouse battering or child molestation, to suicide and crimes of violence—that is not traceable to the problem of a poor self-concept."

However, others say that *too much* self-esteem causes those very problems. For example, in *Ego Is the Enemy*, author Ryan Holiday says that having too much pride in your own abilities and too high a self-image can lead to issues like anxiety and depression: You'll be anxious about taking on any challenge that you might not succeed at because failure would be a blow to your pride; and you could become depressed if you *do* fail at something, because you haven't lived up to the impossible standards you set for yourself.

Manson believes that the self-esteem movement had major negative impacts on society. It led to such things as grade inflation and participation awards. Business and motivational speakers told people that everyone could be successful. Church leaders taught that their members were special in God's eyes and destined for greatness.

As a result of that movement, Manson says, **we now feel entitled to success, regardless of whether we've earned it.**

Participation Trophies: Pros and Cons

Participation trophies, which promote the idea that everyone is a winner, are still hotly debated by coaches, parents, and psychologists alike. There are compelling arguments on both sides of the issue.

Some say that participation trophies are good because they reward children's *efforts* (regardless of the outcome). Those in favor of participation trophies say that such awards teach children that it's good to try new things, to do their best, and to be part of a team—all valuable lessons, regardless of whether they won or lost any particular contest.

However, some say that participation trophies are bad because the above reasoning backfires. Those against participation trophies say that, rather than rewarding children for doing their best, they teach children that everyone gets the same prize no matter who wins (and, therefore, there's no reason to do their best).

So far, neither coaches nor psychologists have reached a consensus on the issue, but

Manson clearly falls into this second category; he believes that trophies should only be given to those who earn them by winning a contest.

Why Entitlement Is a Problem

Manson believes that entitlement is a problem because:

- **It keeps you from growing and learning.** We need to experience and learn from failure and challenges if we are to become successful adults. When you feel entitled, you skip this step.

(Shortform note: Studies have shown that "gifted" children, who were often praised for their natural abilities rather than their efforts, tend to grow into adults who avoid struggles and failures. They tend to take failure as a sign that they're not "good" at whatever they were trying to do, rather than a sign that they need to put in more work to get the results they want. In other words, they feel entitled to skip that work because of their natural gifts.)

- **You feel entitled to rewards you didn't earn,** and you convince yourself you're doing great things when you're not.

In *The Happiness Hypothesis*, Jonathan Haidt observes that we overestimate our own contributions to a project or a relationship and underestimate other peoples' contributions. This overly positive view leads to entitlement and causes relationship friction because we overstate our value to the group.

For example, Haidt cites a 1979 study that asked husbands and wives how much they personally contributed to household work. Their answers added up to 120%, an impossible number that showed they were overvaluing their own work.

- At the extreme, **entitled people are self-aggrandizing**—if something good happens to them they believe it's because they're great; if something bad happens then it's not their fault. They do whatever they feel is necessary to maintain their self-image and status, including abusing others.

(Shortform note: The qualities Manson describes here are also traits of narcissism. At the extreme, narcissism can take the form of Narcissistic Personality Disorder, which is characterized by extreme preoccupation with self-image, a lack of empathy, and the inability to own up to one's mistakes. Notably, psychologists don't believe narcissism stems from an abundance of self-esteem, but rather, from an obsession with attention, admiration, and status. This reflects a potentially negative consequence of giving too many f*cks about expectations driven by social media, as Manson warns against.)

The real gauge of a person's self-esteem is how they feel about their flaws and bad experiences, not how they feel about their positive experiences.

Manson says that if you have genuine self-esteem, then you recognize your flaws and work to fix them. If you have a fragile self-esteem that comes from entitlement, then you do everything you can to hide your flaws (even from yourself) and deny that they exist.

(Shortform note: Scientific studies have shown that Manson is correct: There is a strong link between narcissism and insecurity—in other words, a lack of true self-esteem. As a side note, the same study also attempted to show a link between insecurity and psychopathy (a condition similar to narcissism, characterized by lack of empathy and amoral behavior), but was unable to prove that such a link existed.)

Trauma May Lead to Entitlement

Manson notes that another factor that can lead to a feeling of entitlement is having experienced trauma in your life. This kind of entitlement stems from either the belief that **you're terrible and everyone else is great,** or that **you're great and everyone else is terrible.** Either way, you feel unique and deserving of special treatment. You may even alternate between these feelings, up one day and down the next.

It develops this way:

- You experience trauma.
- You feel helpless to solve your problems.
- You feel there is something wrong with you.
- **You feel your problems are unique and therefore you're different from others.** You feel that different rules must apply to you; that you're entitled to special attention or treatment.
- You may overcompensate to prove your value and worth, through such things as unhealthy relationships, drinking, sex, and trampling others' feelings. **You may feel entitled to do and say whatever you want, then use your trauma to justify your actions.**

Learned Helplessness

What Manson describes here is what psychologists call *learned helplessness*. When someone goes through trauma and feels helpless to change the situation or protect him- or herself, that person might conclude that it's impossible to change *any* stressful or traumatic situation.

Someone suffering from learned helplessness will become passive in stressful situations, and will simply let traumatic things happen to them. This feeling of helplessness creates a great deal of stress.

Angela Duckworth discusses the devastating effects that learned helplessness can have on a person's motivation and thus their ultimate success in her book *Grit*. She references several studies showing that when a person (or an animal) is forced to endure traumatic experiences that they have no ability to stop, they react submissively to future trauma as well. This effect can last their entire lives, especially if the initial trauma they endured was during childhood. They essentially learn to give up, which makes it less likely they'll successfully navigate challenges towards their goals.

Learned helplessness is also associated with several mental health conditions, including depression and PTSD. The unhealthy relationships, addiction issues, and selfish behavior that Manson describes in the final bullet point are common coping mechanisms for people with those conditions.

Exceptional Is *Not* the Norm

Technology has solved many problems. However, Manson believes that it's given us new mental problems by flooding us with huge amounts of biased information, which convinces us that the exceptional is actually normal. That leaves a lot of average people feeling inadequate and insecure, with a distorted view of themselves.

We've come to believe that being average is being a failure; but if everyone were considered extraordinary, then no one would stand out.

Averageness as Failure in *The Incredibles*

We can see how prevalent this belief is by observing how it's made its way into many pop culture references. For example, the premise of *The Incredibles*, a superhero movie by Pixar, is based on this idea: The villain (Syndrome) has a plan to destroy the very concept of superheroes by granting *everybody* superpowers because, in his own words, "...when everyone's super, no one will be."

His plan rests upon the idea that *being average is failing*—that if the superheroes aren't exceptionally powerful, then they aren't superheroes at all.

It's also noteworthy that, when Syndrome reveals his grand plan, none of the heroes even question its premise. What might have been a philosophical debate was instead presented as a simple statement of fact. No debate was needed, because society (in other words, the audience) already believes that Syndrome is right, and that his plan will succeed unless the heroes stop him (which, of course, they do). In doing so, *The Incredibles* promotes the very exceptionalism that Manson argues against.

It's Okay to Be Average

In fact, Manson bluntly tells us, **you are probably average at most things that you do**. If you excel at something, you're still probably average or worse at other things.

To be emotionally healthy you need to accept that:

- You're not special or extraordinary.
- What you do doesn't matter that much, all things considered.
- Much of your life will be unexciting and dull.

(Shortform note: Manson has since elaborated on these points. In his blog post "In Defense of Being Average," he clarifies that we should never *try* to be average; however, we should *accept it* when we end up average in spite of our best efforts. In other words, he doesn't recommend aiming for mediocrity, but rather, accepting that we'll most likely blend in with the crowd.)

According to Manson, accepting these realities eliminates the pressure and stress of feeling inadequate and always needing to compensate. You can do and achieve what you want, free of unrealistic expectations.

When you lower your expectations to a realistic level, you'll have a greater appreciation for ordinary things like spending time with friends, helping someone, or pursuing something you enjoy. These are actually the important things.

A popular way of explaining this idea is with the "equation" happiness = reality - expectations. The equation implies that if your reality doesn't live up to your expectations, then your happiness is negative—in other words, you're unhappy. Thus, according to this "formula," the simplest way to become happier is to lower your expectations.

Following this line of thought to its logical conclusion, if your expectations = 0 (that is, if you have no expectations at all) then you'll be happy with whatever reality you have. That's one way to approach what Tara Brach calls Radical Acceptance—not expecting or anticipating anything, but simply accepting each moment as it comes.

Exercise: Do You Feel Entitled?

A feeling of entitlement can stand in the way of improving yourself and succeeding in your work and relationships.

Have you ever thought in an entitled way? (This might mean you feel your problems are unique; that the rules don't apply to you; that you deserve special treatment; that you consider yourself a victim.)

After reading this chapter, what is a more emotionally healthy way to think of yourself?

Do you currently feel inadequate in any area of your life? What is it? Who are you comparing yourself to?

Consider the possibility that you might just be average in that area — how does that make you feel? Do you feel less pressure to achieve a particular expectation?

Chapter 4: Defining Your Values

To figure out what to give a f*ck about, Manson notes that you must be clear on your values. Your values are what drive you to feel and act in certain ways. To get to know your values, Manson says you must develop strong **self-awareness,** which will help you understand your values so that you can choose better values.

Three Levels of Values

Manson notes that self-awareness has multiple levels. To uncover your deepest motives, you need to explore each level by questioning yourself.

Value Level 1: Identify Your Emotions

Manson advises you to recognize when something is bothering you and to identify what you're feeling—for instance, "this makes me feel sad." Identifying your feelings can be difficult because we're unaccustomed to it, and it takes practice. Many people were taught they should repress emotions, or that certain emotions were inappropriate. As a result, they have emotional blind spots and have to learn to identify and express the forbidden emotions constructively.

(Shortform note: The tendency to repress emotions is particularly common among men, many of whom are taught from childhood that certain emotions—especially sadness and fear—are not "manly," or appropriate for men to express. Various types of therapy may help people (not just men) reconnect with their repressed emotions.)

Value Level 2: Determine Why You Feel Certain Emotions

Next, Manson says that you should ask yourself *why* you feel the way you do. Once you understand the cause, you can change.

- It often requires the help of a therapist to understand why you feel certain emotions. It's difficult because the reasons often involve your definitions of success and failure. For instance, the reason you feel angry in a certain situation could be that you feel you've failed at something.
- It can help to keep asking yourself "why" multiple times until you can't answer it anymore.

(Shortform note: It may also help to remember that we have emotions because we've evolved to have them, meaning that they are (or at least were) a survival mechanism. Thus, the "why" behind an emotion you're feeling might be deeper than simple success or failure. This is especially the case with particularly strong emotions; you may be tapping into primal, irrational feelings of life-or-death.)

Value Level 3: Identify the Personal Values Underlying Your Emotions

Finally, ask yourself: How do I define success and failure? What yardstick am I measuring myself against?

- Our values are the basis for what we do. The kinds of problems we have are a result of our values, and they affect how happy and satisfied we are.
- Since our emotions and thoughts are based on our values, a nonconstructive value can throw them off balance.

In *Maybe You Should Talk to Someone*, Lori Gottlieb—who's both the author and the main character—illustrates the importance of not only **consciously uncovering and naming your core values,** but also ***replacing*** **nonconstructive values with constructive values.**

Gottlieb isn't able to move past her midlife crisis until she identifies the *values* that caused it. Through her work with another therapist, she eventually realizes that she values **security** and **control**; she feels like she's succeeding when things are going according to plan, and she spirals into a crisis when her plans for her own life are suddenly uprooted (in this case, by an unexpected breakup).

In order to heal, she has to embrace more constructive values like accepting things as they are, enjoying the thrill of uncertainty, and appreciating each moment as she lives it.)

Ask Difficult Questions

To understand our feelings and values, Manson suggests that we ask ourselves difficult questions—questions that can make us uncomfortable. For instance:

1. Think of something that bothers you.
2. Ask yourself *why* it bothers you.
    - Often, when something bothers us, it's because we subconsciously think that we've failed in some way (that we're wrong about something, for instance).
3. If you do believe that you've somehow failed, ask yourself why you think so.
4. Ask yourself whether there's another way you could look at the situation.
    - For example, what if it's not a failure, but rather a learning opportunity?

Using Questions to Find Your Purpose

Another way to understand your core values is to understand what you hope to achieve in life—in other words, your purpose. Psychologist Angela Duckworth suggests figuring out your purpose by writing down every goal that you have (from short-term goals like returning a phone call, to long-term goals like losing weight or earning a college degree).

Once you have your list, organize your goals into a pyramid. The base of your pyramid will be your short-term, concrete goals like making that phone call. Above that will be slightly longer-term goals, like passing a test or handling a project at work. Above that will be even longer-term goals, like earning a degree. The trick is: Each level of the pyramid should support the level above it. If the goals in one level don't get you closer to the goals in the next, then you should discard them.

At the very tip of the pyramid will be your ultimate purpose in life—your "top-level goal," as Duckworth calls it. You may not even know what your top-level goal is at the moment; to find it, start with a lower-level goal and ask yourself "why?" For example, why do you want to go to that college? When you have that answer, again ask yourself "why," and continue for each of your answers. For example, why do you want to major in engineering? Why do you want to get a job building safer structures? Why do you want to make the world a safer place to live and work? When you get to the answer of "Just because," that's your highest-level goal.

Alternatively, you could ask yourself questions like, "Who am I really?" "What kind of world do I want to create?" In other words, as Manson would put it, **"What do I give a f*ck about?"** This is an

effective method to learn your own values because, ultimately, your top-level goal must be based on those values; if it weren't, then you wouldn't be so passionate about it.

Positive Values vs. Negative Values

Manson says that when you have poor values and standards, you give f*cks about things that don't matter. That leads to difficult or even unsolvable problems. **Negative values are non-factual, non-constructive, or out of your control.** For example:

- **Popularity—**out of your control; it's based on others' opinions of you.
- **Power over others—**non-constructive; it requires hurting or manipulating other people in order to get what you want.
- **Feeling good—**non-factual; it's a pure emotional response.

(Shortform note: Negative values like these usually stem from what you think *other* people value. They're about how you relate to others (power and control), what you *think* they admire in you (money or status), or how they think of you (popularity, admiration, fame, and so on). Manson urges you to instead choose values that are about yourself, because you can't control what other people think or do. Since it's out of your control, it's not worth giving a f*ck about.)

By contrast, Manson believes that **when you adopt healthy values and standards, you reserve your f*cks for things that lead to good problems and enhance your well-being.** Positive values are based on fact, are constructive, and have an outcome you can control.

The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche discussed how people create their own values by arguing that things in themselves have no value—they simply exist, and any significance that we attach to them is our own creation. Therefore, we're free to make any judgments that we want about what's important or not important.

In Nietzsche's philosophy, we can see the roots of Manson's argument that we must choose what to value. However, Manson expands on Nietzsche's ideas by saying that we must choose the *right* things to value; otherwise, we're setting ourselves up for frustration and unhappiness.

Five Alternative Positive Values

The rest of Manson's book discusses five beneficial values that run counter to cultural and social media messages that Manson advises you adopt. They require addressing problems rather than avoiding them through denial or feel-good exercises.

1. **Taking responsibility** for everything that happens in your life, whether or not it's your fault.
2. **Accepting uncertainty**: Accepting that you might be wrong, and that you don't know everything. Examining and doubting your beliefs.
3. **Embracing failure:** Being willing to uncover your flaws and fix them, as well as learn from what goes wrong.
4. **Practicing rejection**: Focusing on a few important things, and rejecting unimportant things. Also developing the ability to say "no," and accept "no" from others.
5. **Reflecting on your mortality** to keep your life and values in perspective.

Each of the remaining chapters explores one of these topics.

Manson's Values Compared to Aurelius's Meditations

Manson's five counterintuitive values are very similar to some of the main topics of Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*:

*The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck:*

- **Take responsibility for everything in your life**.
    - However, remember that responsibility and blame are not the same thing.
- **Accept uncertainty.** Remember that you don't know everything; doubt yourself and your beliefs, and examine them critically.
- **Embrace failure.** Learn from your mistakes and use your failures as opportunities to grow.
- **Practice rejection.** Stop giving f*cks about the unimportant things in your life. Reject everything unimportant.
    - Corollary: Practice saying no to people, and accepting it when people say no to you.
- **Reflect on your mortality.** Keep your life in perspective, as that will help you develop constructive values and standards.

Meditations:

- **Be strict with yourself and patient with others.** The only things you can control are your own actions—thus, you are personally responsible for everything that you do.
    - You are *not* responsible for what other people think, say, and do; that's neither your responsibility nor your problem.
- **Embrace *logos* (meaning both personal logic and natural laws).** Aurelius believed that the universe was governed by perfect logic and natural laws, which ensured that everything would proceed in the best possible way.
    - However, people have limited perspectives and imperfect logic, which often leads them to incorrect conclusions. Aurelius argued that, if you feel unhappy or anxious, it's because you're struggling under some incorrect understanding of the world.
- **Live without fear.** Aurelius insists that the only danger in life is that which damages your *character*—in other words, **the only things you should fear are your own flaws.**
    - Thus, you should work ruthlessly and fearlessly to improve yourself.
- **Only concern yourself with living well.** Aurelius urges you to reject material wealth and pleasure, and devote yourself completely to your duty (whatever that may be).
- **Examine life and death rationally.** A person's life is finite, and insignificant compared to the world.

- Therefore, anything you do for yourself is meaningless; every action you take should make the world better somehow.

Difficulties With Changing Your Values

Manson points out that you're already making choices of what to give a f*ck about. **Change is just a matter of choosing to give a f*ck about something different.**

While it sounds simple, there are uncomfortable (but temporary) side effects:

- **Feeling uncertain**: Changing long-held values is disorienting. You'll question whether you're doing the right thing.
- **Feeling like a failure**: When you try to apply new values and standards, the old ones will keep coming to mind in each situation. You'll feel like a failure for discarding them.
- **Facing objections**: Your relationships are built on your values, so when you change your values, your relationships will change as well. You'll get pushback.

According to Manson, feeling uncertain is the most prevalent reaction when you decide to stop giving a f*ck about certain things, and to care about other things instead. Just remember that **cultivating uncertainty is the second of the five alternative values that can change your life.**

Identifying Your Values Is the First Step

It's important to understand how to change your values, and what struggles you might face in trying to do so. However, you may find that you're not even sure what your values are. For example, do you *really* give a f*ck about people liking you? Perhaps it's actually confidence that you value, and popularity is just a good confidence booster.

Business coach Scott Jeffrey suggests a seven-step process to discover your true, core values:

1. Keep an open mind

- You probably think that you already know who you are and what you value. That kind of false certainty will interfere with this exercise; try to start with the assumption that you *don't* know yourself.

2. List your values

- Listing the values that you know you have will help you to discover the true values underlying them.

3. Group the values by theme

4. Find the *central* themes

- Once you've grouped your values by theme, pick one value in each group that best exemplifies it. Highlight that value, and leave the others as explanation or context for it.

5. Whittle down your list

- Even after step 4, you might find that you've got too many values to effectively work with. Try to narrow it down to the 5-10 that are most important to you.

6. Contextualize your values

- For the 5-10 core values you've chosen, expand each into an *actionable statement.* For example: "Honesty—Always tell the truth, even if it might make me look bad."

7. Test each value

- Come back to your list the next day and look it over with fresh eyes. See how each value makes you feel, and whether they're consistent with who you are or who you want to be.

Measuring Yourself

Manson defines **values** as what you believe to be important and what you want to achieve. He defines **standards** as the yardstick you use to measure success or failure in living up to your values.

What are your personal standards? We have internal standards against which we measure ourselves, without necessarily being conscious of them. It's important to recognize and understand them so **we can change our values if they're not constructive**.

Our values and standards can be constructive or destructive—they may lead to good problems that we enjoy solving, or to problems that stymie and frustrate us, leading to unhappiness.

Tony Robbins's *Awaken the Giant Within* recommends setting a mixture of standards for yourself:

- Some very high standards that force you to grow
- Some reachable standards that let you enjoy your accomplishments

Setting only unrealistic standards is setting yourself up to fail, while only setting low, reachable standards will lead to stagnation.

For example, say that someone who's not physically fit wants to get in better shape. A reachable standard might be to exercise three times a week; an unrealistic standard would be to become an Olympic athlete.

The reachable standard will let this person feel like he's succeeding—which, in fact, he is, since he's exercising and getting into better shape. The less realistic standard of competing in the Olympics will force him to push himself harder than he normally would, since he's trying to get himself to the same level as the world's best athletes.

Exercise: Be Self-Aware About Your Values

Question how you feel and why to uncover your deepest values.

Think of something that's currently bothering you. What is it? What emotion are you feeling?

Why does that bother you?

Why does *that* bother you? Keep answering this question a few times until you can't anymore. Type each question and response here.

At the end of your questioning, you should arrive at a value that you care about. Now go back to the original situation in the first question. Understanding your value, do you see the situation in a new light? Should you reframe your value? Should you use a different yardstick to interpret the situation?

Chapter 5: Value—Taking Responsibility

When you don't feel in control of a situation, you become unhappy. However, according to Manson, it's often a matter of perspective: A difficult problem can make you miserable, or it can give you a sense of accomplishment when you solve it.

Often, the only difference is in the degree to which you're responsible for the situation or feel you have a choice in it. **We feel in control and empowered when we choose our problems or challenges**; when forced to deal with problems not of our making, we feel helpless and victimized.

But here's Manson's solution: No matter what situation you're in, no matter your circumstances, you always have a choice. **You can choose what you think, and how you behave in every situation.** Once you accept your responsibility and ability to make choices, you'll feel empowered in any situation, and this will make you happier.

Even in the worst situations—for example, being stuck in the hospital, or in prison—your attitude and your behavior are **your choice** and **your responsibility.**

Discipline (or self-control) is one of the values that Robin Sharma teaches in *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari.* He makes the case that chasing after your whims doesn't make you powerful or free; on the contrary, it makes you a slave to your own desires. Therefore, he urges you to study your desires and only act on those that are worthwhile—namely, your desires to grow and improve yourself.

According to Sharma—and Manson—true freedom and power lie in having the discipline to make your own decisions, instead of being pushed along by outside forces like desire.

You're Always Making Choices

Manson says that, **while we don't always control what happens to us, we're always responsible for how we respond to it.**

In any situation, you have more choices than you think:

- You choose the values and standards you live by.
- You choose how to interpret what happens and how to respond.

Manson also points out that you actually *can't* avoid responsibility—even choosing not to respond to something is a response, and you're responsible for it. Therefore, the question isn't whether or not you should decide to take responsibility; **the question is what values you'll base your decisions on.**

In other words, what will you give a f*ck about?

The Benefits of Values-Based Decisions

Knowing your values and sticking to them has many benefits. For example, Forbes interviewed 12 CEOs about how values-based decisions have helped their companies. Some of the responses included:

- **Clarity.** Clearly defined values help with decision-making, because any given decision becomes a simple question of whether it goes against one of those values.
- **Efficiency.** Clear values lead to clear goals. In turn, clear goals stop you from overextending yourself trying to chase every passing whim. You can use your resources (time, money, energy, and so on) *effectively* and *efficiently*.
- **Transparency.** When people know what your values are, they'll find you more trustworthy. Furthermore, they'll find it easier to anticipate what you'd want in any given situation—therefore, you'll find that people are more helpful and accommodating when your values are clear.
- **Being true to yourself.** Defining your values and living by them is the best way (perhaps the only way) to **become the person you want to be.**
    - Looking at it another way: You have to know what your goal is before you can reach it. Defining your values will allow you to set meaningful goals for yourself.

Responsibility Versus Blame

Manson believes that the more responsibility we assume for what happens in our lives, the more power and control we have. Thus, taking responsibility is the first step toward solving our problems.

Furthermore, it's a common misconception that taking responsibility for something means taking the blame for it, but responsibility and blame are different things. We aren't to *blame* for everything that happens to us (for instance, a traumatic childhood), but we're still *responsible* for how we respond to it.

(Shortform note: When approaching this concept, you might find it helpful to replace the word "blame" with "fault." Your current situation (whatever it is) might not be your *fault*; however, dealing with it is still your *responsibility*.)

Manson stresses that **you alone are responsible for your circumstances.** Others may have contributed to the situation, but you're responsible for your unhappiness because you're choosing how to react to and frame the situation.

For example, suppose somebody robs you in a bad part of town. The robber is responsible for that event, but not for how you feel about it. Only you can make yourself happy again; you can decide to **accept** what happened (a value) and **learn a lesson** (why did I get robbed? How can I avoid similar situations in the future?).

Attribution Error Mislabels Blame

One way that people commonly avoid taking responsibility is through *attribution error* (also called *attribution bias*). Basically, people tend to attribute their own shortcomings to circumstance (losing a job because "the manager hates me," for example), and other people's shortcomings to character flaws like laziness or carelessness. In *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living*, Dale Carnegie suggests that you treat others with the same tolerance you have for yourself—assume that what they do is the result of circumstance, rather than poor character.

However, Manson takes this one step further by saying that you *shouldn't* assume your shortcomings are because of circumstance. Taking Manson and Carnegie's ideas together, we'd end up with a sort of "reverse attribution bias," wherein we assume that our own problems are due to our choices, while others' are due to their circumstances. Interestingly, that closely resembles Marcus Aurelius's insistence that we should be strict with ourselves, but patient with others.

Manson offers another way to approach this concept: **Blame exists in the past, while responsibility exists in the present.** In other words, when you blame someone (including yourself), you're focused on the past: "How did this situation happen?" When you take responsibility, you're focused on the present: What are you going to *do* about it?

Furthermore, blame is destructive—it serves no purpose except to make someone feel bad. However, responsibility is constructive—it drives you to find and implement solutions.

In *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius offers two compelling arguments against the very concept of blame (or fault):

- **Blame is pointless.** People make mistakes and hurt others due to ignorance or accident, not out of malice. There's no sense in blaming people (including yourself) for what they don't know, or for an honest mistake. Instead, you should teach them (or learn) how to avoid that problem in the future.
- **Blame is useless.** Even if there were someone to blame for a situation, doing so wouldn't fix the problem. The only rational approach is to find a solution and work to implement it.

Responding to Tragedy

It's a fact of life that tragic and horrible things sometimes happen. You don't choose what happens to you, but you do choose how you handle it.

For example, if you're robbed, you didn't choose it, but you made choices nonetheless. For instance, you made choices at the time (running, screaming, or fighting), and later you chose how to respond to the physical and emotional aftereffects.

Manson stresses that **we all experience pain of some kind—we decide what that pain means, and how to respond to it.**

A Buddhist Take on Suffering

The central tenets of Buddhism—the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path—teach us that suffering is a fact of life, as Manson says. Everyone will experience pain, fear, and tragedy at some point.

The Four Noble Truths are Buddhists' philosophies on the existence of suffering, and the Eightfold Path is Buddhism's solution to that suffering. Buddhism teaches that, by constantly striving to speak, act, and think in constructive ways, you can free yourself from pain. In other words, by **taking responsibility for your thoughts and actions, you can find peace.**

We can see a direct connection between these teachings and Manson's theories, in that Manson also advises that you accept suffering and focus on how to respond to it rather than fight it or be upset by it.

Four Noble Truths:

- Suffering exists.
- People suffer due to worldly desires (for material goods, physical pleasure, and so on) and ignorance (failure to see the world as it is, which leads to such vices as anger, greed, and hate).
- Your suffering will end (this may refer either to finding peace in your lifetime, or achieving Nirvana after you die).
- The Eightfold Path will free you from suffering.

Eightfold Path:

- Correct understanding—seeing the world as it truly is
- Correct thought—rejecting thoughts of desire and animosity
- Correct speech—avoiding lies and hurtful words
- Correct action—ethical behavior
- Correct livelihood—avoiding occupations that cause harm directly (like fighting in wars) or indirectly (like selling alcohol or other drugs)
- Correct effort—working tirelessly toward enlightenment
- Correct mindfulness—awareness of yourself, your mental and physical state, and your surroundings
- Correct concentration—single-minded focus; meditation

Playing the Hand We're Dealt

Manson acknowledges that many people are born with disadvantages. Those people may feel as though they got the short end of the stick, and they're helpless to do anything about their situation, so they avoid taking responsibility. However, even though it's not their fault, they're still responsible for their choices—and the outcomes of those choices.

Life is like poker: A player who gets a bad hand can still win. **The outcome of the game is determined by the players' choices.**

(Shortform note: Ludwig von Beethoven famously composed great works of classical music despite being deaf. His desire to create music (a value) was more important to him than his disability, so he didn't slip into a victim mindset. This example shows that knowing your values and sticking to them can help you overcome seemingly impossible circumstances; **the only thing that can truly hold you back is yourself.**)

Perpetual Victims

People often try to shift responsibility for solving their problems to others. Manson believes that blaming someone else creates a feeling of moral righteousness; a brief high that comes from feeling special.

Manson also believes that **social media helps enable this behavior by making it easy to shift responsibility to other people.** Users join in a public blame game, sharing injustices to generate sympathy and attention, which rewards those who feel victimized. Moral indignation makes them feel good and they get addicted to this feeling.

Here are some destructive effects:

- People on both the right and left, rich and poor, from every demographic group claim to be victims.
- People who are offended claim they're being oppressed, and expect outrage and attention.
- **There's a repeating cycle or spiral of outrage**: Media find something offensive, they broadcast it, this creates outrage, they broadcast the outrage to generate more outrage.
- The propensity of so many to declare themselves victims over small things distracts attention from real victims.
- It threatens democracy. Part of living in a democratic society is tolerating people and views you disagree with.

(Shortform note: Social media experts have noted that websites like Facebook and Twitter encourage extreme beliefs and behavior almost by design. Since everyone can have a platform on those sites, only the loudest and most outrageous personalities rise to prominence. Furthermore, such sites naturally create "echo chambers," where you only have to interact with people who share your opinions. Taken together, these phenomena reinforce one another and lead to ever-more-extreme beliefs.)

We've all seen this counterproductive phenomenon. Instead of participating, Manson suggests that you:

- Maintain a healthy skepticism toward the media and avoid categorizing others.
- Practice healthy values of honesty, doubt/uncertainty, and open-mindedness over destructive values of being right or morally superior.
- Nurture democratic values to support our political system.

Instead of playing the victim and expecting special treatment when you encounter disagreement, take responsibility for your feelings and choices.

How to Effectively Disagree

Manson gives general guidelines for avoiding the destructive aspects of social media but doesn't offer any concrete, actionable advice. This TED Talk by Julia Dhar explains **how you can disagree in a productive way, rather than a hateful and destructive way.**

In summary, the steps are:

- **Fault the idea, not the person.** If you encounter an idea or opinion that you believe is wrong, explain why you think that. Don't resort to personal attacks; just because someone has a bad idea, that doesn't mean that he or she is a bad person.
- **Find common ground.** This is hardly new or uncommon advice, but Dhar emphasizes that even the *smallest* bit of common ground will do as a starting point.

    - For example, if one person wants much stricter immigration laws while another wants much looser laws, **they both agree that the current system isn't working.** That's enough to start a productive conversation.

- **Practice humility.** Set aside your need to be right, along with your certainty that you *are* right; in other words, set aside your pride.
    - A useful thought exercise is to imagine that you're on the other side of the issue. What would it be like if you fully embraced the opposing viewpoint? How would you defend it? Debate teams often do this exact exercise to make sure that they fully understand *both* sides of a topic, not only their own side.

- **Accept the possibility that you're wrong.** Before you debate a topic, you should be able to explain what it would take to change your mind about it.
    - If nothing can change your mind, then you're not debating; you're just fighting.

Exercise: Take Responsibility

Things may happen to us that aren't our fault. But we are still responsible for how we choose to respond to them.

Think of something that happened to you that wasn't your fault but that you feel resentful about. What was it?

Remember that no matter the circumstance, you always have the ability to make choices and the responsibility to decide how you feel. Given this, how should you change how you feel, or how you behave?

Chapter 6: Value—Accepting Uncertainty

Manson says that to grow, we need to entertain doubt about our beliefs, feelings, and rightness. **Instead of trying to prove we're right, we should look for ways that we're wrong.** Finding our mistakes will allow us to grow.

He also stresses that **learning and changing our beliefs is a lifelong growth process where we continually build on what we've learned before**. We'll never reach perfect knowledge or perfect certainty. That's because learning doesn't take us from wrong to right, but rather from wrong to less wrong. Thus, rather than striving to find the one "right" answer, **we should figure out what we're definitely wrong about, so that we'll be less wrong tomorrow than we are today**.

(Shortform note: Manson's ideal of lifelong learning and growth echoes the concept of *kaizen*, a Japanese word that means *constant self-improvement*. While kaizen usually refers to a business practice, Robin Sharma's book *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari* urges you to apply the same principle to yourself: In short, to improve yourself in some small way every day. To do this, Sharma advises that you make a list of your weaknesses or fears, because these indicate the areas you need to work on the most. Then, he recommends facing each weakness and fear head-on, which will allow you to effectively make progress.)

The Problem With Certainty

So that you can change your values to better ones, Manson advises you to doubt the rightness of your current values and be open to their flaws. **Your values are works in progress and never complete**.

He warns that, if you believe your values and priorities are perfect, then you risk becoming dogmatic and entitled—therefore, you need to concede your ignorance. If you accept uncertainty, then you're less prone to judge others or yourself, or to harbor biases. You're open to learning what you don't know through experience. **The more you acknowledge not knowing, the more you can learn.**

(Shortform note: An empty cup is an old Zen Buddhist metaphor for an open mind. When you think you already know everything, your "cup" is full: There's no room for anything else to go in. To learn, you must start by emptying that cup; let go of what you *think* you know, and approach every situation with an open mind.)

Manson points out that when people are *too* certain, they can actually end up with insecurity, anger, or bitterness when they get information that contradicts their certainty. For example, an athlete might be confident in his own skills going into a game. However, if he ends up losing, his certainty that he should have won will make him feel worse than if he hadn't been so sure in the first place.

Certainty can also be used for harmful purposes. Researchers used to believe people did wrong things because they felt bad about themselves, but studies in the mid-1990s found the opposite: **People who do bad things may actually feel good about themselves**. Such people are often certain that they're in the right, which makes them feel justified in harming others.

In other words, evil people don't think that they're evil; they believe other people are evil.

Influences on Evil

Philip Zimbardo, a psychologist and Stanford professor who has extensively studied the nature of "evil" in humans, gave a TED talk (content warning: images of graphic violence) on how good people can be convinced to do terrible things like torture and kill one another.

According to Zimbardo, three key influences cause average people to turn cruel and violent:

- **Propaganda.** People repeatedly see or hear that they are good, and another group is evil, and therefore that other group must be destroyed. As Manson says, such propaganda can cause people to do horrific things, all with the certainty that their cause is just and right.
- **Societal pressure.** People will often conform to popular opinions and actions, even if they personally disagree with them. In other words, people try to "fit in" rather than going against the group and risking ostracization.
- **Authoritative pressure.** Often, people will ignore their own consciences in favor of obedience to authority figures. One example of this is the infamous Milgram Shock Experiment, where volunteers were ordered to administer increasingly painful—even lethal—shocks to people. Many did so, simply because they were told to. The "victims" were actors, and the shock devices didn't actually do anything, but the volunteers didn't know that.

Zimbardo wrote about his findings in much greater detail in *The Lucifer Effect*.

Pessimism Brings a Kind of Certainty

Manson says that people can also have negative certainties based in fear—in other words, they're certain that bad things will happen to them. For example, they assume that everyone will laugh at their ideas, or that they'll be shunned by their peers.

This is another reason why Manson advises you to **embrace *uncertainty*—in other words, accept that maybe good things will happen and maybe bad things will happen; either way, you'll deal with each situation as it comes.** By doing so, you'll eliminate your negative certainties and become more comfortable and confident.

For example, you could remind yourself that you don't know how people will react to your ideas; they might laugh at you, or they might think you're brilliant. Embrace the uncertainty: You can't know what will happen until you try.

(Shortform note: The final lesson in Lori Gottlieb's *Maybe You Should Talk to Someone*—and the final step in Gottlieb's treatment—is to welcome uncertainty instead of fearing it. Gottlieb suffers from an unknown disease, which she fears might be fatal. Her therapist asks whether she'd prefer to live in fear because she doesn't know when she'll die, or to savor each moment of her life because she doesn't know how many moments she has left. In the same way, Manson advises us to welcome uncertainty by appreciating the possibilities, instead of fearing the worst outcomes.)

Personal Growth Requires Uncertainty

Manson suggests that you think of personal growth as a trial-and-error process similar to the scientific method:

- Your values are the hypothesis

- Your actions are the experiment
- Your resulting thoughts and feelings are the data you collect from that experiment

Don't get fixated on being "right"—like a scientist, you must be ready to discard any hypothesis that the data doesn't support. Our own inability to admit that we might be wrong can get in the way of personal growth and true happiness.

> It may be reassuring to know that scientists—some of the most intelligent and highly educated people in the world—are wrong about things all the time. In fact, those errors are how we learn new things about the world.
>
> In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn explains how **major breakthroughs only happen because scientists realize that they're wrong about something;** for example, when Ptolemaic astronomy repeatedly failed to predict events like equinoxes, astronomers had to discard it in favor of a new model (Copernican astronomy).
>
> Scientists don't fear being proven wrong; they welcome it as a chance to get closer to the truth. In the same way, we can embrace our own wrongness as a chance to learn, instead of something to be embarrassed about.

For example, suppose someone wants to get promoted but isn't willing to examine her current job performance. She believes that she's doing excellent work, and refuses to consider that it might not be the case. So, **she avoids the short-term discomfort of confronting her shortcomings at work, but she does so at the expense of future happiness.** If she instead faced and reframed her beliefs about herself, she could grow and improve her life.

Manson also emphasizes that this principle doesn't just apply to our fundamental beliefs or values, but also to our temporary impressions. When we define an experience as positive or negative, we can be wrong. Sometimes a distressing experience ends up changing our lives for the better, or a seemingly positive experience derails us. The only thing we know is how something feels in the moment.

(Shortform note: Reserving judgment on your experiences is what Tara Brach calls *Radical Acceptance*: Taking each experience as it comes, rather than judging it as "good" or "bad." More traditional Buddhist texts may refer to it as *equanimity*; in other words, staying calm in the face of upsetting events.)

According to Manson, continuous growth makes us happier than checking off a list of accomplishments, such as graduating from college, getting a promotion, or buying a house. These kinds of short-term achievements only generate a limited amount of satisfaction; once you achieve them, they don't keep making you happier and happier. However, constructive values—for instance, being honest with others—involve **an ongoing process that's never completed, and that process continues to provide satisfaction**.

(Shortform note: Tony Robbins (author of *Awaken the Giant Within*) says that the key to happiness is a single word: progress. Like Manson, Robbins notes that short-term accomplishments only create short-term satisfaction; the secret to lifelong happiness is to keep growing and improving yourself. He also adds that we all have ideas about what it means to have "made it;" but that once we reach that point, we'll find that there's something beyond it. In other words, there's no point we can reach where we'll be happy with our accomplishments forever.)

Let Go of Your Identity

Manson says that you can't change or improve your life until you're able to change how you think of or view yourself. **However, people typically avoid changes that challenge their identity.** They even fear changes that could improve their lives because change pushes them out of their comfort zone.

He adds that **success and failure both challenge your identity**, which is why people fear them both. We may reject even beneficial opportunities if they require us to change the values by which we define ourselves.

Buddhism teaches that you should give up your idea of who you are, because your image of yourself is an artificial creation. The way you think about yourself constrains you, and you should give up these limits. **Giving up your concept of who you are frees you to try things, fail, and grow**. Conversely, when you choose a narrow, rigid identity, you constantly feel threatened by things that challenge it.

(Shortform note: In a similar vein, Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus explore, in their book *Minimalism*, how your identity can be an anchor, because it chains you down to who you *think* you are. For example, if you see yourself as a free-spirited artist, you might pass up an opportunity for a steady office job because that job doesn't fit with your self-imposed identity. However, that office job might actually lead you to happiness because some part of you also likes to analyze things and work with numbers. If you narrowly define your identity, you might neglect other aspects of your personality.)

We put a lot of effort into "finding" or "knowing" ourselves, but Manson warns that this can be limiting, if the identity you choose is a narrow one. It can restrict your emotional development and opportunities. It's better to keep learning and discovering than to "find" yourself; you'll be more open to improvement, and less judgmental about yourself and about the situations you encounter.

(Shortform note: This lesson extends the lesson at the beginning of Chapter 6: Learning and growth are continuous processes, and you'll never achieve perfection. The same goes for learning about yourself—you'll never have a perfect understanding of your own identity, and the identity itself isn't perfect either. In other words, both *who you are as a person* and *your self-image* should grow and change over time.)

In sum, to let go of your identity so that you can adopt better values and priorities, Manson advises that you:

- Accept that you're not unique or special. **Choose a common, non-limiting identity** such as friend, student, partner, or parent, instead of a narrower one like a victim or a rising star.
- **Give up inflated ideas of yourself that give you a short-lived high**, such as that you're uniquely talented, smart, or attractive (and are therefore entitled). Letting go of these ideas will make you more resistant to failure and allow you to pursue growth, since failure no longer threatens your identity.

How to Let Go of Your Identity

Again, Manson provides general guidelines for how to live but offers little in the way of concrete steps you can take. Ryan Holiday's book *Ego Is the Enemy* suggests three practices to help break out of your self-imposed identity:

1. Stop talking about yourself. In addition to being a waste of time and energy, talking about yourself (self-promotion, as Holiday calls it) is all about asserting your identity—that is, your chosen

identity.

- We can particularly see this happen on social media, where every post you write or share promotes a particular image of yourself. This is true whether you're consciously crafting that image or not.

2. Stop thinking about yourself. Here, Holiday is specifically talking about self-aggrandizing, egotistical thoughts. Such thoughts put your focus on yourself instead of on what you should be doing; they may also cause you to hesitate when making decisions, out of fear that you'll choose something that doesn't live up to your inflated self-image.

- For example, suppose that your chosen identity is "genius scientist." You might hesitate to take a lesser position at a lab (like an assistant), even if it would be a good opportunity to further your career, because it doesn't match up with the picture in your head of you leading projects that change the world.

3. Stop being prideful. Holiday claims that pride is a kind of fraud—it's your ego lying to you, telling you that you're better than you are, or that your situation is better than it is. Pride can also be very dangerous: If you're too caught up in your egotistical fantasies, you'll overestimate your abilities and overlook dangers.

- It's likely that your chosen identity is a major source of pride for you, especially if it's an "exceptional" identity (whether exceptionally positive or exceptionally negative). That's another reason why such identities can be difficult to change; **letting go of your self-image means letting go of your pride in that image.**
- One example of pride and self-image getting the better of someone is Jocelyn Wildenstein, an NYC socialite who won billions in a divorce settlement. However, less than 20 years later, she declared bankruptcy. It's unclear whether Wildenstein's situation was purely the result of outrageous spending habits, or if she received significantly less money than she was promised. However, in either case, it's clear that her pride told her that she was living the high life with near-inexhaustible wealth, when in reality that was not the case.

Three Questions to Cultivate Doubt

Questioning and doubting yourself is a difficult skill to learn, but you can develop a healthy sense of doubt. Manson suggests that you **ask yourself three questions that encourage humility,** as opposed to certainty.

Question 1: Could I Be Wrong?

Acknowledging that you're wrong, or that you *might* be wrong, allows you to change. Put another way, **you have to make mistakes in order to learn.**

Manson says that unhappiness could be a sign that you're wrong about something important in your life—for example, maybe you don't really want to be a professional actor, you just enjoy performing. In that case, trying to make a living with acting is a mistake—getting involved with a local community theater would be a much better choice for you.

Note that *asking* whether you're wrong doesn't mean that you necessarily *are* wrong—it's just opening yourself to the possibility.

As with letting go of your chosen identity, pride is the enemy when it comes to admitting that you're wrong. People tend to shield their self-image by denying that they've made mistakes, even when they know that they're in the wrong.

Here are five tactics that might help you overcome your pride:

- **Accept that you're human.** It's a fact of life that people make mistakes, and that includes you. Your mistakes don't make you any less competent or worthy of love.
- **Reflect on yourself.** Ask yourself questions about your character and your actions. For example, "Do I get angry too easily?" "Am I too controlling?" or, "What did I contribute to that drama at work?"
- Seek feedback: Ask people how you might improve.
- Accept feedback: Be open-minded when people tell you their thoughts.
- Find help when you need it: Therapists can help you learn to accept your weaknesses and face your fears.

Question 2: If I *Am* Wrong, What Does That Mean?

Manson warns that this is a more difficult question, because it goes one layer deeper. It requires examining our values and considering potentially contradictory values.

For example, if you're arguing with your partner, and you realize she's actually right and you're wrong, then that could mean "I *do* get unnecessarily jealous when my partner talks to another man" or "I tend to jump to conclusions way too easily."

Usually, this thinking leads you to discover a weakness, which can be painful to hear. Overcoming that weakness might require you to adopt better values, such as open-mindedness or tolerance.

(Shortform note: Psychologists argue that it can be hard to admit that you're wrong because your identity is tied to your ideas. In other words, your beliefs are a key part of your self-image. Therefore, your brain responds to an attack on your ideas the same way it would respond to a physical attack; admitting that you're wrong feels like losing a life-or-death struggle.)

Question 3: Would Changing My Position Improve or Worsen This Situation?

Finally, Manson's third question requires you to **compare alternatives, including the impact those options will have on others.** To continue the previous example: Might taking a stable job, and restricting acting to a hobby, make you better able to support your family? Manson believes that **this third question reveals whether the values underlying your problem are valid or poor ones.**

In this example, if you insist on pursuing acting as a career even though you're unsuccessful and miserable, it probably means that you're guided by a negative value. Perhaps your chosen identity is "actor," or your pride prevents you from admitting that your acting skills aren't up to snuff. Thus, you should change your values to ones that allow you to better support yourself and your family, and find a career that suits you

better.

Steps 1 and 2 of Alcoholics Anonymous's 12-Step Program involve changing your position so that the organization can help you:

- "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable."
    - This Step means changing your position from either "I don't have a problem" or "I can solve this problem myself" to "I can't do this on my own."
- "We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity."
    - This Step means changing your position again; this time to "I can find the help I need." While the Power in this step originally meant the Christian God, nowadays members accept anything greater than yourself, which you can lean on for support and comfort. For example your local community, Alcoholics Anonymous itself, or any deity that you believe in.

The fact that the program's very first and second steps center on changing your position shows how crucial this part of the process is—you can't make any progress toward your goal until you first confront your mistaken positions.

Key Point

Manson offers this tip about changing your positions and values: Ask yourself if your opinion differs from everyone else's.

He says that when you feel like *everyone else* is wrong, and you're the only one who's right, then you're probably the one who's actually wrong. When you feel like you're battling the world, you're probably battling yourself—your own mistakes and poor values.

Counterpoint: As Kuhn explains in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, major advancements and discoveries happen because a person or small group of people go *against* popular beliefs. In other words, they prove that everyone else is wrong.

However, overturning a widely accepted idea isn't easy. It requires time, patience, and irrefutable proof that you're right—or, at least, that the idea you're opposing is wrong. Here's a brief rundown of Kuhn's model:

1. Recognize an anomaly. An anomaly is something that doesn't fit with current beliefs.

- For example, astronomers once believed that the Earth was at the center of the solar system. However, as the field continued advancing, scientists recognized that the geocentric model couldn't explain the movements of stars and planets that they were observing.

2. Explore the anomaly. If the current system can't account for the anomaly, then the scientific community enters a period of *crisis.* A crisis is a time when there are two competing models—for example, the Earth-centric and Sun-centric models in astronomy.

- Oftentimes, things that seem to be anomalies actually do fit into the current system. Perhaps further study reveals a connection that makes the anomaly possible, or scientists find that the anomalous results came from a flawed experiment.
    - Anomalies are actually very common in science, while true scientific revolutions are quite rare.

3. Cause a revolution. If a new system can explain the anomaly **while still explaining everything the old system did**, it will eventually take over as the accepted model. This is why we now accept that the Sun is the center of the solar system, rather than the Earth.

Therefore, it's certainly possible that the popular opinion about something is wrong, and you're right. However, if you plan to stick to your position, Kuhn's example shows that you should have ironclad evidence that the popular opinion is wrong; and even then, understand that others won't change their positions easily.

Exercise: Embrace Being Wrong

Much of what we think we know is wrong. Being willing to learn and change our beliefs is how we grow.

Think of a disagreement you had recently when you thought you were right and everyone else was wrong and dumb. What was the situation?

Now force yourself to ask—"what if I'm wrong?" What evidence would convince you that the other person was right?

If you were wrong, what does that mean about you on a deeper level? What weakness might this reveal about you?

Chapter 7: Value—Embracing Failure

Most people are reluctant to fail or to admit failure. However, Manson says that **to succeed at something you first have to fail**, usually multiple times, so you can learn.

Improvement at anything is a result of many small failures. The more you've failed, the greater the scope of your success will be. Someone who is better at something than you are probably failed at it more times.

Manson believes that we don't start trying to avoid failure until later in life, when we internalize messages that failure is bad from the education system and overly critical parents. The media's focus on extraordinary successes, but not on the challenges leading up to them, also distorts our beliefs about success. **If you want to be successful at something you have to be willing to fail at it.**

A popular quote by author and illustrator Stephen McCranie sums up this idea: "The master has failed more times than the beginner has even tried." In other words, a master isn't someone who never fails; on the contrary, it's someone who has failed a great deal already and continues to grow through further failures.

Michael Jordan, a masterful basketball player by any measure, agrees: He credits his success on the basketball court to the enormous number of failures and mistakes that he suffered along the way.

Manson argues that **our fear of failure stems from having warped values.** For example, if your value is to make everyone like you, you'll feel insecure; you'll fear failing at your value because other people determine whether or not they like you. Therefore, a more constructive value would be to build good relations with others, which isn't dependent on the actions of others.

Pride Makes Us Fear Failure

Ryan Holiday's *Ego Is the Enemy* offers another theory about why we fear failure: It's a blow to our pride.

Holiday explains that, to an ego-driven person, failure seems like a direct insult or attack. Furthermore, when we encounter failure, ego naturally comes to the fore and takes over our emotions, which makes it hard for us to think and react rationally.

Thus, in order to protect ourselves from further "attacks," we stop trying so that we no longer risk failure—which only serves to stifle growth and make defeat permanent.

To break out of that ego-driven mindset, Holiday suggests:

- **Turn "dead time" into alive time.** Dead time is when it feels like you can't make any progress; perhaps you're unemployed, stuck in the hospital, or even in prison. However, you can still use that time to better yourself, study and learn new things, or make preparations for your next period of "alive time." Doing so requires that you stop thinking of yourself as a victim of circumstances, and take responsibility (**but not blame**) for your situation.
- **Let low points transform you.** A major setback or failure is a chance to learn a difficult truth, either about yourself (perhaps you don't plan things out well enough) or about the world

(perhaps there's just not a market for your brilliant new product). Accepting that lesson and acting on it will allow you to do better in the future.

- **Examine your mistakes.** Look at the decisions and actions that led you to your current situation. Consider what drove those decisions, and how you might make different decisions to avoid this situation in the future.
- **Redefine success.** If you define success as popularity or material rewards, then a project that gets a lackluster reception will leave you frustrated, angry, and bitter. Try putting the focus on your own actions instead—if you completed your project and got it out into the world, then you succeeded. You can't control what happens after that.
- **Cut your losses.** Because ego sees a failure as a personal attack, it wants to fight those failures to the bitter end, no matter what it costs you (money, reputation, friends, and so on). Instead, you should examine your failure honestly: can you fix it, and if so, is it worth the cost? If not, it's time to let it go and move on to a new project.
- **Let go of hatred.** Your ego will try to find someone to blame—to hate—for your failure. However, hatred is counterproductive; it weighs you down with stress and shows you in a bad light, which makes others less likely to sympathize or cooperate with you.

Pain Spurs Positive Change

Manson says that we need pain and suffering—including the pain of struggle and failure—in order to grow. **Pain shows us where we need to make changes**. It also makes us stronger, more compassionate, less entitled, and more appreciative of the positives in life.

When people feel sad or anxious, they usually want to get back to "normal" (feeling good) again as soon as possible. But Manson advises you to not try escaping pain so quickly; embrace the experience instead, and see what it can teach you.

The examples of survivors of war and cancer shed light on another benefit of pain: **It can force us to look for meaning in our struggles and, consequently, live a more meaningful life.** Viktor Frankl found unique and powerful meaning through his experiences surviving Auschwitz, which he wrote about in *Man's Search for Meaning*.

Many of Frankl's fellow prisoners thought that surviving and getting home would give their suffering meaning, but Frankl disagreed—he didn't like the thought that survival was the only meaning, because then their pain would have no meaning if they died. Instead, he found his own sense of meaning by reframing his *trials* as *triumphs*; each hardship that he endured at Auschwitz was a personal victory.

Also, Frankl and others were able to resist their Nazi captors in small ways by protecting other prisoners, even when doing so meant they would be treated even more harshly than usual. Because that suffering helped others, it also had meaning.

Just Start

People often get stuck on the question of *how* to change—it seems complicated, and they don't want to fail (or be perceived as a failure). For instance, they might ask, "How can I just drop out of school?" or, "How can I break up with my partner?"

According to Manson, there isn't really a process; we just need to do it. **The solution to many problems in life is just taking a step that we already know is necessary.** It only seems daunting because we know that step will involve pain.

(Shortform note: One of the major topics in Aurelius's *Meditations* is the difference between *pain* and *harm*. For a Stoic like Aurelius, the only thing that can truly harm you is something that harms your character or your morality; in other words, something that **changes who you are.** However, pain—whether physical or emotional—is merely a distraction, and can be safely ignored. Therefore, Aurelius would agree with Manson that the best option is to simply do what needs to be done, and to calmly endure whatever pain it may cause.)

The Motivation Loop

Sometimes we wait for inspiration to motivate us, or we wait to be forced into action by a crisis. However, Manson argues that this approach is incorrect; **you should think of motivation as part of a loop, rather than part of a linear sequence.** Instead of moving from inspiration to motivation to action, you should constantly cycle between action, inspiration, and motivation.

He adds that **you can start doing something (taking action) regardless of whether you already know how to achieve your goal.** Once you get your brain moving, the solution will come to you; or, at the least, you'll figure out exactly where you're getting stuck.

If you start by doing something simple (such as writing down the numbers from a math problem), larger tasks (such as solving it) will seem easier. Also, doing something—anything—helps you to overcome procrastination.

An Example of "Just Starting"

Write every day is classic advice for aspiring writers, for exactly the reasons Manson outlines here:

- The act of writing helps overcome procrastination
- Once you start writing, you may find yourself motivated to continue
- Writing *anything* helps conquer writer's block—if you just start putting words on a page, you'll often be able to work through your mental blocks.

It doesn't matter what you write each day, or how much—as Manson says, just do *something.* The same principle applies no matter what you're trying to do: It doesn't matter how you approach your task, or how much of it you accomplish, **just get started.**

Set a Low Bar, Then Clear It

You might be holding yourself back because you fear failure. Manson believes that this is another reason why "just do something" is a good starting point: **The bar is so low that failure is less of a concern.**

First of all, when your goal is simply to "do something," *anything* you do is an accomplishment. That small victory will then inspire you to do more. Second, the consequences of making a mistake will be minimal, so you'll feel freer to mess up and learn from those mistakes.

(Shortform note: The Harvard Business Review writes that the single best motivator is making progress at something meaningful. Even if that progress is minimal—for instance, even if your only goal was to "do something"—it will motivate you to keep working toward your goal.)

Exercise: Find Success in Failure

Improving at anything requires failing many times and building on those failures.

Think of a goal that's important for you, but that you're not making as much progress on as you'd like. What is it?

Is it possible that you're afraid of failing? In what ways could this be holding you back?

Remember that failure is necessary to improve. It's better to try and learn than to not try at all. Given this, what is one small action you can take today to just do it?

Chapter 8: Value—Practicing Rejection

Our culture tells us to always be positive and accepting of everything—to always say *yes*. However, Manson argues, **if you value everything equally, then you really have no values at all.** Therefore, you must also practice rejection—saying *no* to all those things that don't align with your values or further your goals. It comes back to giving a f*ck about some things and choosing to not give a f*ck about others.

The idea of narrowing our options to be happy may be counterintuitive, but Manson believes that **meaning in life comes from caring a lot about a few select things.**

Why Less Is More

Manson claims that we actually tend to be happier with less; the more options we have, the less satisfied we are with the options we choose, because we keep thinking of the ones we didn't choose. You keep wondering if you'd be happier with a different choice. Psychologists call this the paradox of choice. When faced with an overabundance of options, some people delay making a choice in order to keep their options open as long as possible, or they avoid commitment.

(Shortform note: Further studies have shown that the Paradox of Choice may not be as straightforward as experts once thought. While it's true that having too many choices often leads to stress and difficulty making decisions, **in some circumstances the opposite is true.** For instance, someone who's an expert on a subject will prefer having more choices available, such as a computer whiz looking at parts for a new PC.)

He adds that, when you continually chase new experiences, you experience diminishing returns—you gain less satisfaction from each additional experience. The same principle applies to acquiring possessions, hobbies, partners, jobs, and friends.

The older and more experienced you get, the less significantly such things affect you when compared to your total experiences. Therefore, Manson urges you to **focus on the people and experiences that bring you the most satisfaction, and reject those that don't make the cut.** He adds that it's good to practice rejection; say "no" to those unneeded trips, possessions, hobbies, and people.

However, Manson also provides a counterpoint to his own argument: Experiencing as many different things as possible *can* be helpful when you're young and trying to determine where your interests lie.

> Recall the *hedonic treadmill* that we discussed in Chapter 2: **Constantly chasing happiness actually makes us feel worse, because it highlights that we *aren't* happy.** Also consider the Set Point Theory of Happiness, which states that people have a "baseline" happiness level that they'll always return to, even after life-changing events like a promotion or a divorce.
>
> Both of these theories effectively say the same thing: It's impossible to make ourselves happy just by getting things that we want (including experiences, relationships, and so on). Therefore, it would be better to say "no" to those things and devote ourselves to what will really make us happy—which, according to Manson, is progress and personal growth.

Rather than following the cultural dictate to keep pursuing a broad range of things or experiences, Manson says that you should **focus on a narrower range of things and depth of experience**. Prioritize quality

over quantity. Here's why:

- **Commitment to less brings you freedom**. It allows you to focus on what's most important to you and achieve more than you would if your efforts were scattered.
- Commitment makes decision-making easier and **dispels the fear that by choosing you're going to miss out**. When you're committed to something, you don't need to keep pursuing more.

Finding Your Focus

In *Designing Your Life*, Bill Burnett and Dave Evans suggest the following process for figuring out what you should commit to:

- **Make a list.** Identify and list all of the options you have available for whatever situation you're trying to figure out.
- **Categorize your list.** Group those options by theme. Within each theme, list the relevant options in order of how much they interest you (most interesting at the top, least interesting at the bottom). Cross out every option except the top one or two from each theme.
- **Discern which option is right for you.** They use the word *discern* instead of *decide* to emphasize that this process isn't purely thought-based. Listen to your instincts, your emotions, and even the physical sensations you feel when considering each option.
    - Many of us aren't in tune with our instincts and feelings, because we've been taught to disregard or suppress them. If you find that you're having trouble hearing what they're saying, you might try to explore them through a reflective practice like journaling or meditation.
- **If applicable, test your new choice.** Live as if you'd fully committed to your decision; both your thoughts and your actions should reflect your new commitment as much as possible. After 2-3 days, you should have a good sense of whether it's the right choice for you.
    - During this trial period, pay attention to your mindset, your feelings, and your body; all the same things you used to help discern this option in the first place.
- **Let go of the other options.** If your trial period leaves you feeling good about your decision, commit to it and put the other options out of your mind. Cross them off your list, throw the list away, or do whatever you have to do to affirm your commitment to the choice you've made.

Rejection Is a Social Skill

As we've discussed, Manson believes that rejection is an integral part of committing ourselves to our core values. He also says that, in a different way, **rejection is essential in building healthy personal and love relationships.**

Rejection is a social skill that everyone needs to learn. People try to avoid being rejected or rejecting others because it makes them feel bad. But, if you don't practice rejection, you'll get stuck in situations that make you unhappy—the very thing that you were trying to avoid in the first place.

- Trying to avoid rejecting or confronting anyone and to accept everything is a form of entitlement. Entitled people believe they should feel good all of the time; rejection feels bad, so they avoid it. As a result, they become self-absorbed and lack values.
- Avoiding rejection (both being rejected and doing the rejecting) can make us feel better temporarily, but it isn't the way to have a meaningful life.

(Shortform note: Robert Cialdini's book *Influence* explains that we avoid rejection because our brains are hardwired to avoid downsides—which we subconsciously perceive as danger—over seeking upsides. Thus, we don't ask for things that we want (or say no to things that we don't want) because of the potential downside of rejection.)

Therefore, Manson concludes, practicing rejection strengthens our relationships. **When we're comfortable saying no and getting no for an answer, that means our relationship is based on honesty and openness.**

Psychotherapist Amy Morin, author of *13 Things Mentally Strong People Don't Do,* writes that people who avoid rejection (who avoid both rejecting others and being rejected themselves) often suffer from a lack of self-worth.

Such people feel the need to be accepted and liked—in other words, they get their sense of worth from other people—and rejection in any form can cause them intense anxiety. As a result, "people-pleasers" tend to rate others' needs more highly than their own. This can lead to self-destructive behavior, as the people-pleaser sacrifices his or her own health for the sake of others.

Morin recommends **breaking out of people-pleasing habits by starting small:**

- Say no to something unimportant, like a small project or a dinner date you don't want to go to.
- Give your honest opinion about something simple, like a popular movie you didn't care for.
- Stand up for something you believe in—while not as trivial as the other options, it may help if you have the "courage of your convictions," as they say.

Rejection in Love Relationships

Manson warns that **an inability or unwillingness to practice rejection leads to unhealthy love relationships.** It blurs the boundaries between partners when one or both assume responsibility for the other's feelings; remember, nobody is responsible for your situation or your feelings except you. Therefore, you should *reject* the idea that your partner's happiness is your obligation.

To have a **healthy relationship**, there must be **firm boundaries** between the partners and their values. Each person must:

- Accept responsibility for their own problems, and refuse to take responsibility for their partner's problems. For example, if your partner feels insecure and jealous whenever you spend time with other people, **it is not your responsibility to cater to those feelings.**
- Work on their own problems, with the other's support.
- Be willing to both reject and be rejected by their partner.

Manson expands on this discussion in his blog post "The Guide to Strong Relationship Boundaries," adding that a lack of boundaries goes hand-in-hand with a lack of self-esteem. In other words, you fail to set boundaries because you don't value yourself enough. Therefore, he says, **the best and easiest way to establish strong boundaries is to build up your self-esteem.**

However, like happiness, self-esteem isn't something that you can pursue. Rather, self-esteem is a side effect of being a stable, capable person; the type of person that this book is trying to help you become.

Manson claims that romantic love can be like an addiction, giving temporary highs but creating long-term problems. Furthermore, he says that romance is often characterized by entitlement on the part of one or both people, leading to blurred boundaries between them. Because of these blurred boundaries, entitled people either assume responsibility for their partner's problems, or they hold the other person responsible for their problems.

(Shortform note: In fact, love may be more like a drug than Manson realized when writing this book. When you're in love, your brain produces large amounts of dopamine, which causes intense happiness much like being high. Since that feeling is associated with the person you love, you'll start doing whatever you can to see and be around that person—much like an addict will do anything to get his next fix. That desperation for a dopamine high can contribute to blurred boundaries, since you'll be tempted to sacrifice your own well-being for the chance to stay close to your partner.)

The book *Difficult Conversations* explains that we often mistake people's *impacts* for their *intentions*. For example, you might assume that a harsh remark your partner made that hurt your feelings (its impact) was *meant* to hurt you (its intention). Conversely, you may have said something harsh a moment before but didn't intend to hurt your partner—in this case, you focus on your *intent*, instead of the *impact* your statement had on the other person.

In short, we often assume that we have good intentions, while others have bad intentions. The way to avoid this hypocrisy is, as Manson says, to **take responsibility for your actions and your feelings.**

When you take responsibility, intentions—your own and other people's—no longer matter to you. All that matters is ***what you did to cause the current situation*** and **what you will do in response to it.**

The Mindsets of Entitled Partners

Manson believes that entitled people blame others for their problems, or accept blame or responsibility for another person's problems, because they're trying to feel loved. They generally fall into one of these two mindsets:

- **Victim:** If they play the role of victim, then someone will save them and they'll feel loved.
- **Savior:** If they fix the other person, then they'll be appreciated and loved.

He adds that victims and saviors are naturally drawn to one another, but end up unable to meet each other's needs. That's because they're not in a healthy relationship; each partner is acting selfishly, using the other to get an emotional high. Furthermore, because a victim/savior relationship isn't built on solid values, both partners are terrified that any disagreement or rejection could make the relationship fall apart—

meaning that they couldn't get their "fix" anymore.

(Shortform note: Relationships based on a victim and savior dynamic fail because of Manson's earlier point that you have to take responsibility for your own emotions. Your feelings aren't anyone else's problem, and nobody else's feelings are your problem. More to the point, other people's feelings are totally out of your control.)

The Mindset of Supportive Partners

In contrast to a victim/savior relationship, Manson says that disagreements and rejections in healthy relationships might lead to bruised feelings, but the pain is short-lived. That's because the partners **care about each other enough to work through the difficulty together,** instead of only caring about themselves.

Maintaining boundaries in a healthy relationship doesn't mean partners don't help and support each other; it means that **they support each other by choice,** rather than due to pressure or a feeling of obligation.

Psychologists recommend a four-step process for setting boundaries (in any relationship, not just a romantic one):

- **Define the boundary.** This first step is just for you; you have to clearly know what boundaries you want before you can set them.
- **Explain the boundary.** Once you know what your boundary is, communicate that information to your partner (or whoever the boundary is for).
- **Keep it simple.** You don't need to go into details or justifications. In a healthy relationship, the other person or people will respect your new boundary without demanding explanations about it.
- **Add an "or else."** Along with your boundary, clearly lay out what the consequences will be if someone violates it. Make sure that you're prepared to follow through with those consequences.

Building Trust in a Relationship

Trust is a vital component in a relationship. For Manson, that means that **partners have to trust each other enough to be honest:** to say what they really think and feel and to tolerate rejection (saying no and hearing no).

According to Manson, that means being honest about even simple things—for instance, if your partner asks whether you like her new haircut, and you really don't care for it. Many partners lie to avoid short-term discomfort in answering such questions, but honesty in a relationship is more important than feeling good in the moment. **Being honest about small things sets the stage for being honest about bigger things.**

He adds that conflict and differences also help to build trust. In fact, conflict is necessary because **when people can disagree, it means the relationship isn't conditional or dependent on keeping one or the other happy**.

- If someone always agrees with you, they're not being honest and you can't trust what they say. Working out differences openly is preferable to manipulation and dissembling.

- Rejection is part of building trust. If both people in a relationship cannot say no and accept no in turn, one partner's values and problems may dominate the relationship.

How to Fight Effectively

TIME Magazine interviewed psychologists about how to productively "fight" with your partner. They gathered the following tips:

- **Examine your fights.** If you find yourselves arguing about the same topics over and over, try to find what triggers those fights and figure out a way around that problem.
- **Schedule your fights.** If you start getting pulled into an argument, agree to continue it when you'll have the time and focus to have a real discussion.
    - This also gives both partners a chance to calm down and collect their thoughts, instead of lashing out in anger.
- **Call timeout when you or your partner needs it.** Fights are stressful, and one or both partners might drop into "fight, flight, or freeze." When that happens, put the argument on hold until both people are ready to continue it.
    - "Fight, flight, or freeze" is an instinctive response to danger. When one or both partners are instinctively reacting to a perceived threat from the other, it's unlikely that they'll be able to have a productive conversation.
- **Ask instead of complaining.** Ask for what you want, instead of complaining that your partner isn't meeting your needs. This approach is less confrontational and more likely to get the outcome you want.
    - For example, instead of complaining that your partner lets dirty dishes pile up, just ask him or her to wash them.
- **Listen, and ask questions.** Listen to what your partner is saying, and ask questions to make sure you really understand what the issue is.
    - Don't interrupt or insult each other—if the fight gets to that point, it's time to call a timeout.
- **Learn your partner's apology language.** Like love languages, people respond to different kinds of apologies differently. For example, some people want dramatic gestures, while others benefit more from a simple, contrite admission that you were wrong.
    - If the two of you have different apology languages, then trying to smooth over a conflict might just make it worse—your partner might see your dramatic gesture as insincere, or your simple apology as inadequate.

However, while conflict can work to strengthen a relationship, Manson clarifies that not *all* conflicts are beneficial. For example, cheating destroys trust rather than strengthening it. If that trust can't be repaired, the relationship is over.

- **People who cheat are valuing something more than the relationship.** Whatever that value is—validation or power, for instance—it's not compatible with a healthy relationship.
- Most cheaters apologize when caught and promise never to do it again, but that won't fix the relationship. Fixing it, if that's even possible, is a lengthy and painful process—the cheater needs to uncover and acknowledge the value that broke the relationship, and then decide whether it or the relationship is more important.
- Next, the cheater needs to build a track record of improved behavior. It has to be a long one—trust can't be rebuilt without time and painful struggle.

In his blog post "Why People Cheat in Relationships," Manson offers another explanation: People cheat when their **need for self-gratification** is greater than the **satisfaction they get from their relationship.** Thus, according to Manson, there are two reasons why people cheat:

- **They aren't mature enough to delay their gratification for a larger goal.** In other words, they value the immediate pleasure they get from cheating more than they value a healthy, long-term relationship with a loving partner.
- **An unhappy relationship.** Manson argues that it's common sense that people are more likely to cheat if the relationship is already miserable.

In short, Manson is still saying that people cheat because there's something that they value more than the relationship; however, he's adding the important point that it might be because the relationship isn't very valuable to the cheater.

This process applies to repairing any relationship where trust has been broken: The transgressor owns up to the values that led to the rift and proves he or she values the relationship through improved behavior over time.

Manson adds that you might be able to repair one breach of trust. However, **if trust is broken again, the relationship is damaged even further and may be beyond repair.**

(Shortform note: As Maya Angelou famously said, "When people show you who they are, believe them." Repairing a relationship is difficult because one person now needs to overturn the other's belief about who he or she is. Damaging the relationship again, especially in the same way, may cement that belief forever.)

Exercise: Give a Fck About the Important Things

A fulfilling life requires making choices—accepting the important things, and rejecting others.

What is one important thing in life that you want to commit to?

What does pursuing this require you to reject? This might be other options that are incompatible with your goal, or alternatives to spending your time.

Are you willing to reject what you listed above, in pursuit of your goal?

Chapter 9: Value—Reflecting on Mortality

We prefer not to think or talk about death because we fear it. However, death is the yardstick we all use to measure our life and its meaning. Without death providing perspective, our lives and values wouldn't mean anything.

Thus, Manson believes that accepting your mortality means **getting rid of superficial or selfish values** and **considering what impact your life has made on the world.**

- When we feel entitled, we put ourselves at the center and view everything and everyone from the perspective of how it affects us. This is our current social/cultural dynamic: We feel society should serve us, we try to impose our views on others, and we feel that we deserve things we haven't earned.
- Instead, you should choose your values and make decisions with the reality of death in mind. For instance, being part of something greater than yourself, or caring about something beyond yourself. These kinds of selfless values are the ones that bring happiness.

(Shortform note: In *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius points out that even the most extraordinary people die. Most of us will be forgotten once we're gone; even if you're one of the few people who's remembered for centuries, that fame won't do you any good once you're dead, so why concern yourself with it? Therefore, Aurelius argues, self-serving goals are meaningless. **The only important thing in life is what you can do for others.**)

Instead of feeling a need to be extraordinary because society celebrates only the extraordinary, Manson urges you to realize that *true fulfillment* comes from questioning yourself and choosing your own values—choosing what to give a f*ck about.

In short, **confronting the reality of death teaches you to prioritize what's important, and to stop chasing or worrying about trivial things.**

Accepting that you'll die someday can sharpen your focus, and make you realize what's really important to you. However, the *fear* of death may do the opposite; it may act as a distraction, and prevent you from fully committing to your new values.

There are many ideas about why we shouldn't fear death, but perhaps the simplest is an Epicurean argument: "*Non fui, fui, non sum, non curo*" (I did not exist, I existed, I do not exist, I do not care). In other words, you won't care after you're dead, because there won't be a *you* to care about it. **There's no reason to be afraid of something that you'll never experience.**

Aside from no longer existing, the other thing people commonly fear about death is leaving things unfinished. For these people, the fear isn't so much death itself as it is dying without a sense of fulfillment. Finding that fulfillment is what Manson's lessons are all about. That's why he says it's so important to give the right f*cks and devote your energy to the right things—so that you'll live a life that's meaningful to you, and that you'll be satisfied with when your time comes.

Accepting the Reality of Death

To deal with the fear of death, people often come up with ways to leave a legacy: for example, putting their name on something, contributing to a cause, or doing something that will be remembered.

However, Manson says that focusing on a legacy may or may not be a positive thing. He references the work of psychologist and author Ernest Becker, who argued that we should instead **confront the inevitability of death, and focus on having better values in life.**

Becker was a professor of anthropology in the sixties when he got colon cancer. In order to cope with the fact that he was dying, he researched and wrote an influential book, *The Denial of Death*, about coming to terms with death.

Becker said that because humans, unlike animals, have the ability to conceptualize past and future, and to imagine a future in which we no longer exist, we experience "death terror." This anxiety about death underlies everything we do.

Becker argued that instead of focusing on immortality projects, you should question the identity you've created, and strive to accept the reality of death. **Instead of futilely pursuing immortality, you'll then be free to choose more meaningful values in life.**

> In *Antifragile*, Nassim Nicholas Taleb offers a scientifically-grounded idea about why death is not just inevitable, but necessary.
>
> The basis for Taleb's concept of antifragility (becoming stronger through damage or injury) is that weak parts of a system are destroyed by stress, and the remaining parts overcompensate for that stress to protect itself in the future (like a weightlifter's muscles, which break down from exercise and rebuild themselves stronger than before).
>
> Taleb applies that concept to us, treating the human race as a "system." He explains that individuals are fragile, and they must die so that the species as a whole can be antifragile. Following that logic, he makes much the same argument as Manson (and Aurelius, and many others throughout history): We shouldn't try to live forever; rather, we should live good lives and then make room for others.

Life Is Short: Spend It Wisely

We commonly distract ourselves from the inevitability of our death is by giving too many f*cks about things and feeling entitled, as we've explored throughout this guide. However, Manson believes that** saving your f*cks for important things is part of accepting your mortality. **

When you accept that your time is finite (and, therefore, so is the number of f*cks you can give in life), you recognize the importance of spending those f*cks wisely. Your main concerns shouldn't be living forever, or being remembered once you're gone—immortality is impossible, and being remembered does you no good.

Instead, Manson concludes, focus on what's really important: The impact you can make on the world through constructive values and focused efforts. In other words, **live a fulfilling life by giving the right f*cks, and you'll have no reason to fear death.**

(Shortform note: Seneca the Younger was another prominent Stoic philosopher like Marcus Aurelius. Seneca wrote the famous essay *De Brevitate Vitae* (On the Shortness of Life), wherein he argued that our problem isn't that life is too short, but rather that we waste too much of our limited time. He urges us to

examine our lives and **decide if we're really living our lives, or just passing the time until we die.**)

Exercise: Give a Fck—Or Not

The key to a happy, meaningful life is to give a f*ck about less, and focus only on what is most valuable and important to us.

Make a list of things you give a f*ck about.

Make a list of things you don't give a f*ck about, that society suggests you should give a f*ck about.

In your first list, are there any things that, at the end of the day, don't seem that important?