



How To's

Anna Mercury

How To's

Contents

- How to Meet Your (Real) Needs (p. 1)
- Moving from Suffering to Satisfaction (p. 7)
- How to Change a Belief (p. 14)
- On Setting the Right Goals (p. 22)
- How to Manifest (p. 28)
- How Not to Burn Out (p. 32)
- How to Be Emotionally Present (p. 40)
- How to Live a More Conscious Life (p. 49)
- How to Care About People (p. 57)
- How to Break Out of Harmful Cycles (p. 67)
- How to Trick the Ego into Dissolving Itself (p. 74)
- How to Play the Game of Life (p. 80)
- How to Be Happy (p. 83)

How to Meet Your (Real) Needs

A few months ago, I replaced cigarettes with rock music. These days, when I get in the car or go for a walk and I'm feeling a little low, I throw on some aviators, blast Dorothy or All Them Witches and let the waves of electric badassery wash over me until my nerves are sufficiently cooled. That's what cigarettes always did for me: they cooled me off. They gave me this cloud of protection from vulnerability. If I felt stressed or emotional or claustrophobic, I could go outside, light a cigarette and wall myself off from the world behind a hazy barrier that left me feeling, well... cool.

There's a song I've been listening to a lot called "[The Marriage of Coyote Woman](#)," because it feels just like smoking a cigarette. The sound of the music curls around me in charcoal gray wisps, with a dry, sleek ruggedness I can only describe as the musical equivalent of a light blue American Spirit. But more than the song itself, listening to it makes me feel protected, wrapped up in a cloud of that same dry, sleek ruggedness. I feel cool. I feel less vulnerable, less exposed, more protected.

This isn't just about music, of course. The [ability of wearing sunglasses to create a sense of power is well-documented](#). Wearing certain clothes can make us feel confident or vulnerable, professional or relaxed, secure or embarrassed. The view of Yosemite Valley tends to inspire a rather different emotional response than, say, a Walmart parking

lot on Long Island. Certain foods might not do much to physically nourish us, but they remind us of childhood or a tropical vacation or a holiday. As mammals, we live by [conditioned](#) associations. We tend to like and seek out the things we associate with happiness, safety, connection or enjoyment, and avoid those we associate with less-desirable emotions.

Many of our problems arise when we start pursuing the things we associate with positive feelings, regardless of whether or not they still produce positive feelings. This blurring of the line between what we associate, and what we associate it with, is arguably the main source of suffering in our lives. This act of confusion produces cravings for certain things and the corresponding belief that we need those things in order to experience satisfaction.

The truth is, what we actually need is only ever a state of being, either physical or emotional.

If you are too cold, you do not need a blanket, or a campfire, or a heater, or the sun. You need warmth. You need to be in a state of experiencing more warmth. If you are too isolated, you do not need a girlfriend, or a night out, or a kitten. You need connection. You need to be in a state of experiencing more connection. Even the need for a particular vitamin is a need for a state of being; holding a bottle of Vitamin D supplements in your hand won't help you if you're deficient. You need to be in the state of having adequate Vitamin D in your body.

Depending on the need, we might be more or less able to see it clearly for what it is. For instance, when it comes to cold, or hunger, or the need to pee, I'd wager most of us are more adept at understanding those needs directly as physical states. I may prefer a sanitary toilet, but if I'm on a long drive and there aren't any of those around, I'll squat in the woods no problem.

We tend to be less adept at this when it comes to more emotional needs, like respect, self-worth, belonging, connection or trust. For example, how many of us have found ourselves miserable because our need for love and connection wasn't being met by the one specific person we had in mind? How many of us have stayed in jobs we hate because the paycheck gave us a sense of self-worth? How many of us have denied our authentic selves to conform for a sense of belonging?

Everything we do, we do to meet our needs. The problem comes in when we think that what we're doing is the need, rather than a strategy to meet it.

The second Noble Truth of Buddhism typically gets explained as, "The root cause of suffering is desire." The original words are *dukkha* (suffering, anguish, unsatisfactoriness) and *tanhā* (thirst, longing, craving), so a more precise explanation would be something like, "The root cause of the anguish of never being satisfied is craving." Craving is what you do when you have an addiction. To me, it is simply the act of believing that the strategy you use to meet your need is the need itself.

When we understand that our needs are simply states of being, they become far easier to meet. Rather than limit ourselves to one or a few options to meet our needs, once we understand what state it is that we actually need to be in, we can open ourselves to far more possible paths to get there. Likewise, when the strategy we have chosen to meet our needs is harmful to us, understanding what we actually need can help us find healthier strategies.

Coming to this understanding is not always easy, because it's so alien to how most of us typically go through life, but it is a very simple process. The spiritual teacher Teal Swan says, "To heal is to experience the opposite." From a biological perspective, understanding need as a state of being, this becomes obvious: when we are too far to one side of our ideal state of homeostasis, we need to move in the opposite direction to reach homeostasis. So, whatever state of being you find yourself in that feels "bad" tells you that you need to move towards the opposite state of being in order to feel "good."

Simply put: What kind of bad do you feel? What's the opposite of that feeling? You now know what you need. Now, come up with as many strategies as you can to meet that need, focusing on strategies that are healthy for you and your community, and that you can take action on now. It really is simple. Again: just because it's simple does not mean it's easy.

This practice can be difficult first because we typically have several needs at a given time. We might be feeling bored,

hungry, lonely and worthless all at once, and so, we might think going out to dinner with a cute new date is the only way to meet all of our needs. But what if we ate a sandwich, did an interesting activity, called a friend and learned a new skill instead? Then, we might feel full and nourished, inspired, connected and worthy too.

The second thing that inhibits us from meeting our needs is our conditioning: we are used to certain patterns of behavior, certain ways of framing problems, certain thought habits, and so we may not notice that there are other ways to meet our needs. We may not even be able to notice what our needs are. The process of dislodging yourself from unconscious, conditioned patterns of thinking and behaving does not typically happen overnight. It can take years (some yogis would say lifetimes), but making the commitment to chip away at it, bit by bit, to come to greater consciousness is probably the single best thing you can do for yourself.

Finally, some of our associations come along with physical withdrawal symptoms, from the kinds of relationships to substances we'd scientifically diagnose as addiction. In quitting smoking, or alcohol, or heroin — the process is going to be difficult and physically painful. However, the physical withdrawals for most addictions pass quickly, in a matter of weeks at most. It's the psychological craving — the emotional state that we used to meet with that habit continuing to go unmet— that's what reels us back in.

What I know from experience is that nicotine withdrawals are tough, but the worst is really over after a few days. After two weeks, any craving left is psychological, and from there, the emotional needs that smoking was meeting for me can be understood, assessed, and met. The truth is, I never needed a cigarette; I just needed to feel safe and confident. So it's out with the American Spirits, in with the sunglasses and rock n' roll.

No matter what our addiction, no matter how little it looks to us like an addiction, this pattern holds true: the less we fixate on the specific things we crave, the easier our needs are to satisfy. The act of freeing ourselves from addictive relationships to ideas or forms — it's also an act of reaching homeostasis, moving us away from states of powerlessness and suffering and towards states of satisfaction, agency, consciousness, abundance and flow.

Whatever our craving, we're all in recovery, taking it one step at a time. It's not easy, but it is simple.

Moving from Suffering to Satisfaction

This is very simple. Simple does not mean easy.

Understanding Your Needs

All living beings seek to satisfy their needs.

A need is only ever a state of being, either physical or psychological. A living being understands and meets its needs by experiencing what state it is currently in, and moving towards the opposite state (for example, if it is too cold, it needs more warmth.)

As humans, we often confuse what we need with a tool or strategy we use to meet that need. For example, when we are too cold, and we need more warmth, we could meet that need with a blanket, a jacket, a fire, a heater, exercising, drinking hot water, and so on.

We often experience suffering because we equate what we need with a thing we use to meet that need. When we cannot have that one particular thing, we experience suffering: our need is unmet and we feel powerless to meet it.

Disentangling the Need from the Method You Use to Meet It

The second noble truth of Buddhism is typically described as, “desire is the cause of suffering.” A more accurate description of it would be something like, “craving is the cause of the anguish of never being able to be satisfied.”

Craving, in my view, is what happens when you equate a strategy you use to meet your need with the need itself. You start to believe you need that thing, that one path, as though your need could not be met through any other means. The path is only ever just a path. If the path is blocked, you can reach your destination far more easily by choosing a different path.

The mind gets attached to certain methods or tools for meeting our needs because doing so makes it think it's safer. When the mind can conceptualize the path, it can perceive that there is a path, and the world seems less scary. The problem is, of course, that this exact process clouds the mind from seeing needs clearly and makes us less safe, because it starts to limit our paths to getting our needs met.

A need is only ever a state of being, either physiological or psychological.

Embracing Multiple Methods

The more we focus on what we need, and give ourselves over to accepting many possible strategies to meet it, the easier the need will be to meet. The less we attach ourselves to certain strategies, the more likely it is that our needs will be met.

Sometimes, we grow attached to certain strategies because we have been conditioned to believe that those strategies are the only method of meeting our needs, or the only we have available. This pattern of conditioning comes up frequently, and can be responded to by remembering that a need is only ever a state of being.

Sometimes, we grow attached to certain tools or strategies because we have multiple needs at once, and we can only think of one method of satisfying them all. Then, we suffer if we cannot use that method. Rather than continue trying for the method we cannot use, we can instead pause, and assess what all of our needs are, individually. Then, we can meet each and all of them, either individually or in combination, through other means.

Sometimes, the attachment we feel to a certain tool or strategy is important to us, too. For example, we may feel attached to a certain person who meets our needs for connection, security and validation. If relying on this relationship to meet our needs repeatedly creates suffering, but we don't want to give up all relationship with

the person, we need only give up attachment to the relationship meeting those specific needs. We can seek other means of finding connection, security and validation, and allow the relationship to transform to meet different needs.

Ending the Illusion of Conflicting Goals

Our cravings often bring us into conflict with others. When we have the ability to exert control over others, we typically use it to force them to follow certain strategies we think will meet our (own) needs. We often do this regardless of whether or not this strategy will meet their needs.

When these strategies cause others not to have their needs met, they experience suffering.

We like having, or thinking we have, the ability to dominate the world around us, because we believe doing so will help us to get our needs met. We often fear that not dominating the world around us will mean that our needs won't be met, and we'll suffer as a result.

What we have when we dominate the world around us is not, actually, an increased ability to get our needs met. What we have is simply an increased ability to force a certain method for meeting needs on others. This actually

limits us, as well as others, from having our needs met as fully, quickly and efficiently as possible.

We actually don't have to dominate the world in order to have our needs met, because our needs are only ever states of being, and they can be met through multiple methods. The more open we are to a variety of possible strategies to meet our needs, the easier it is to find a strategy that meets our needs without forcing behavior in anyone else.

As a result, when we engage with others, we can come together with the shared goal: finding strategies that meet each and all of our needs without anyone having to suffer in the process. Rather than manufacture a competition between each of our proposed methods of meeting needs, we can all refocus on the needs themselves, and collaborate towards a common goal of everyone's needs being satisfied.

Experiencing Safety and Freedom

When our needs are easier to meet, we are all safer. The better able we each are to get our needs met, the less cause we all have to hurt one another in order to get our needs met, and the safer we all are from harm. The more we work together to meet all of our needs, the more satisfying all of our lives become.

At the moment, most people don't really live like this. Most people, myself included, still experience suffering at our needs going unmet, get fixated on certain methods of meeting our needs, and end up in conflict with others over incompatible strategies to meet needs.

We can begin to disentangle ourselves from all of this, by remembering that our needs are only ever states of being, figure out what those states are, and open ourselves to accept more methods by which our needs can be met.

How to Begin

I cannot pretend that anything will change overnight just because you've now read this article, but I can offer some advice on how to start shifting your experience towards embodying this, if you want to:

Step 1: Start easy. This is a practice of changing your habits. Like strengthening a muscle, start the process of disentangling needs from strategies with need in your life that seem easy to detach from the strategies you use to meet them. Start with situations that seem manageable, or obvious, or minor. Build up your strength over time. Do not try to tackle all of your attachments to strategies at once. This takes time.

Step 2: Commit. Treat this like quitting an addiction: whatever aspect of your life you choose to start with,

commit to seeing it differently. Remind yourself of it as often as you can, every day: a need is only ever a state of being. Make living according to that thought your top priority, or at least, a top priority.

Step 3: Embrace discomfort. When you crave something, don't act upon that craving. This is very uncomfortable at first. Anyone who has ever quit smoking knows the feeling exactly: you want to do something, you just sit there instead, it's wildly uncomfortable, and that's okay. It won't be uncomfortable forever. Just sit with the discomfort, rather than run from it reactively by giving into your craving. It will go away faster.

Step 4: Practice. Remaining conscious that your needs are states of being, and opening up yourself to multiple paths to get there, is a pretty deep shift in habits. Making the shift takes practice. It takes time and repetition, missteps and returns to the path, again and again. Even if this practice is not easy, it is simple. The more you practice, the easier it gets.

How to Change a Belief

A belief is a confirmation bias you think is true. It's an ingrained mental habit— a pattern of thinking strong enough to condition your thoughts, your actions, and your life all on its own. You can hold beliefs that help you to achieve your goals, live happier and healthier, feel more satisfied or loved or free or worthy, and you can hold ones that create cycles of suffering and frustration. Beliefs impact you constantly, in small ways and large, so you might as well get choosy about the ones you're going to keep.

For most of us, throughout most of our lives, most of our beliefs are unconscious. Some of our mental habits got ingrained before we even learned object permanence. Our beliefs are conditioned from infancy, by our families, our culture, our society, our circumstances, our friends, our media, our everything. Your unconscious beliefs can come from anything, but what makes them unconscious is that they come from something other than you.

Changing your beliefs is simple, but that does not mean it's easy. Being told to "just change your beliefs" can feel deeply invalidating when your beliefs feel true, for understandable reasons. Fortunately, this article is not about challenging the truth. This article is about challenging a confirmation bias.

Here's how:

Step 1. Figure out what you believe.

This step takes self-awareness, which is always where we need to start, but it's actually very simple. To figure out what you believe, call to mind a situation in your life, especially one in which you have negative feelings. What do you think about this situation? Now, try thinking the opposite thought. How easy is it for you to accept that opposite thought as true? If it's difficult or impossible, you have now found something you believe. Probe it with some more thoughts to find the root of the belief.

For example, let's say I feel frustrated because I can't support myself as a writer. I think: what I write isn't that marketable, and I don't have "a platform," so the publishing world isn't interested in me. I can't be a successful writer in this economy. I notice that I'm thinking this, so I try thinking the opposite: "I can be a successful writer in this economy." I find this hard to accept as true, because I can't just snap my fingers and change the publishing industry overnight. The more I poke around, the more I come back with an inability to accept as true that I can be successful in this economy. I have now identified a belief.

Step 2. Figure out why your current belief is serving your needs.

The tricky little thing here is that your beliefs are always serving your needs, in some way. If they served no purpose, you could not keep them.

This step can be deeply uncomfortable, because it often causes us to recognize parts of ourselves we would rather not see. It is also crucial. If you do not do this step, the unconscious need the belief was meeting will almost crop up again like an ingrown hair. This step may feel invalidating, but please remember that we are not debating whether or not anything is actually “The Truth.” We are just challenging a confirmation bias.

For example, let’s say my belief is “I can’t be successful in this economy.” This belief may seem unhelpful, contributing to potential feelings of failure, frustration, sadness, anger or worthlessness. It’s keeping me from accomplishing what I want to in my career. But the belief is serving me, in some way, or I could not keep it. The way it serves me might be that it takes the pressure off of me to be successful. It might keep me feeling safe, protected from the risks of pursuing my dreams. It might give me a built-in excuse for not being successful that stops me from feeling shame.

All beliefs serve your needs in some ways, but that does not mean you have to keep every belief you currently have. There can be other beliefs that meet your needs, too, and don’t create such suffering in the process.

Step 3. Marie Kondo it: Does it spark joy?

Just like you can with your wardrobe or all that stuff in your garage, once you take a good look at your beliefs, you can ask, of each of them, “Does it spark joy?”

Now, you may find yourself asking, “What does it matter if my belief sparks joy if it isn’t true?” Remember, beliefs have nothing to do with the truth. They are confirmation biases you think are true. Having confirmation biases that spark joy makes your life more joyful. If joy isn’t your thing, you can substitute in whatever you want. Does it spark moral goodness? Does it spark fun? Does it spark productivity I can track on a quarterly spreadsheet? It’s really up to you what you value here.

Once you’ve asked the question, answer it. Does it spark joy? If yes, keep it! If not, put that belief in the throw-away box. You can give it a little mental hug, thank it for how it served you, and continue to Step 4.

Step 4. Come up with another belief that does.

Come up with a different belief, one that meets those needs you identified in Step 2 while also sparking joy. I’m serious; you can literally just make one up. This step is easier if you choose a belief that you already think could be plausible. Do not expect yourself to fully believe this new

belief just yet, but notice if you're willing to entertain the idea of it. You could try picking a belief that seems completely outlandish to you, but doing so makes this process harder on yourself.

For example, rather than "I will never be successful in this economy," I could come up with the belief: "Success is committing myself to what I love."

Step 5. Justify your new belief.

A belief is a confirmation bias you think is true. In order to believe it, you must get to the point of having experiences in which the belief seems true. That means, to change your beliefs, you have to decide that your new belief is valid, and start confirming it to yourself everywhere you can.

Start with your thoughts around the new belief. Start coming up with justifications for the belief. What are some thoughts you can have that make the belief seem true? You can write a list of them. Get creative. Look at it from multiple angles. You are not looking to assess the objective validity of the belief; all you are doing is justifying it, validating it, supporting it, confirming it. The point is to be one-sided.

For example, to prove the belief "Success is committing myself to what I love," I could start listing justifications like, "Successful people are committed to what they love, even

if it takes time for the success to come,” or, “I think the capitalist economy is evil so ‘winning at it’ isn’t exactly an accomplishment, and therefore, I have a different definition of success.”

Step 6. Commit to proving it.

This step is about going into the world as if your new belief were true, and acting with your new belief in mind. Like quitting an addiction, you have to commit. It may feel clunky or silly at first. That’s okay. Again, we are not objectively testing a hypothesis here to see if it’s true; we are confirming a bias. Confirmation bias is your goal.

First, remind yourself about your new belief as often as you can. Write it on your mirror, on your hand. Set it as your desktop or phone background. Set little alarms to repeat your new belief. Tell your friends and family about it. Make sure you are keeping it in mind, so you can keep practicing living according to it.

Second, prioritize it. Make living by this new belief a priority. Really try to take this as seriously as an addiction recovery: the change in this pattern is your number one goal every day. Seek support to keep going. Reward yourself for your progress. If you have people in your life who make it harder to commit to your new belief, try to take space from them, at least for now.

Third, take actions as if your belief were true, in little ways at first; the big ways can come in time. For example, a friend might invite me out for drinks, and I might decline, choosing instead to stay in and write. I remind myself, “Success is committing myself to what I love.” Then, after writing, I might reward myself with a yummy salt bath to congratulate myself for prioritizing my new belief.

Step 7: Rinse, repeat.

A belief is an ingrained mental habit, and conscious habits don’t engrain themselves. That’s what makes them conscious.

You are carving a new mental river through your experience of life. This means you have to actively push your thinking and behavior in directions they are not used to going, and you have to do so again and again and again until they create lasting grooves in the bedrock of your reality.

For example, a year from the night I stayed in to write rather than go out for drinks, I might find myself choosing between a high-paying finance job (ha!) and a book deal. But by then, the thought, “Success is committing myself to what I love” might be a real belief of mine. It might be ingrained. Still, I don’t expect myself to start with something that big. It takes time to build up a new belief, like strengthening a muscle.

This is a practice, which means: it takes time and repetition. It takes screwing up, falling off the wagon and getting back on. The process will not happen overnight. If it does, your new belief is probably extremely flimsy, a shallow floodplain rather than deep river. Keep going. Slip up, dust yourself off, and get back to it. Be patient and kind with yourself. This takes time.

This process can be done again and again, with any beliefs you come across that are inhibiting you from living your best life.

You do not have to change your beliefs. There are no should's about any of this. You are not a worse person for maintaining limiting beliefs; sometimes, you can't help it. But sometimes you can, and doing so, well... it can make your life spark a lot more joy.

On Setting the Right Goals

“How can we sail to an island that nobody can find with a compass that doesn’t work?”

“Aye, the compass doesn’t point North. But we’re not trying to find North, are we?”

- The great holy writ, *Pirates of the Caribbean*

Wouldn’t it be great if, like Jack Sparrow, we had a compass that guided us magically towards exactly what we desire most?

I actually think it wouldn’t. I think it would make it all the harder to guide ourselves towards what we *need*. For more on the distinction between the two, I recommend asking the Rolling Stones.

Fortunately, we do have such a compass, and that compass is our experience itself. When we experience unpleasant sensations, we know which side of a healthy *equilibrium* we are on, and therefore what direction we need to move towards a state of balance. What we need is only ever a state of being.

Focusing on what we *need*, and expanding our options by releasing what we *want*, is the essence of antifragile goal-setting.

Antifragile is a term [coined by Nassim Nicholas Taleb](#) to explain the opposite of fragile. A thing is *fragile* if it breaks or weakens when subjected to shocks. A thing is *robust* if it remains the same when subjected to shocks. A thing is *antifragile* if it gains, grows, becomes stronger or more of itself when subjected to change, surprise, shock, chaos, and challenge.

Antifragile goal-setting can be found across many philosophies, and it comes down to a simple practice that Alan Watts once called “tacking with the wind”:

Figure out what you need, set your course, and use the fluctuations in circumstances around you to guide you further towards that need, even if you veer completely off of your imagined path.

That path may never have led you to the place you were trying to find anyway. Hold tight to your needs, your compass that points you in the direction you need to go, and relinquish attachment to your imagined path. Just start moving, let unfold, and shift accordingly.

To attach too strongly to a desire is *fragile* — your movement to your goals can so easily be broken by circumstances. To exist beyond desire is *robust* — circumstances won’t change your movement because you’re not attached to moving at all. *Nirvana*, by the way, literally means “blown out,” like a candle; extinguished: the space where the winds of life’s fluctuation do not touch you.

Me, I like the wind, so I'm learning how to tack with it.

For example, I want to buy a sailboat. This is not a metaphor.

The irony — perhaps synchronicity — of sailing and writing about *tacking with the wind* is not lost on me. The irony — perhaps synchronicity — of wanting to sail and talking about navigating the endless expanse of existence with only the compass of your own experience — that's not lost on me either. I talk about energy flowing like water and wind. I talk about navigating based on shifts in current. The irony — perhaps synchronicity — is something I choose to laugh about.

I want to buy a sailboat. I want to travel widely and live between many places, with a home I can take with me and share with others. I want to be near water, and coasts have always been where I feel most at home. I tried #vanlife, but found I want to be in cities too often and it left me feeling trapped instead of free. I want to learn a useful skill. I want to rely less on car and air travel for the betterment of the planet. I want to spend less money on housing. I want to never sign another apartment lease that I'll just break again, and I have broken many.

This is what I desire.

What I *need* is to feel free. I need to feel safe. I need to feel in control. I need to feel purposeful. I need my life to fit me. I need to feel on a path to something. Through irony —

perhaps synchronicity — I feel like I'm drifting through a shoreless ocean. I need to feel like I'm sailing somewhere.

For now, I'm sailing towards a sailboat. I'm heading in that direction. I'm researching, saving up money, learning to sail, asking questions of those more knowledgeable than me, and working out a lifestyle that would allow me to live on a sailboat full-time — in short, I'm going for it.

But if anything else comes up along the way that can satisfy these needs — even if it doesn't involve a sailboat at all — then my needs will still be met, and I will still be satisfied. My satisfaction will only decrease if I attach too strongly to my desire for a sailboat, which can easily be hindered due to all kinds of external conditions.

Ultimately, what we need is only ever a state of being: warmth, nourishment, acceptance, freedom, safety, connection, hydration, health, and so on. What we need is the opposite of an unpleasant state we currently find ourselves in. Moving towards our needs moves us towards our unique states of healthy equilibrium. We can tell what state we're currently in by *figuring out what we feel*, and *checking in with our surroundings*.

The internal practice of this is simple: Root yourself in awareness of your feelings, in your physical and emotional sensations, and let your awareness of possible actions broaden. If you feel cold, there are many paths to experiencing warmth.

Then, check in with your external surroundings. What else in your experience is filling in the gaps and lighting the path to follow? Perhaps you feel cold not because you *are* cold, but because you have a fever. Is turning up the heat going to help you? Perhaps you need an antibiotic.

Perhaps the cause of your experience is not the cause you think, and the desire is not the thing you need. Perhaps your understanding of the situation is incorrect. What do your experiences and feelings tell you? Feelings are not right or wrong; they simply are or are not felt. Thoughts can accurately and inaccurately figure out their causes and resolutions.

Thoughts are a part of your experience, and they can make your path to your goals *fragile*, or *antifragile*. Thoughts can help you to work with your feelings and move harmoniously towards your goals, or they can work against you. The actions of those around you, foreseen or otherwise, can work with you or against you. This is the wind.

Tacking with the wind comes in releasing ideas of what having your needs met has to look like, and following the best path you can find now until a better one presents itself. It comes in being open to many path, letting the need be heavy and the desire light. Your compass is your experience itself. Your compass is always pointing you towards your needs. These are your True North.

This is antifragile living: to ground yourself in your experience and move towards your needs, allowing many possible paths to get there, to move towards your best option until a better one arises.

Because of irony, or perhaps synchronicity, the best path I have to meet my needs, based on every factor I can factor in, I want to buy a sailboat. But if the winds shift, I will not hold fast to this desire. If something else comes along that gives me what I need, I can shift my action and move in whatever direction takes me towards the goal of my needs being met. I will have given up nothing I could not lose, and kept everything I need close to my heart.

This is tacking with the wind.

How to Manifest

Many of our manifestations go awry because we fixate on manifesting particular events we believe will bring us to a desired state. Almost invariably, these visions we seek to manifest either do not transpire as we want them to, or if they do, they leave us feeling nothing like the way we thought they would.

The issue, as usual, is that we've confused a thought with a feeling — mixed up a potential catalyst for a state of being with the state of being itself.

A need is only ever a state of being, and it is the opposite state of whatever unpleasant or difficult state you currently find yourself in. Moving toward the opposite state gets us to a healthy equilibrium. This applies equally to both physical and emotional states of being.

For example, if you are too cold, you need more warmth. This state of warmth could be achieved through feeling warm sunlight on your face or sitting next to a campfire or putting on a warm jacket. When you are too cold, you do not need the sun or the campfire or the jacket; you need warmth. Sunlight and fires and jackets are strategies or tools you can use to meet your need.

A Course in Miracles offers this powerful tool for manifestation: Focus on what it is you want to manifest in the future, and [give gratitude](#) for it in the present. It's quite

simple. Feel the feeling you want to manifest, and give gratitude for the fact that it is coming.

It's often hard for us to imagine and embody a particular state of being without fixating on what we think will bring us there.

But how do you feel that feeling now, given that you're trying to manifest something in the future? As we know, the thing you actually wish to manifest is not the tool or the strategy to meet your needs; instead, you are seeking the state of being you believe the tool or strategy will unlock for you.

It's often hard for us to imagine and embody a particular state of being without fixating on what we think will bring us there. If you seek to manifest [authentic connection](#) and your mind keeps imagining it will come from your crush telling you that they love you back, how are you supposed to ignore that thought? How can you force yourself to set aside the strategy to meet your need and fixate on the need itself when your mind seems to only be able to imagine reaching that state from this one particular source? And more to the point, how else can you conjure the feeling you believe the stimulus will bring you?

The answer is even simpler: Don't ignore the thought. Use the thought of what you want to happen to cause you to feel, now, what it is you want to feel in the future. Then, give gratitude for the feeling and release the thought.

Manifestation: A user's guide

Step 1: Notice what it is you want to happen.

Do you want that promotion? Do you want that ex-girlfriend to contact you and apologize? Do you want to randomly bump into that ex-boyfriend with a hotter new boyfriend on your arm? Do you want to win \$10,000? Do you want your dad to say he's proud of you and accepts you for all that you are? Notice the story you want to be told, and notice that it is a tool, a strategy, a thought.

Step 2: Notice how that thought makes you feel.

What emotions, what physical sensations do imagining it induce? In your mind, when you're thinking about experiencing this event, what is it that you feel as a result? Do you feel warmer or freer, lighter or stronger, happier or more satisfied? Do you feel a warmth spreading from your heart or a lightness in your stomach or a smile tugging at the corners of your mouth? Name it. Tell yourself what you're feeling.

Step 3: Focus on the feeling, and notice that you're feeling it now.

Go all the way into the feeling. When we imagine something happening in the future, we feel, in the present, the way we believe that event will make us feel. That confidence and radiance you feel as you fantasize about bumping into your ex with your new lover on your arm? You're feeling that, right now, as you imagine the possibility. That sense of solidity you feel when you imagine your parents finally being proud of you and accepting you

unconditionally? You're feeling it, now, when you think about them saying it in the future. You could do something as simple as saying aloud or in your mind, "I am feeling _____ right now."

Step 4: Give gratitude for the feeling.

Rather than continue to fixate on how your fantasy has not yet played out, thank your fantasy for giving you the feeling here and now. Notice that you've already called that feeling into being right now just by thinking these thoughts.

Consciously, whether by words or thoughts or ritual, thank yourself and the world around you for bringing you this feeling — both now and in the future. You could do something as simple as saying aloud or in your mind, "Thank you for bringing me this feeling."

Step 5: Release the thoughts.

You actually don't need that fantasy to come true. You don't need that event to take place. You've already found the feeling, reached that desired state of being even just for a moment, here and now. You've manifested it already just by noticing it, feeling it, and opening yourself to it, and in so doing, you've called it all the more strongly into your future. The feeling, the state of being, will materialize for you again and will almost certainly have nothing to do with the event you wanted to take place. You could do something as simple as telling the thought aloud or in your mind, "I release you," or waving it away with your hand.

How Not to Burn Out

This past winter, I burned out. Boy, did I burn out.

I don't know if it was the pandemic, my unhealthy mind or one too many shitty Tinder dudes, but by Valentine's Day I was existentially toast. Burnt toast, to be exact, the kind you have to scrape the char off of to make it edible. I quit my job, left all my lefty organizations and spent months hiding in my aunt's spare bedroom, trying to find where all the life in me had gone.

I know I wasn't alone in this experience. Between all the ways the world is crumbling down and all the new fuckery it props itself back up with, it's no wonder we're living through a veritable burnout pandemic, too. We're a planet of people exhausted, dispirited and running out of reasons to keep trying. I read an article a while back that said that what we call burnout is often simply grief. Ours is a culture that doesn't accept grief, doesn't give us space and time to pause, listen to our negative emotions, and do the slow, hiccuping work of healing.

But we must heal. It's the most important thing we can do. So, this is an overview of what I've learned so far about how to do that healing.

First, it's important to remember that burnout is a symptom. It is indicative of an internal imbalance. When you are burnt-out, the relationship between you and your

environment has turned destructive to you, pulling you down to a bedrock of exhaustion and despondence. That relationship needs to change in order for you to return to a state of balance. Note that I didn't say, "The environment needs to change in order for you to find balance." The *relationship* is what needs to change. You can't always change your environment, but you can always change how you relate to it.

In order to keep your relationship with your environment healthy, or to realign it once its fallen out of balance and caused burnout, you must slow down long enough to assess how and why it dragged you off course. To do that, I'd recommend checking in with yourself about the following five things:

1. Over-saturation

If you've burned out, then the relationship between you and your environment is off-balance. As you would with a diet that's making you sick, the first thing to check is your levels of exposure to certain elements of your life. Do you simply have too much of the same people, activities or thought patterns?

For example, I know that for many community organizers, our fellow activists become our whole lives. The people we organize with are not only our best friends, they're our lovers, partners, roommates, coworkers, coparents, and so on. Exhaustion and despondence can crop up in your life

simply because one or a few people are playing too many roles for you. We all have different needs from the different roles in our lives. The same person or group can't play every role to meet your needs.

The same is true of over-exposure to certain actions or beliefs. Are you spending too much time and energy on one set of activities and neglecting your need for others? Are you repeating the same negative beliefs to yourself again and again without checking to find out if they're even true? How much time do you spend each day worrying, panicking or brooding? If your answer to that question was greater than zero, then your thoughts are contributing to the burnout. Your negative emotions are always valid, but that doesn't mean they're always necessary or helpful.

If you're burnt-out already, assess if your life is over-saturated with something and look for ways to decrease your exposure to it. Increase the time and energy you spend on other things. Even a small change can have a big impact.

2. Motivation

When we are burnt-out, we're often acting with unhealthy motivations. It's crucial to check in with yourself about why you are doing what you're doing.

There is a huge difference between being passionate about something because you love it and being passionate about it because it makes you angry. Threats to what we love

make us understandably angry and afraid, but if we don't take the time to let our emotions pass through us before we react to them, our actions will be fearful and angry actions. Being motivated by love leads to a dramatically different experience than being motivated by anger.

It's important to notice the motivations in your feelings, not your thoughts. You might *think* you're working yourself to death because it's the right thing to do, but on the level of feeling, you're working too much because you're afraid of what might happen if you didn't. In this case, your emotional motivation is actually fear.

When we experience deep burnout, it's almost always a sign that we've been acting too much from a place of anger or fear. Internally, the reason why we're doing what we're doing is caused by one or more of these emotions, and our actions are spawned by what those emotions tell us to do. If we act in anger or in fear, we don't give ourselves any reason to stop being angry or fearful.

If the primary motivation for your actions is anger or fear, your relationship to life is going to be angry or fearful. It cannot be otherwise until your motivations change.

3. Misplaced responsibility

In my experience, burnout always signifies some misalignment of responsibility in our relationship to life. Either we're trying to take responsibility for something we

cannot truly respond to, or we're abdicating or ignoring the responsibility we do have (usually it's both).

I find the word "responsibility" troubling, because it calls to mind associations with unrelated terms like "duty," "obligation," and "fault." A concept like duty or fault is just that: a concept. It only exists conceptually. You may have your beliefs about who has a duty to what, or who is at fault for what, but neither of these beliefs really has any bearing on what other people decide to do.

Responsibility, in its purest form, means nothing more or less than "ability to respond." When responsibility burns you out, it's because you are trying to respond to things that you authentically cannot change or control, or because you are using your mental energy to react with fear and anxiety to hypothetical problems that don't actually exist yet.

The solution is not to release all responsibility; that would be impossible, because you are always able to respond to some things in some ways. Rather, the solution is look at what abilities you actually have, and focus on responding well.

If you're burnt-out, you need to respond to that burnout by helping it heal in some way. If that's what you're spending your time and energy on, then you can't prioritize the other fifteen things your reactivity tells you should be your responsibility right now. You simply can't respond to it all, so don't try to.

4. Bad faith

I draw a distinction between simple exhaustion, which is treated with rest, and what I'd call burnout. To me, burnout isn't just about being incapable of going on, but about not feeling motivated to do so. Burnout involves feeling despondent or dispirited, not just tired. While I think there's plenty of exhaustion that has nothing to do with bad faith, I've never seen or experienced a case of burnout that didn't.

To act in bad faith is to be deceitful about your motivations. If someone is acting in bad faith towards you, it means they are untrustworthy, duplicitous and unconcerned with your well-being. If you are taking someone in bad faith, you are assuming they are not acting with your best interests in mind. Regardless of whether or not others are actually acting in bad faith, the despondence of burnout typically arises when you come to believe that they are.

We all require rest to avoid exhaustion, but healing burnout involves the added step of rebuilding trust in a world that's currently causing you to feel like there's no point in trying. Rebuilding that trust requires changing your belief that others, or the world at large, are acting in bad faith towards you.

Though it's been taught throughout history, from ancient philosophies and spiritual traditions to contemporary behavioral therapies, we tend to forget the crucial role of

beliefs in determining feelings. It's easy to do; our emotions often feel like automatic responses to what happens in the outside world. But they aren't. Our emotions arise due to our beliefs about what's happening.

If we believe the world is inherently bad or indifferent to us, we give ourselves no reason to try and every reason to burn out. In order not to burn out, or to heal from burnout, it's helpful practice taking the world in good faith. The decision to assume positive intent is one we can always choose to make.

5. Lack of care

Burnout, like any wound or illness, is a sign that you need care. Sometimes, assessing your life carefully and making conscious changes to it isn't something you feel capable of right now. The weight of the burnout is too great, and for now, you just need to focus on rest and feeling better. Even with a thorough "diagnosis," preventing and treating burnout always requires care.

Self-care is not an indulgence; it's a requirement of being a responsible member of an interdependent species. If you don't provide care for yourself, you'll inevitably force others to care for you. We all require care from others (as mentioned, we're an interdependent species), but being incapable of giving care to ourselves tends to breed toxic relationships with our environment. When our relationship to our environment grows toxic, we burn out.

No matter what, a healthy relationship is rooted in reciprocal care. If you care for your environment, but do not receive care in return, the relationship will get imbalanced. If you expect care from your environment, but do not give care to yourself, the relationship will get imbalanced. All healing requires care: conscious, loving attention.

Ultimately, care is the answer to both preventing and treating burnout. When we don't pay conscious, loving attention to ourselves, our thoughts, our actions or our relationships, we burn out. In order to heal, we must make up for the care that was missing by paying more conscious, loving attention, in every way we can.

How to Be Emotionally Present

This is a quick and dirty guide to becoming more emotionally present. If you're not sure what to do with that term, for now just know that it means becoming more self-aware, more authentic, more expressive and more empathetic.

If you have any illusions that emotional absence and disconnection aren't serious issues, you need to look again at the root causes of most personal and societal ills. Between [suicides](#), [overdoses](#) and [murders](#) — [all of which would be impossible without emotional disconnection](#) — the epidemic of emotional disconnection killed half as many Americans as Covid-19 last year.

Before you go pinning any of that on specific mental illness diagnoses from the DSM-5, I invite you to name one mental illness that does not thrive in an experience of emotional disconnection, or that isn't profoundly ameliorated with repeated experiences of deep emotional connection and care. Often, I think the specific diagnoses can obscure the more universal root problem: we're traumatized by the cruelties, big and small, of growing up in a culture built on emotional disconnection, and now we're so emotionally disconnected from ourselves and each other that we can't heal.

Emotional disconnection is serious, and we all need to take it seriously.

Now, to improve your emotional connectivity and presence, there are all kinds of researchers and teachers you could learn from. There are countless techniques and skills to practice, not to mention the entire field of psychotherapy. The following suggestions are a few among thousands, and I encourage you to do your own research and experimentation, too. Different approaches to emotional presence will resonate with different people, and it takes time and continuous self-study to figure out what works best for you. Also, taking the time to do your own research helps you to cement the belief that becoming more emotionally present is important and worthy of sustained effort, which it is.

Without further ado, here are my top five tips for developing greater emotional presence:

Tip #5. Chart what you're feeling every morning. Then, journal about why you're feeling it.

Last year, I moved in with a friend who was going through a deep process of emotional transformation, and he was adamant about us circling our emotions on a laminated [feelings wheel](#) every morning. At first, I found the practice a bit campy, but I quickly came to love it. It was such a quick, simple reminder to check in with ourselves

and each other. It gave us all an easy way to understand each other's head-spaces, and it helped us be present with our own.

After circling my feelings, I'd go on to my other morning routine — journaling long-hand for three pages about what I was feeling and thinking, and why. Noticing that you feel “dismayed” or “powerful” today is good, but taking the time to understand where that feeling is coming from is better.

The first step to greater emotional presence with others is always greater emotional connection with ourselves. The more emotionally disconnected we are, the less we even know what we feel at any moment, and the more we need to prioritize and practice checking in with ourselves. Only when we know what we feel can we communicate it effectively to others.

Tip #4. Go to therapy.

I know you don't want to hear it, but I have to say it. Though I have my hang-ups with a lot of contemporary psychology, I absolutely think regularly talking to a therapist is an important part of learning emotional connection for those who are deeply disconnected. If you are not used to being vulnerable, authentic and expressive with yourself or those close to you, having a designated person you know you can talk to who can provide a safe

space for your vulnerability and offer helpful guidance can quite literally be the difference between life and death.

Again, figuring out what kind of therapy and which therapist work for you typically takes time and some trial and error. Personally, I'm a fan of dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT) and acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), because I think they balance internal self-awareness with concrete skills-building the best, but you'll find the approaches that are right for you.

Of course, in the United States, not everyone has the financial ability to see a therapist regularly. If you can afford it, it's an excellent use of money. If you can't, many therapeutic skills are free to learn online and you can still practice those on your own or in support groups. You could also ask some non-judgmental friends (with their explicit consent!) if they're willing to listen to you on a semi-regular about your feelings. If you do that, though, please remember that being your therapist is not your friend's job — it's a kindness they're offering to you, if and as they have capacity.

Tip #3. When you get defensive, ask yourself what it is you're defending. Then, say it.

If memory serves, this next tip comes from the spiritual teacher Teal Swan. We get defensive when we feel attacked. The problem is, we often feel attacked when

we're not really being threatened at all. The way someone close to us is speaking or behaving might trigger negative thoughts and emotions in us because it reminds us of past pain, and we tense up, close down, and go on the defense — regardless of whether there's any threat in the current moment whatsoever.

You know the feeling of defensiveness, and you know how much it sucks. Your face and body get tense. You feel that drop in your stomach. You feel an urge to get aggressive or passive-aggressive, to shout or act petty, and you have this thirst to conquer the other person and defend yourself from them. Can you remember feeling that way in a conversation? Pay attention to it.

Now, the next time you feel that way, notice it. Notice the sensation itself. Then, pause. If you're in a conversation with someone, ask for space and time for a moment. If you need to literally walk away from the interaction triggering your defenses, do so.

Whenever you notice yourself getting defensive, stop for long enough that you can ask and honestly answer the question, *"What am I defending?"*

What you're defending might be a negative thought about yourself. You might be defending a truth you don't want to admit, a painful memory you don't want to relive, or a feeling you wish you weren't having.

The thing is, when you get defensive, you feel attacked. That means you're in need of care and safety. If you keep

defending yourself, you deny yourself the opportunity to receive care and safety in the interaction with another person. Only if you stop defending yourself does anyone else have the opportunity to help you feel safe.

So, as hard as it is, as impossible as it sounds, when you figure out what it is that you're defending: take a deep breath, and say it. Say the thing that you're getting defensive in order to avoid. If you don't, the real emotional truth of the conversation will never be revealed, and the disconnection can only deepen.

Tip #2. Give what you want to receive.

This tip came from, of all places, an episode of *The Crown*. It's simple and utterly brilliant. I'll let the character of Princess Diana explain it for herself: "Anytime either of us feels like we're not getting what we need, we simply need to give that very thing to the other."

Give what you want to receive. This is not just a useful tool for conversations or intimate relationships — this is the key to connection with the whole world. When you feel like you're not getting what you need, give it. Reverse the process by which you're trained to think it must arise.

When you don't feel like you're getting enough compassion, give compassion. When you don't feel like you're getting enough care, give care. When you don't feel

like you're being understood, seek to understand. Every time you give what you want to receive, you increase how much of that thing there is in the dynamic. Giving compassion, care or understanding to others cannot reduce what you get. It can only increase the overall level of compassion, care and understanding in the connection.

This does not mean, "When your partner isn't giving what *they* want to receive, call them out on it." It means, give what *you* want to receive. Take responsibility only for your own behavior. Stop playing "Who's gonna capitulate first?" chicken about your emotional needs, and give what you want to receive.

Tip #1. Show, don't tell, your empathy and understanding.

This is my number one skill for *everyone* wishing to develop greater emotional connection in their relationships.

Emotional connection is about empathy. In order for both people in a relationship to experience empathy and being empathized with, the empathy needs to shine through in the interaction. Just telling someone "I understand" or "I empathize" does nothing to help them feel understood or empathized with. It also does nothing to help you understand them or empathize with them.

I'm sure you can picture it. You're having an argument with someone, and you're obviously hurt or emotionally enervated in some way by their actions. They tell you over

and over again, “I understand, I get it,” but their actions keep demonstrating that they do not understand or get it. On top of feeling upset, you’re now starting to feel almost gaslit. Why? Because they haven’t demonstrated their understanding. They might think they understand, but their actions are not the actions of someone who understands.

Fixing this pattern is very simple, though not always easy. If you want to demonstrate your understanding, you must show it, not tell it. In a conversation, you have to stop, listen to the other person, think about what they said, and then paraphrase to them it in your own words. Explain to them, in your own words, why it makes sense that they feel the way they do.

I repeat: listen to them thoroughly, think about what they said, and then explain it back to them in your own words, in as much detail as possible. If they’re pointing out a pattern of behavior, reflect on your own behavior and see if you can think of other examples of it. Then, say those examples aloud. Ask them if you’re understanding their feelings correctly. Be open to correction.

This applies to your relationship with yourself, too! Validate your own feelings when you have them. Explain to yourself why it makes sense that you feel the way you do.

Remember: as much as it might feel like an attack, listening to someone else’s perspective on your behavior is not an attack. Just because something feels painful for you right now does not mean it’s bad for you. It might hurt your self-

concept in the short-term, but humility and self-awareness will benefit you in the long-term.

Oh, and don't forget: you have to practice.

Going through every step on this list once over will not dramatically increase your emotional presence. This is a practice. That means, it takes time and repetition. It takes continuous, conscious practice like learning a language or an instrument. You're going to be bad at it at first, but keep going — you'll improve in due time, and every aspect of your life will be better for it.

How to Live a More Conscious Life

Last year, my spiritual practice qualitatively changed from intellectual understanding to the beginnings of actual embodiment. As anyone on the path to greater consciousness, whether or not you call it “spirituality” knows, so many teachings tell us what is true or what we should do, but don’t offer us tangible ways to experience it.

The following are a series of exercises I’ve personally used that I’ve found impactful at qualitatively changing my experience, allowing me to become more intentional, conscious, compassionate, authentic and accepting.

All of these practices are all very simple. “Simple” does not necessarily mean “easy.”

Exercise 1: Talk Yourself Out of Embarrassment

Your thoughts shape your feelings. Choosing your thoughts consciously can change how you feel.

Start by spending one week talking yourself out of embarrassment, whenever you notice that you’re feeling it. When you feel embarrassed, pause, and take some time to think through why you might not need to feel embarrassed about this action.

Think up justifications for why what you did is nothing to be embarrassed about. Maybe you said the wrong thing, but you weren't sure what to say, and you did your best under the circumstances. Maybe you made a mistake, but you're learning from it. Everyone makes mistakes, and it's okay that you did too.

Continue the practice for at least a full week, as often as you can remember to do it.

You can repeat this practice with other painful emotions like shame, anger, bitterness, jealousy or fear — if you want to.

Exercise 2: Clean Mindfully and Assess Your Space

Our external environment influences our internal environment. How we treat our surroundings, and the intention we put into what surrounds us, has a dramatic impact on how we feel. In cleaning and curating our environment, we make it easier to live a more conscious, happy life.

Start by cleaning and organizing a room, or your entire living space, as slowly as you can. As you pick up each item, ask yourself these questions: “What is this *for*? What am I using it for? Is it sparking joy?”

Continue cleaning, looking at the overall flow of the space. As you observe, ask yourself, “What is this space *for*?”

What experience does your physical environment create? What experience do you want it to create? How does cleaning it impact your experience of it?

Whenever you become aware that your mind has wandered, return your thoughts to focus cleaning what is in front of you. When you are finished, notice if there are aspects of your space that you want to part with.

This process can be repeated with mindful cooking, mindful shopping, mindful bathing, mindful job searching, and so on — if you want to.

Exercise 3: Tell the Whole Truth

Disharmony in relationships and interpersonal pain are always the result of not telling, or listening to, the whole truth. Often, we aren't fully aware of our own motivations, intentions or desires. Even when we do know, we often aren't honest with others. We get caught up in spirals of defensiveness instead of building an authentic connection.

Whenever you feel yourself growing defensive around someone you care about, pause, and tell the person you're talking to that you find yourself feeling defensive. Cast no blame on them, simply express that you are noticing yourself feeling on the defense.

Next, tell them why. What insecurity or fear has been triggered in you? What is going unsaid? Say it, as

excruciatingly painful, shameful or embarrassing as it may be.

Lay no blame or judgment, upon yourself or upon them. Simply tell the whole truth, or as much of it as you know.

You can repeat this process with more and more people in your life, including people in positions of authority above you, and with yourself — if you want to.

Exercise 4: Only Focus on the Next Five Minutes

So much of our anxiety comes from trying to determine out the future before we possibly can. Simply telling ourselves to be present does not stop the worry. What does stop the worry is focusing on what's actually happening in the present, and continuing to bring our focus back to it.

Whenever you find yourself anxious about the future, shift your focus to the next five minutes. What needs to be done in the next five minutes?

Check in with your body. Do you need to pee? Are you hungry? Are you thirsty? Should you probably drink more water than you have so far today even if you're not actively thirsty? What about your muscles, could they use a stretch or a run or some rest?

Then, check in with your environment. Does the dog need dinner? Feed the dog. Do the plants need to be watered? Water them. Is the room a mess? Clean it.

When those five minutes are up, focus on the next five minutes.

You can repeat this practice with other kinds of “life admin minutia” to counter feelings of anxiety or depression (for example, staving off existential despair by spending the day getting your driver’s license renewed or making a dentist appointment).

Exercise 5: Don’t Know What To Do

Faith in the future is simply the knowledge that things can work out for your highest good, without you personally knowing how that’s going to happen right now. The limited mind simply cannot perceive or control the future, and trying desperately to ascertain the future can hold us back from any satisfaction in the present.

This practice is most useful when you feel your most miserable. When your plans have been shattered, all hope is lost, and you don’t know what to do next.

Simply: don’t know what to do next. Actively don’t know. Allow yourself not to know. When you feel totally lost, take a deep breath, and say to yourself, “I don’t know.”

Repeat it, “I don’t know. Because I don’t know, trying to know right now is fruitless. I do not need to know right now. I surrender control in this moment.”

Keep repeating it. If you find your mind in resistance to the thought, start justifying it to yourself. Why might you not need to know right this second? Why is it perfectly plausible that you don’t need to know right now? Is there anything else you could put your focus on instead?

A Note on Exercises 6 and 7:

These final two exercises are about practicing non-reactivity, allowing yourself to sit with certain thoughts or feelings without running from them. They can be very emotionally intense, so if you choose to undertake them, do so with self-compassion and do not push yourself further than you feel able.

Exercise 6: Talk to (and Listen to) Your Pain

Sit or lie down in a comfortable, quiet place, with at least 30 minutes of free time ahead of you. Close your eyes, and breathe, slowly and deliberately. Commit to not moving or reacting for the entire duration.

Become aware of any place in your body that hurts or feels uncomfortable. Simply notice the pain or discomfort,

without reacting. What does it feel like? Is it heavy or light? Pulsing or constant? Dull or sharp? Does the pain have a color, a texture, a sound? Focus on that area, and breathe into it.

When you feel present with your pain, ask it, “What are you?” Allow it to answer you, in its own time. Notice what thoughts, images, memories or emotions arise when you do this. What is the pain about? Beyond the physical sensation, what mental or emotional sensations seem to be “in there”?

Continue breathing. Continue not reacting. Mindfully stop the practice if it becomes unbearable to continue your focus on it, today. Seek help if it becomes too much in your life. If and when you are ready, you can return to it.

Exercise 7: Consciously Allow Yourself to Be Worthless

Once again, sit or lie down in a comfortable, quiet place, with at least 30 minutes of free time ahead of you. Close your eyes, and breathe, slowly and deliberately. Commit to not moving or reacting for the entire duration.

Next, think of a time you felt negatively judged by someone else. Ask yourself, “*What if that negative judgment of me were true?*”

Notice what happens in your body while you entertain the thought. Where do you feel it? What does it feel like? What

happens if you allow yourself to think about the possibility, without reacting whatsoever?

Next, let yourself sink even deeper. What if you are worthless? Allow the possibility, without reaction. Remain motionless and focused. What happens when you fully allow yourself to be worthless? When you do, what does it even mean?

You can repeat this practice with any other concept you don't want to identify with — if you want to.

How to Care About People

People in general don't grow up being taught how to care for each other — how to receive each other's feelings, how to hold space for each other, how to make others feel cared for, how to meet our own emotional needs and assist others to meet theirs in mutual aid. So, as someone who really, deeply prioritizes giving care to others, and has been told time and again that I'm pretty good at it, I'm offering a free lesson.

First, I was not born knowing how to care for people. I'm still learning, and I still screw it up a lot of the time. But I want to hit home the point that *this is something I've learned how to do because I've actively tried to*. I've made learning how to care for people well a priority, because I believe it is the most important thing I can do. I know it is, because I've felt firsthand the pain of not feeling cared about by the people in my life over and over and over again, and seen on more macro- levels how a lack of centering care at all levels of social relationships leads to brutality around the world.

So, without further ado, I've written you all a lesson.

Step 1: Don't have people in your life that you don't care about.

This is so obvious that I laugh at even having to say it, but it's actually something not all people understand, or do. I forget it all the time.

If you don't care about someone, don't have them in your life. If you only talk to them to get something from them, don't have them in your life. If you feel obligated to them but don't actually want to be around them, don't have them in your life.

Limit your sphere of association to the people you actually feel caring feelings towards, and focus on caring for those people better. Spoiler alert: you don't have to care about everyone. You won't be able to care about everyone. Quit making time for the people you don't care about, so that you have time for the people you do care about.

"But what if I need this thing from them and pretending I care is the only way to get it?" Congratulations, you suck. The new way of being starts with you. Do better.

Step 2: Understand that care is a thing you *do*, not just a thing you *feel*.

As ye olde Massive Attack adage goes, "Love, love is a verb. Love is a doing word." The same is true for care.

You can like someone all you want, but if you don't spend your thoughts or words on them, you don't care. You can

want someone to be happy all you want, but if you don't try to facilitate their happiness, you don't care.

Care without action is emotional masturbation. It's telling yourself you're a caring person but not putting in the work to *be* one. Action is our interface with this world: our movement, our thoughts, our speech, our silence. Other people cannot feel your feelings for you. They can only feel *their* feelings, which are influenced by *your actions*. Use your actions to care.

Step 3: Ask others how they are doing, and listen to their answers.

Ask from a place of genuinely wanting to know. If it's not clear to them whether you're honestly asking or just asking to be polite, make it clear. Go out of your way to make sure the person you're talking to knows that you actually want to know what they are feeling, what their emotional landscape is like in this moment.

If you are asking just to be polite, don't ask. Refer to Step 1.

Step 4: Understand that everyone's feelings make sense.

Even if they don't make sense to you right now.

Regardless of whether or not a feeling is *rational*, it is always *logical*. Rationality does not apply to feelings. A person's feeling is always the result of some cause. There is no such thing as an incorrect feeling. Feelings simply are or are not felt.

Keep this in mind when you talk to people. Validate their feelings. Try to chart back their feelings in your own mind, and express to them that their feelings make sense. If you don't understand where the feeling came from, ask them. Maybe they don't fully understand, and taking the time to ask them will likely make them feel more cared about.

But please, never, ever, ever, say, "Well if I was in your situation, I wouldn't feel that way." Because you're wrong. If you had that person's biology, that person's upbringing, that person's history, that person's experiences, that person's tendencies, and you were in that person's situation, you would feel the same way. Because you would *be* them.

Just because you've experienced something similar *does not mean* you have been in the same situation, because what we feel in a situation includes the whole of who we are and what we have been through up to and including that point.

Step 5: Care for yourself.

Put on your own oxygen mask first.

Think about all the things that other people do that make you feel loved, seen, valued and cared about, and do them for yourself, too. Things like: genuinely asking yourself how you feel, because you want to know. Not giving emotional energy to others when you don't have it to give. Giving time to yourself, giving energy to yourself, giving love to yourself in whatever form that takes.

We often seek support from others when we feel we cannot give it to ourselves. Some pains require external help. You don't go to the hospital for a cut you can treat at home, but when it's a broken leg? Yeah, you'll want a doctor.

One of the best ways to learn how to give care to others is to learn how to give it to yourself. What do you feel? Ask yourself. Be present in what you feel, and validate yourself. Now, what do you need? Help yourself to get it, just as you would for someone you care about.

Step 6: Be present with others in their pain.

Take the phrase "Cheer up" out of your vocabulary. "Cheer up" is the cat-calling of emotional advice. Just as no one has ever gotten a "*Heyyyy mama you look so fine*" and thought "*Wow, I would love to date this person,*" no one who is feeling pain has ever been told to "cheer up" and thought, "*What a great idea, why didn't I think of that?*"

You cannot work your way out of a feeling without going through it. If emotions are a hole, the only tool you have is a

shovel, and that shovel is feeling your dang feelings. You cannot climb out of a hole with a shovel. What you can do is dig until the hole becomes a tunnel. You can ignore your emotions, or distract yourself from them, or drown them in substances, but your feelings will invariably come back, usually as misplaced hostility towards others, or addiction, or hip pain.

You cannot help someone through their pain without being present with them in it. This does not mean taking on their pain as your own; it means directing your attention, your energy, towards the person in the moment and receiving them as they are. Rather than thinking about what to say next, listen. Rather than talking about yourself, listen. Rather than letting your mind wander to what you're eating for dinner tonight, listen. Actively. Watch their face.

Once the pain has been felt and met with presence, then could be the time for advice.

Step 7: Shut up about yourself for a second.

If you've asked someone how they're doing, listen. Don't talk about yourself. If someone's coming to you in pain, listen. Don't talk about yourself.

If you need to set boundaries, like "I can't handle this right now," or, "I'm not the right person for this," then talk about yourself. Please, *please* do so.

But if someone you care about says, “I’m in crisis right now” or “I’m in pain,” or “I’m really sad,” stop saying things along the lines of, “Oh, I was sad yesterday,” or, “When I’m sad is listen to Jordan Peterson” (actual quote from today, and I can’t vomit enough).

If you’ve asked someone how they’re doing, then *this isn’t about you*. It’s about them. There are lots of ways to relate to someone and show that you empathize by talking about yourself, but these come *after you’ve listened*.

Step 8: Find out how others receive care, and care for them accordingly.

There’s a thing I talk about a lot that I call a “language of care.” (Note: I found out since writing this about “Love Languages,” and they’re essentially the same thing).

Languages of care work like this: everyone has had a different experience up until this point, and everyone has different associations, and everyone has different things that make them feel cared about. Everyone has different things that make them *not* feel cared about. I have a thing about birthdays. People not doing things for my birthday makes me feel uncared for. People telling me openly and honestly how they feel makes me feel cared for. For others, presents or surprises make them feel cared for. For some, certain words feel caring, and certain words don’t.

Mismatched languages of care are one of the easiest ways to leave the people in your life feeling unloved. You may do things for them that would make you feel cared about, but for the other person, these things fall flat.

How do you know what makes someone else feel cared about? *You ask them.* Maybe they don't even know, but if you ask them, they'll have to think about it and find out. Then, within your own boundaries, show care for them accordingly.

Step 9: The best apology is changed behavior.

If you do something that hurts someone, and they tell you it hurts them, maybe don't do it again.

If you do something that hurts someone, and they tell you it hurts them, and you apologize, promise not to do it again, and then do it again, you suck.

Pro tip: hurting someone's feelings is not the same as doing something wrong. Don't apologize for anything you don't genuinely feel bad about doing.

If you actually feel bad about something, try your hardest to not do it again. Seek help in not doing it again. If you are not putting in the work to change your behavior after hurting someone, any apology you give is hollow lip-service at best, and at worst, an abject lie that just keeps the other person

in a cycle of pain believing things might be different this time.

Step 10: Give care because you care.

Not because you expect immediate reciprocity. Not because you think you “should.” Not because you’re tired of dealing with a crying friend, or a depressed roommate, or a despondent lover. Do not care for people because you want to change them. If you’re just trying to change them, you don’t actually care about them, as they are now. You’re just trying to be rid of them as they are now.

Instead, give care *because you care*.

Make the people in your life feel cared about because you *feel care for them*. Make the people in your life feel loved because you *love them*.

The point of this all is to have your actions reflect your authentic feelings — to stop things from getting lost in translation between feeling and action — so that the people in your life know that you care about them. If you don’t care about them, refer to Step 1, and apply the rest of these steps for the people you *do* care about.

Because God damn it, y’all are precious, and beautiful, and so, so special. So please, treat each other accordingly. Don’t let a day go by that someone you love feels unloved. Don’t

let a day go by that someone you care about feels uncared for.

Start prioritizing learning how to give care. Learn how to care more, and care better. Lives depend on it.

How to Break Out of Harmful Cycles

To really understand what conscious awakening is all about, it can be helpful to understand something called “category mistakes.” A category mistake is a kind of logical fallacy wherein a quality is applied to something that cannot possibly possess it, for example, “The Queen of England is on Saturday” or “Purple is drunk.” The thing and its supposed quality are in wholly different categories, so to relate them in this way is nonsensical, signifying a mistake in understanding what the thing is.

What spiritual awakening teaches us is that most of our attempts to improve our lives are fragile and fruitless because every step of the way, we’re making category mistakes. Learning to recognize reality and act in accordance with its actual laws are what lead to real and lasting shifts in our experience. Nothing else works.

If you’ve delved into spiritual stuff much, you’re probably familiar with Plato’s allegory of the cave. The unconscious mind is wholly preoccupied in the drama playing out between the shadows on the cave wall, while the awakened mind sees its own hand in producing the shadow puppets. This is why the spiritual answer to a material question will not exist within the parameters of the material plane.

When you ask your inner knowing for advice on a particular life situation, you’ll likely get an answer that feels unrelated

and unsatisfying to your Ego. The divine answer to a question like, “Should I break up with him?” might be, “Go to sleep.” Asking, “Am I on the right trajectory in my career?” might receive an answer like, “Cultivate your own inner joy and peace, and do whatever you happen to do from there.”

Spiritual awakening teaches you the difference between what you think you need and what you actually need, and how these are of wholly different categories. You do not need your happiness to come in any particular form; you need the experience of happiness. That’s it. Whatever you do in an experience of happiness is what makes you happy.

Your higher self calls on you to find happiness regardless of what happens externally, because the reality outside the proverbial cave has no awareness whatsoever of the shadows on the wall. All it can experience is how beholding those shadows makes you feel.

The infuriating lesson any spiritual seeker learns over and over again is that your mind is always what’s creating all the drama. Material reality has no meaning on its own. Anything could be happening in your material reality, but it’s your interpretation of its meaning that determines your response to it.

Awakening is realizing this: your mind is always mediating your experience of everything. Changing negative external circumstances into positive ones, and changing your interpretation of negative circumstances so that you view

them as positive ones, have exactly the same impact on your happiness. Your higher self doesn't care which one you choose; it just wants you to be happy.

Believing that certain external conditions must be met in order for you to feel happy, peaceful, content or loving forfeits the only power you always have. That's what keeps you stuck in unconscious cycles. Understanding that you possess the ability to be happy and loving regardless of what happens in your external environment, and practicing the cultivation of a positive internal environment every day, is what actualizes your ability to rise above the current.

If you're trying to manifest abundance in your life by fixating on having a million dollars in your bank account, you're stuck in unconscious cycles. If you're trying to manifest love in your life by getting your crush to like you back, you're stuck in unconscious cycles. If you're trying to manifest freedom and autonomy in your life by overthrowing the reigning political establishment, you're stuck in unconscious cycles. If you believe your well-being to be dependent on the acquiescence of anything external, you are not embodying your consciousness. Oh — and, judging yourself negatively for investing in material reality and repeating unconscious cycles is yet another unconscious cycle to be stuck in.

The imaginary laws of the Ego are built on a logic of desires and reactions: what goes up must come down. The bad is punished and the good is rewarded, because this is how things should be. Why? Because we said so. As anyone

who's ever tried to change the world knows, reality doesn't abide by our concepts of goodness at all. Reality doesn't give a rat's ass what you think it should be.

The unconscious mind thinks certain things *should* happen and certain things *shouldn't* — fixated on these ideas to the detriment of what is or isn't actually happening. “*This should be*” and “*that shouldn't be*” are your own made-up judgments. They're shadow puppets on the cave wall. The desire to manifest better outcomes for your shadow puppets is not something the Universe can respond to; it simply has no idea what you're talking about. The only way out of the reactivity and repetition is to focus on a wholly different category of experience.

The Universe does not comprehend form. It only comprehends your energy, how you experience the forms around you. What you see around you always mirrors your energy. Whether we can “manifest” physical events, or if we just have the ability to change our minds about events that happen, doesn't really matter. The point is that your conscious experience reflects the energy you give. That's just how living works.

Any judgment you have about how things “*should*” work beyond that is a shadow puppet the Universe has no awareness of whatsoever. The Universe can't tell what “*should*” be happening; it can only respond to what is happening in your experience, and your experience is determined by your state of mind. Spiritual ascension is the continuous practice of realizing this, again and again and

again, and returning your mind to align with the reality above the phantom concepts you hold dear.

Is it fair? Nope. Our minds' concepts of fairness are shadow puppets. Mistaking them for the laws of existence is a category mistake. We're playing a qualitatively different game here. Concepts are like dreams, and we're here to wake up.

Because the Universe responds to energy, the way to break out of repetitive patterns is to give what you want to receive.

This breaks the game of waiting for external reality to acquiesce to what you want in order for you to feel happiness. When you give what you want, you lay claim to agency over your experience and your happiness. You're not selective about when and to whom and under which circumstances you give it, because to be selective is to be a servant to shadow puppets. Your actions are still determined by them, rather than by you. To be an empowered agent, capable of creating your own life, you can't let yourself be hoodwinked by the power of what you, yourself, made up.

If you want love, give it. Give love everywhere you can. Release your artificial concepts of where love is supposed to come from, and notice it being given back all around you. Maybe your crush doesn't like you back, but maybe your roommate is cooking you dinner.

If you want abundance, give it. Give sustenance and care to the world around you. Release your fixation on how abundance is supposed to show up in your life, and notice it all around you. Maybe you didn't get that promotion, but maybe you have enough food in your garden to eat for the next week.

If you want freedom, be free. You can't control what anyone else will do, but freedom has nothing to do with control. Make your own decisions when and where you can, and don't spend all your time fixated on the things you can't choose. Be vigilant with yourself when you start slipping into patterns of believing others must give your freedom to you. When you do this, you deny yourself opportunities to be freer.

Give what you want to receive. That's it.

The trick is that what you want to receive is always an experience. The material specifics of how that experience enters your life are meaningless shadow puppets, and being dependent on which shadow puppets you get keeps you trapped in unconscious cycles of powerlessness. If you want to break out of them, then give up on the material details, and focus on giving the energy you want to receive.

Your happiness doesn't care how you found it. When you're happy, do you think to yourself, *"God I'm so bummed out that my happiness today was caused by the beautiful weather instead of a friendly dog"*? No. You're just happy.

The act of judging that you must break out of your unconscious patterns or else you're a bad person who isn't worthy of love or abundance or joy is an unconscious pattern. Must you do this? Should you do this? Are you a bad person if you don't do this? Those are nonsensical questions to which the Universe has no ability to respond, and none of these are the subject of this article.

If you want to break out of unconscious repetition and become of conscious how to create your own experience, then give what you want to receive. That's it. It is infuriatingly, dizzyingly simple.

Spiritual practice is about learning how to cultivate your own peace and joy, regardless of what else is going on. Real power is not found in bending the world to your whims; it's found in cultivating the ability to love no matter what the world does.

How to Trick the Ego into Dissolving Itself

Many of us on spiritual paths have had that moment when we bury our heads in our hands and just wish our damn Egos away. All that tension and anxiety, pain and control, disconnection and isolation, resistance and resentment, we want it gone. We believe, or have faith, that an existence of radiant love, happiness, abundance and connection is possible, if only we could do away with this pesky little Ego and its inalienable thirst for its desires.

Like so many spiritual lessons teach us, we cannot begin from resistance. We can't dissolve resistance by resisting it, and we can't dissolve desire by desiring to do so. We must begin by allowing, and that means allowing the damn Ego.

The Ego is the belief that the self is a *form*: you as this body and this identity you've cultivated for you in this particular life, separate from all the rest of the universe. The Ego's interest is its own security. It seeks to get what it wants, which is always safety, but appears more noticeably as the following: 1) certainty about the future, 2) control over material reality, 3) to be (and be seen as) "good," which often means "better than something else." It acts up and seizes our attention most often in times when we feel uncertain, out of control, and ashamed of being "bad" or "worse than something else."

In that space of divine Source/God-consciousness, we understand that past and future don't really exist,

everything is malleable, material reality doesn't mean anything, good and bad are simply judgments, and nothing can be better or worse because all is literally One.

And the nebulousness of this space of Oneness *terrifies* the Ego. So how on earth do you coax it into letting you go there?

You begin by playing its game. You begin by viewing the expansion of the mind as a pathway to the desired gains of the Ego.

1) Focusing on manifesting

It begins by focusing on manifestation, or the practice of calling desired experiences into your life. This is the realm of teachers like Florence Scovel Shinn, "The Secret", the "Law of Attraction" school of thought, and so on. When it comes to the Law of Attraction, I like Teal Swan's way of calling it the "Law of Mirroring," because it works like this: the energy you put out into the universe is mirrored by the universe around you. When you give an energy of material abundance by believing that you exist in a state of abundance already, you are met with material abundance coming into your life. When you give an energy that love and connection are abundant, love and connection are received in your experience.

The same is also true in reverse. When you put out an energy of material scarcity, say, by worrying constantly about your finances, the Law of Mirroring would cause you to be met with material conditions to worry about. When you put out an energy of desperate loneliness and longing for love, you're met with more reasons to feel lonely.

Manifesting does not follow a logic of "good things come to those who wait" or "good things come to good people" or even "good things come to those who put in effort," but simply, "good things come to those who believe fully that they already have them." When it rains, it pours.

Manifesting is an extremely attractive endeavor to the Ego. Why? Because believing in manifestation makes the Ego feel 1) that there is a degree of certainty in the future, because what you put out will come back to you, 2) that it has control over reality, by being able to call into your experience what you want, and 3) that you can be good, and forgive yourself for being bad, because being good will call in good, and fixation on bad will call in bad.

But when you start to get real down and dirty with manifestation, the Ego finds itself unknowingly in a paradox that dissolves itself. Here's how:

- 2) Getting real with the energies

To give the energy you need to manifest something, you have to feel that energy *truly*. To call love into your life, you have to focus on the love in your life. To call abundance into your life, you have to focus on the abundance in your life. To call success into your life, you have to focus on the success in your life. You have to start looking around you to all the possible sources of that energy, and focus your attention on them for what they are: sources of love, abundance, success and so on.

There's no faking the funk with manifesting; you have to start actually noticing what you want to call in already there, around you, focus on those things, give that energy and radiate it outwards, in order to manifest it further. Affirmations that are not grounded in your own understanding of what is real do not work. For example, telling yourself repeatedly, "My crush Seymour loves me back" when Seymour doesn't love you back will not call love into your life. Spending a day giving love and care to all the people you do love, and basking in the feeling of their actual love for you and giving gratitude for the love you already have — that's what manifests more of the love stuff.

In manifesting an energy, you start to recognize that that energy comes from all over the place. It's around you in so many different forms. As you manifest, you start to notice that the energy comes in to your life through extremely unexpected forms. That material abundance you thought you were calling in with a promotion? Well, it came to you

from an unexpected asset being left to you in a will. That lover you wanted to return your affections? You forgot about them, because a new lover waltzed right in and swept you off your feet.

This is where our attachment to form (individuals, events, actions, particular details of material reality) can hinder us from manifesting: we may not notice that our wish is being granted, so to speak, because it's being granted in ways we never would have thought of, through forms we wouldn't have expected. When we don't see it coming back in the form we expect, we feel powerless and scarce. But if we want to keep the ball rolling on the manifesting front, we start releasing our attachment to forms — otherwise, we won't be able to continue authentically feeling the energy we're trying to manifest.

And so, the forms we thought these energies would manifest through stop feeling as relevant, because we begin to recognize the energies for what they are: energies. Feelings. The way things are experienced, rather than the way things seem in form. The “how so” and the “what from” stop being as relevant. The form doesn't matter when the energy is received.

And bit by bit, life begins to look different. Forms matter less. Energies matter more. What we put out energetically with our being matters more. What that looks like matters less. Our relationship to life gradually changes: relationships to experiences become more important, and the particulars of the experiences themselves matter less.

3) Form fades, and the experiencer takes precedence

As the process goes on, our identity gradually becomes more aligned with “the one who relates to these experiences” rather than the experiences themselves. We begin to feel ourselves as the giver and receiver of energies, not as caught up in the forms they come from or through. The “what” and the “how” begin to fade.

Yes, we do attract the better forms our Egos want, but it stops mattering so much whether or not we do, because we’re perpetuating a cycle where form becomes less and less necessary to give and receive desired energies. Yes, it does begin to fall into place, but the form that takes feels less relevant. It falls into place *because* the form feels less relevant. Because we aren’t as attached to form. Because we’re beginning to awaken, little by little, to the reality that the love and abundance and beauty and connection we want is all around us, and within us. It moves through this Ego form, from us, because we are not this Ego form. Because we are the energies that move.

And with neither a bang nor a whimper, with a simple satisfied dissolution as though into warm water, we find ourselves in the place we wanted to be: one, whole, love, clear, in the unendingly fresh expanse of selfhood beyond the Ego.

How to Play the Game of Life

Your experience of life is not the game you're here to play.

Allow me to explain:

If I asked how you to play poker, what would you tell me? You'd probably tell me the rules: how many cards to deal, which ones are high and low, what the hands mean, what you do to win or lose.

Every card game has rules, which make the game what it is. Without the rules, dealing out a hand of cards means nothing. The rules are what create the game, what bring the cards to life to serve a purpose. The rules are what define the game, differentiate one game from another. I suppose, in this sense, the rules are the game.

But if I asked you what poker really is, the answer is, of course: the game you play by those rules. The rules aren't truly the game. They are the means by which you conduct the game, the method by which you describe it and teach it.

But the game itself, the thing that is played in the act of playing — this is not the same as the rules.

For the most part, if you're anything like me, you spend most days acting as though your experiences are the game. What you're doing here is... well, it's what you're doing

here. If you call this all a game, then your experience has to be that game, right?

And so you think about the way you play your game, you try to learn the rules or write your own. You want to get good at the game, hone your skills until you master it. You try to hack it in a hundred different ways. You try to cheat it. You try to win it. You worry you're losing it.

If I asked you how you live your life, you'd tell me of your experiences. But like poker, they themselves are not the game. Yes, your experiences distinguish the game you're playing from the game anyone else is playing, but still they aren't the game. What you see, what you hear, what you smell and taste and touch, what you remember, what you know, what you fear, what you want — these are not the game.

Your experiences are the rules of the game. The game is simply the act of experiencing.

Your experiences are the rules that determine how you play. They determine the action of the game, how it moves and flows, when it starts and ends, but your experiences are just the rules. They are the only rules, and the game is the act of experiencing.

You cannot win or lose the game in any experience; every experience you have just adds another rule to play by, another condition to the way you choose your moves. There is no experience that means you've won, and none

that means you've lost. You are the only player in this game, and so you cannot win without losing.

You are the experiencer, the player.

These experiences you have, these are simply how you play.

But the game is the act of experiencing.

How to Be Happy

I'm sorry to tell you, I've become one of those loathsome people who can't shut up about how I think that everyone is acting against their own happiness. Well — that's not fully accurate. I think people take actions that inhibit their happiness, over and over and over again, without ever realizing that they have any other option.

I think this because it's true.

The fact that it's true doesn't mean you'll believe me. In fact, if you have any sense about you, you'll probably want to punch me in the face right about now. Why? Because your life is hard. You're not unhappy because you're choosing to be. You're unhappy because your life is full of deranged bullshit like health insurance companies and the Republican Party. Because the rent is due, the paycheck is never enough, the kids are screaming, the climate is collapsing, and don't even get me started on men.

Now, just because I know that you're acting against your own happiness does not mean that I think that it's your fault if you're unhappy. I don't. Fault is a useless way of understanding anything like this, and even if it were useful, your unhappiness would still not be your fault. You're not a bad person making a conscious choice to do bad things to yourself. You're doing self-destructive things without feeling like you have any choice whatsoever. To paraphrase Eckhart Tolle, making a willful choice requires

consciousness. If you're unwittingly engaging in self-destructive behavior, your choices aren't fully conscious yet. In a way, it's not really *you* doing the choosing.

You would never choose to make yourself miserable. You would never seek out your own destruction. But your unconscious mind would, that little bastard, and it will keep causing you to suffer until you learn to do away with its patterns, its beliefs and its priorities.

Several years ago, I read [a fascinating article](#) that argued that our lives are defined by the pain we accept. Ask anyone what they want and you'll get practically the same answer — they want to be a polyglot guitar hero with a perfectly-toned body and a Norman Rockwell family. The answers to a question like, "What do you want?" are so ubiquitous that they're virtually meaningless.

But what we actually have in life is not defined by what we want, but by what we're willing to endure to get it. Learning to speak French or play the guitar takes long hours and hard work, and if you're not willing to do that work, it doesn't matter what you "want." What you get is what you're willing to suffer for.

I think that article makes an important point, but not a completely accurate one. Pain isn't the right gauge, because for some people, learning certain skills comes more easily or the act of practice is more enjoyable. What is important about it, though, is the sober recognition that attention, focus, time and effort are finite. We must be

selective with them. What we select to spend them on is what defines our lives, not what we want.

Our lives are defined by what we prioritize. If you prioritize something, that means you've decided that it's more important than other things. If you prioritize something, you spend more energy working towards it than you do working towards something else.

My question is this: Is being happy your top priority?

Right now, you probably think that happiness is something you prioritize, and I believe you — but I don't trust your unconscious mind. I believe that you want happiness, but not that you're willing to sacrifice the siren call of your unconscious drives to find it.

Look at your choices throughout the day and answer honestly. Was being happy your top priority in the choices you made this morning? Was it your top priority the last time you made a major life decision? Had all thought of purpose and priority left the building and given way to automatic reactivity? Or were there simply other priorities that came first, like success, a sense of duty or obligation, minimizing risk, defending your reputation or being "a good person"?

My next question is: Are these your values and priorities, or did your priorities come from your unconscious mind? It's easy to tell the answer. If they're your values in the driver's seat, you'll be happy right now. If your actions are driven by your unconscious mind, you won't be.

The thing is, the unconscious mind is not you. You do not have to do what it says. You do not have to give it what it wants. It doesn't know shit. Right now, it might seem like you have no control over it, and you don't — but you can develop that control by being more attentive to your own decision-making process.

You always have the ability to make a selection, but you aren't going to see that if you aren't paying attention to the process. It's normal not to; we're so primed to be blind to our own consciousness. But the fact remains that if you're generally unhappy, then happiness is not your top priority and you've let in priorities from other places that don't really serve you. You might have very good reasons for giving into other priorities, but if your goal is to be happy, then you need to prioritize happiness.

Take it from me — I had every reason to be happy for my entire life, and I was chronically unhappy. In hard times, I blamed my circumstances. In good times, I blamed my mental health. No matter what was happening, I could scrape misery out of it. I was angry, sad and disempowered, again and again and again, until I finally sat down and started prioritizing my happiness. Nothing else worked. Not love or medication, success or accomplishment. Not getting what I thought I wanted or losing it.

I became happy when I prioritized being happy. That's what it took, and that's all it took. I have all the same past traumas now as I did when I was unhappy. I had all the same privileges then as I do now. All that changed was that

I started practicing what it meant to prioritize happiness, and I stopped indulging the fearful voice that told me to do otherwise.

What it meant to really prioritize happiness wasn't an easy ride, and the changes weren't often what you might expect. It meant letting my residual trauma heal and dissolve. It meant practicing gratitude like an instrument, changing my beliefs about myself and the world, and deciding resolutely to stop going to war with myself, my body or my surroundings. It meant paying attention to what actually made me happy and dropping the things I thought I liked but didn't. It meant spending time each day on the things that make me happy, and not spending time feeling upset when I have to do the things that don't.

It meant drinking more water. It meant stretching and dancing. It meant relinquishing ambition in favor of contentment, shrugging off righteousness in favor of peace, and being conscious about where I put my attention each day. It meant focusing my attention on the parts of life that made me feel joy, and giving less thought to the rest.

Above all, it meant choosing to do these things over other things. It meant deciding that being happy was more important than getting that thing I wanted, than indulging in that habit, than being good, successful, accomplished, liked, or right.

See, prioritizing happiness requires de-prioritizing the other things. If you want to be happy, you have to choose happiness over the things you want that stand in the way of you finding it. Our lives are not defined by what we want. Our lives are defined what we prioritize.

There are all kinds of good priorities to have in this world, and you're not doing anything wrong if being happy isn't your top priority. There are all kinds of external factors that impact our priorities and our ability to set them consciously, life circumstances like poverty, family obligations or health constraints that make it harder to shift things around. Still, you do not have to set happiness as your top priority in every choice you make every day of your life in order to be happier than you are now. You simply have to prioritize it more.

If you want to be happy, look at the choices you're making that prioritize anything other than your happiness, and choose otherwise. What would you do with this day if being happy was your top priority? What job or career would you have? How would you engage with your family or friends? What relationship would you have with your body? What would you read, watch or eat? What beliefs would you believe in? What thoughts would you think?

What I've found, the more I begin to prioritize happiness, is that so many of the reasons why I didn't before were a lot more sinister than I wanted to believe. Many of the priorities I called obligations were obligations only within the confines of a particular set of actions, none of which I

actually needed to take. Most of my desire to achieve or accomplish anything was motivated by a sense of being ill at ease with myself, of having something to prove. My desire to be good and righteous was a defense against pervasive guilt. There was so much fear, of myself, of the world — but now, I have so little to prove. I'm happy, so I like myself. I like myself, so I see no reason to prioritize anything but happiness. I want to do the actions that arise from that state of being, whatever they may be.

To live for anything but living well — that just seems silly now.

And why shouldn't it? Why shouldn't we prioritize our happiness? Whose game are we trying to play? What arbitrary judgment of our lives do we hold in such high esteem that we believe our joy should be sacrificed to it? Why do we keep living as supporting actors in some alien story that doesn't care if we like it or not?

I don't owe a thing to the writers of those stories — to those systems, beliefs and social expectations that don't care about my happiness. Neither do you. Those values are not ours — they are the insane values of an unconscious mind perpetuating fear by believing in nonsense. No one owes the cost of their own happiness. The games we play have no right to our lives. The structures we live within have no right to our obedience. This world has no right to our suffering.

You don't have to prioritize your happiness, but in case no one's told you, you're allowed to. You're allowed to prioritize being happy and nothing else. Priorities, like attention, are selective and finite. You can't prioritize everything. We all choose what matters to us most, and we sacrifice whatever doesn't. We might as well make that choice consciously.

If you want to be happy, here's a last piece of advice: stressing out about trying to prioritize happiness in every facet of your life today will obviously not contribute to your happiness. What will contribute to your happiness is taking a deep breath, right now, and choosing one aspect of your life where you can change your priority to happiness. But pick one. Once that change is fully integrated, then you can pick more, and start a virtuous cycle of increasing happiness and consciousness.

Though it might not be obvious yet, happiness and consciousness are one and the same. Bit by bit, we turn over the stones of our lives so they face the light of our clear-headed choices. As we do so, it becomes easier to like ourselves and like our lives. As we like ourselves more, we're kinder and more compassionate, and we realize: there's no point in trying to be anything but happy.

The happier we let ourselves become, the easier we make it for others to do the same.