

7 Habits of 7 Calm & Happy People



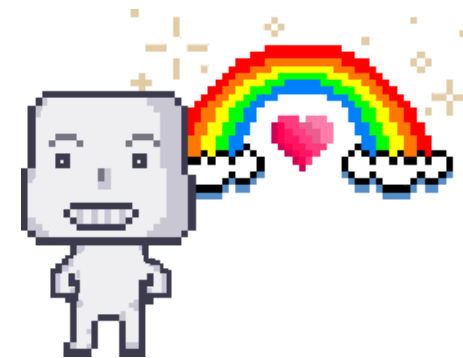
This little book is about living a calmer, better life. The fact that you're here tells me you're on a good way.

It started as a collection of ideas and habits that I made for myself – because I've always struggled with being calm and "stoic". I've probably read hundreds of books and articles on these topics. Most of it wasn't that useful, unfortunately. But some things that I've learnt and implemented were really life-changing, and this is what I want to share with you.

It sucks that we don't get much education on how to live a more healthy, peaceful lifestyle. This knowledge would especially be invaluable in these trying times, where the world is in turmoil with a scary virus that is killing our most vulnerable and might change the way we live forever.

We need better tools and habits, we need to rethink the way we live and work and love – because how we live now makes many, many people miserable.

By the way: I've started drawing pixel art a little bit, so I wanted to include it here (I know it's not that good, yet:)



Why are you writing this?

I'm not a therapist or a motivational trainer. I don't sell seminars or books.

Learning about peace of mind wasn't something that I chose out of pure curiosity. I felt I **had** to learn about this so I wouldn't go crazy.

For me, being calm never came easy to me. It's not my natural state. My first childhood memories are me lying awake in bed, scared and ruminating, not being able to fall asleep for hours.

I had good grades at school and played instruments to please my parents, not because I really enjoyed those things. But I never really learned to listen to myself and ask: "What do I really want?" After a seemingly prestigious "corporate career" of about 5 years, I gave it all up.

"Something's wrong with me," I've always felt, because it seemed that I see and experience the world differently than others. It made me eager to understand myself and the world better. With time, I started to ask the right questions: Why am I so **sensitive to loud noises**? Why do I care what others think of me? Why am I so distant to my friends and my own family? Why am I so pessimistic?

I wanted to understand myself and the world, at least a little bit. And build habits to be happier. So I started writing down what I learned, which turned into this book.



Here's why this book is different

I'll have to admit that, while consuming more and more information about self improvement, I've become somewhat allergic to "self-help content". There's just too much fluff (no, I don't want to hear the life story of Jack Welsh or Churchill again, please!) and about one paragraph of useful information per 100 book pages.

I wanted this little book to be different: short and useful.

There's nothing more useless than those lists with "[100 things you can \(theoretically\) do when you're stressed](#)", so I forced myself to reduce the content of this book to the stuff that (I believe) has the **highest chance of changing your life for the better**, the best tools and ideas I've found after years of reading, testing and iterating. This means I won't always be able to go into much detail, but I will provide plenty of **resources for further reading** within the text and at the end of each chapter.

Moreover, each chapter has an **Implementation** part: I will ask you to make an honest self-assessment and then decide on how you will implement this you're your life (by forming habits that suit your lifestyle and goals). You shouldn't skip this part if you want to see lasting, positive change from this book.



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If you're super impatient, you can jump to the chapters/habits right away, but I'd advise you read the few pages of introduction – they're important.

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We'll go from the basics in habit 1 and 2 on to how to tweak your own "hardware" (habit 3) and "software" (habit 4) for a calm life. Finally, we'll talk more about the external world in habits 5, 6 and 7: how can you build an amazing, meaningful life with fulfilling work and loving relationships?

Before we start with the habits, I want to address two crucial points:

1) Why we should strive to live a calm life, and 2) what we need to get there.



Why would I need a book on being more calm?

That's not a difficult case to make: We're in the midst of a [mental health crisis](#). I could fill pages on the record numbers of depressions, anxiety disorders and suicides, but you probably know all that already. Ongoing stress and mental health issues cause more devastation than wars and diseases. It doesn't help that we don't have a clue on how to treat mental health well, so we cope with drugs, games, sugar and other distractions.

Now we can start analyzing why we're so anxious and unhappy. How our humans brains are evolutionarily wired to prioritize danger. Or how radically our daily lives have changed, how we're faced with countless new stressors that overwhelm us. But this book is about **solutions** first and foremost.

So let's be selfish for once, here: You need this book if you want to be happy.

I believe if we knew more about what actually makes us healthy and happy, we wouldn't be in this mess. Why are we so ignorant? Maybe because **nobody taught us**, and because our parents, Hollywood or Marketers fed us incorrect stories

Unfortunately, our **intuition** about what will make us happy is quite terrible, too. My brain still regularly tries to convince me that eating a tub of ice cream, browsing Social Media and binging Netflix all day will help me be happy and have peace of mind.

But this doesn't work, at all.



What does calmness have to do with happiness?

Let me get to the point here: That missing ingredient to a happy life is a **calm mind**. Maybe it isn't always a sufficient condition, unless you like living like a monk. But it's a necessary condition.

Put another way: **When you're in a stressed, restless, "uncalm" state, you can't truly be happy**. This becomes obvious when I look back on times when I was really anxious and stressed out. It's a terrible feeling. It felt like every spark of hope and joy gets swallowed by a black hole in my chest.

I felt weak, dumb and sick.

In fact, I learned something quite mind-boggling not too long ago: When I'm in a calm, relaxed state, I can **easily transform this state into happiness and joy** if I choose to.

When I'm calm and relaxed, a little stroll in the sun or dancing to a song makes me happy, and quite reliably so. On the other hand, you can have millions in your bank account, go to the best parties and travel through the world - if your thoughts torture you, all of this is worth nothing. There are enough examples of celebrities who committed suicide, even though they seemingly had it all.



By the way: Calmness has nothing to do with "sitting at home and meditating all day". You can have the most exciting life - but only through inner peace and contentment does it become truly enjoyable.

Ok, here's the take-away: *If you want to be happy, you need to be cultivate a calm mind.*

In fact, aiming for a life we're you're at peace (most of the time) is a **better strategy** than **making happiness your goal**. Happiness is elusive and vague anyway. Many smart people are convinced that [we shouldn't fixate on it](#), because it "inevitably amounts to a never-ending pursuit of 'something else' - a new house, a new relationship, another child, another pay raise. And despite all of our sweat and strain, we end up feeling eerily similar to how we started: inadequate. Psychologists sometimes refer to this concept as the 'hedonic treadmill': the idea that we're always working hard to change our life situation, but we actually never feel very different."²³

On the other hand, your health and pretty much everything positive and joyful in life depend on your mind being at peace.

This is why we need to find out how to get there. Because our minds aren't calm by default (at least mine isn't).



What we need to get there

1. Believe that you can change

I know this sounds like a cheesy Hollywood movie line. But if you're convinced that your anxious self is set in stone because of your genes and your past, neither techniques nor drugs will really have an effect. If you continue to hold on to your preconception that a life must be full of suffering, heartache and restlessness, then you won't find peace (look up [nocebo](#) – our minds are *very* powerful).

You need to “buy in” that you can change. I'm cynical myself; It's harder for people like us. But seeing positive results convinced me to continue on my path.

2. Make calmness a *priority* by building habits around it!

Pretty obvious, again, but important: You'll have to make calmness a priority in your life! (It'll be easier once you “buy in” that it's worth it).

A quiet life is a conscious decision, and you've got to live it daily by forming and sticking to healthy habits around it! Don't worry; This won't mean half of your day will be spent meditating and journaling. In fact, almost all of the habits and tools I recommend hereafter make you a better, more productive, well-rounded and healthier person overall. So this book is for everyone who's serious about self improvement, not only for depressed or overly anxious people.



Why habits?

We can't rely on willpower or setting vague goals get where we want to get. Instead, we need to build reliable, effective **systems** to get there.

Adopting good habits seem to be the only way that we humans can really be productive and change our daily behavior (a habit is a behavior that has been repeated enough times to become automatic).

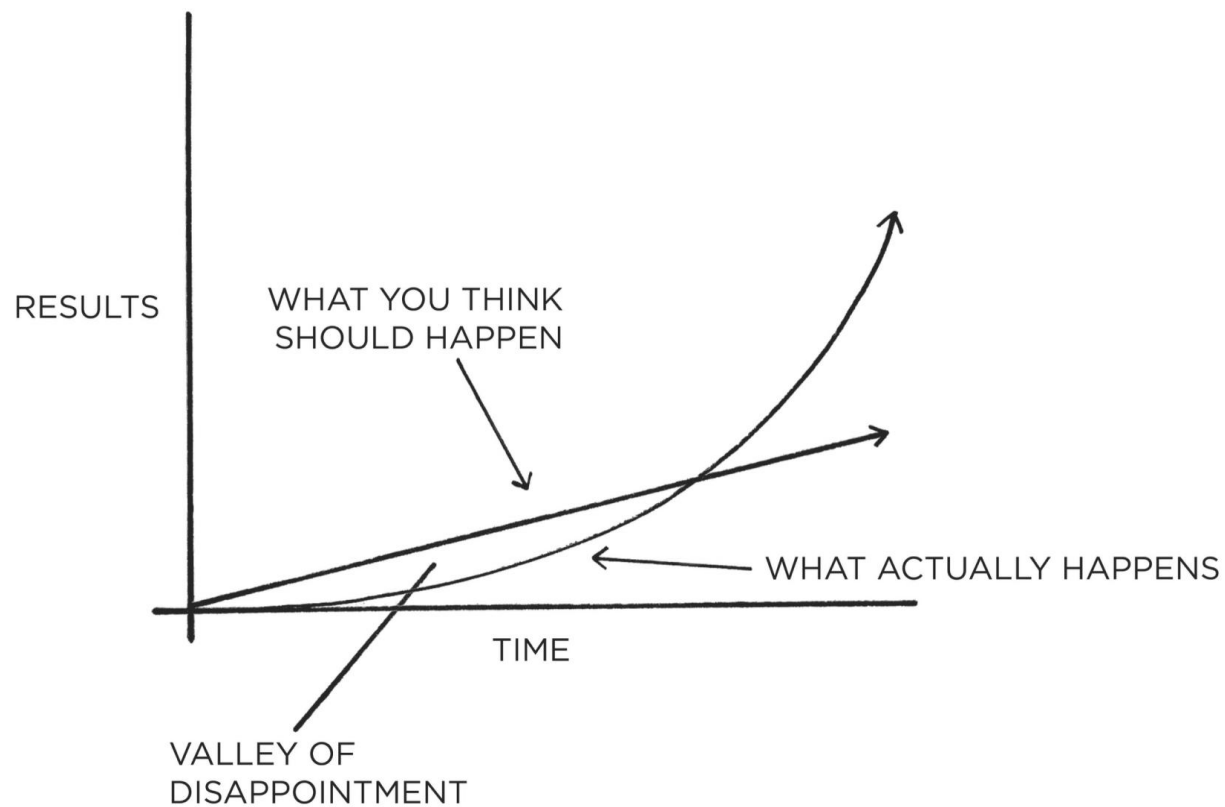
Getting one percent better every day makes a huge difference in the long run. Your habits can **compound for** you or **against you** (if you're alcoholic, things will likely get worse every day).

Here's some advice to make your new habits stick:

1. Choose healthy habits, those with "compounding interest" (you'll learn more in this book on which ones to choose). You can only do so much every day. Don't overshoot it and try to take on more than two new habits at a time
2. Start easy and often (e.g. meditate for 5 minutes only, but every day)
3. For habits to work, make them (more) obvious, attractive, easy and satisfying (read [Atomic Habits](#) for more details)



4. You need evidence of your progress: Use a calendar or habit tracker. Try to keep your habit streak alive. Never miss a habit two times in a row
5. Celebrate sticking to habits. Take pride in progress, not results
6. Beware of the “valley of disappointment” (Seth Godin calls it “[the dip](#)”) when forming new habits (this basically applies to any important endeavor in life!)



Ok. Let's start with the 7 habits, shall we?



Habit 1: Listen and Learn

Why is this so hard for me?

Ok. You're anxious and stressed. Me too. What now?

First off, we're not going to try to "get rid" of those emotions. That usually doesn't work well in any case. Instead, we're going to start by trying to **understand** these emotions better. What causes us stress and anxiety every day?

First, there are certain problems that pop up which stress us out, like a strict deadline at work. And second, there's a general hum of anxiety about life (at least I have it. Sometimes I forget it's there, but it's there).

Not everyone gets stressed out to the same extent. That's important. It depends on "nature and nurture": Either your parents screwed you up by how they raised you, or just by the genes they passed on to you. Or both. (Jackpot!) You didn't choose your parents and your genes, so here's what I want you to understand first: **it's not your fault!**¹ You're not weak, lazy or broken if you're more stressed and anxious than others! You and I were dealt more difficult cards. And some unique gifts, too.

We are not our genes. Our traumas don't define us.² We don't have to be like our parents. **We can change!**



Is fear the enemy?

Fear is at the root of stress and anxiety. You can trace almost every anxious thought back to the fear of death.

Fear is an old-brain system (our reptilian “survival brain”) giving us our deeply ingrained “fight or flight” responses. On top of this old brain, we evolved by developing the neo-cortex, which is involved in planning and thinking strategically. It is incredibly potent and the reason we humans are so successful – but it can also make us miserable.

What’s for sure is that a life consumed by fear is a shitty life. That’s the bottom line of some good books by Osho and other authors.³

But here is where I disagree with this premise: Fear and anxiety are actually our allies, in many ways. Without the *fight or flight* response, our ancestors would have been eaten pretty quickly. It just sucks that I get that same response when I have to hold a short presentation (no brain, my boss won’t eat me if I screw up!)

Fear responses are **normal and healthy**, they help us adapt. If you walk down the street and almost get hit by a car, our fear response is “hey, don’t do that again”, and learn to look left and right!



Here are more reasons why my fear and anxiety are beneficial:

- They are a call-to-action, a sign to “get off my ass and do something”
- They guide me to long-term, sustainable thinking and planning instead of giving in to destructive impulses
- They prevent me from taking crazy risks like gambling all my savings away
- They tell me if I’m ignoring my body and its signals (how about you move instead of sitting all day?)
- They signal to me if I suppress my emotions and don’t live in authenticity
- They allow me to learn about myself and this world

Bottom line: Fear is my friend.

You should make it your friend, too. It’ll become less scary.

But it’s a weird friend, I’ve got to admit that.



What's weird about fear

Let's be real, here: Fear is normal and healthy, but it can definitely suck, it can paralyze us and make our life miserable. That's out of the question.

Fear is strange: the more you try to push it away, the harder it hits you.

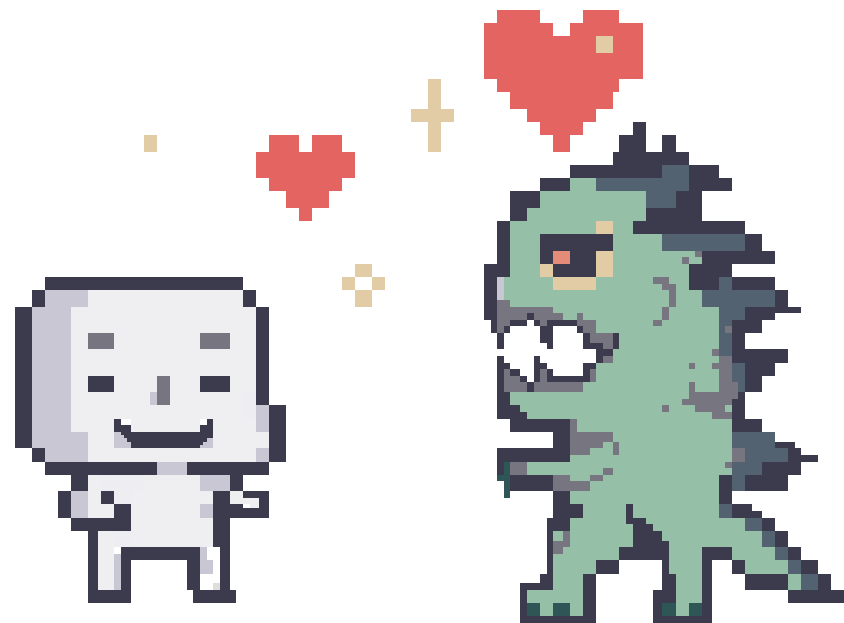
When it comes to fear, **the only way out is through.**

As cliché as that sounds: you gotta feel your feelings!

People who cope best with fear are not the ones who say "I'm not afraid".

Those that cope best with fear are those who stay with the emotion.

They **listen and learn.**



What should I do exactly once anxiety arises?

Looking inwards into our bodies is usually not our intuitive response when we're stressed and anxious. We tend to look outwards for reasons (e.g. my boss is annoying). Instead of searching for a "culprit", I learned to turn towards the **sensations in my body**. I don't try to interpret and understand why. I just observe: Where in my body does it feel hard and cramped, for instance? It helps to think of sensations as colors. Where it feels hard, where it is out of balance, where it does not flow: that is where I stay with my attention and observe.

I like the "**RAIN method**"⁴ and adopted it as my "**rescue plan**" for when I get overwhelmed. Once I notice anxiety rising up in myself, I do the following:

- **Recognize/Relax** into what is arising
- **Accept/Allow** it to be there
- Investigate bodily sensations, emotions, and thoughts (I ask "What is happening in my body or mind right now?" as described above)
- **Note** what is happening from moment to moment (often, the tension dissolves)

What's key here is that we move from self-judgment and non-acceptance to **kindness** and **curiosity** when dealing with stress and anxiety. That's why I would add an "L" to RAIN: **Learn!** Listen to your body & mind, let them be your teachers.



The puzzle of You: Stay curious and learn!

What does curiosity have to do with all of this?

Well, it's much more constructive and peaceful to remain curious when things get tough. It's a **powerful reframe** from "why is this happening, I want this anxiety to go away!" to "Interesting, let's explore what my brain came up with this time."

In general, we all should aim at understanding ourselves better. How we tick, what irritates us, what gives us joy, which character traits are atypical. It's actually not that obvious. In many cases, it's easier to understand others than ourselves, because it's hard to take a "bird's eye view" on ourselves. You might have heard the Lao Tzu quote: *He who knows others is wise. He who knows himself is enlightened.*

I believe we should all make it a mission to learn more about ourselves within our lifetime, without it becoming self-obsession. Here are some tools and resources that can help as a starting point:

- Learn about [cognitive biases](#) and assess which ones you're guilty of ⁵
- Learn about your brain and its reward systems (e.g. dopamine) ⁶
- Take personality tests like [Big 5 / MBTI](#) (even though they're not perfect)
- Learn about your *work type* (see [ch. 5](#)) and *relationship type* (see [ch. 6](#))

Learning about how you're "different" is the first step to accept yourself! (see [ch. 4](#))



Implementation: Now it's Your Turn!

Habit to adopt: Make it your default behavior to go into your body and stay with the sensations whenever negative emotions arise. You can practice this daily by doing a “body scan”, even if you don't feel out of the ordinary. Or just wait for anxiety to arise and use this as a cue to do the body scan.

Also, it is advisable to have a “rescue plan” to follow once anxiety pops up (you can use RAIN and adapt it)

Exercise: Start a Journal or document on your computer, you can name it “What I've learned & how I want to live” (this is how this little book started by the way):

- How anxious and easily stressed would you rate yourself? What in particular stresses you out? How do you currently cope with anxiety (unhealthy ways?)
- Write down what (surprising) lessons you learnt about yourself from life experiences or personality tests
- What new habits do you want to adopt to become a better version of yourself?
- Also write down your “rescue plan” in this document. Define what you're going to do once anxiety pops up. You can adopt the “RAIN” process and expand on it with further body and mind techniques that we're going to learn later



Resources (if you want to learn more)

¹ [Blueprint: How DNA makes us who we are](#): an interesting (quite scientific) analysis of just how much DNA affects who we are (we underestimate it: All our traits, our school performance and much more are largely hereditary)

² [The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma](#) by *Bessel van der Kolk*: It's a great book about trauma. Even if you think you have none

³ [Fear: Understanding and Accepting the Insecurities of Life](#) by the eccentric guru *Osho*. There's a similar book on [Courage](#). It's therapeutic to read to this when you're an overly anxious and risk-averse person

⁴ [The Craving Mind](#) by *Judson Brewer*: describes how we get hooked to different bad habits such as food, drugs, information. Helped me a lot to understand my brain

⁵ [Thinking Fast and Slow](#) by *Daniel Kahnemann*: A must-read on behavioral economics and cognitive biases by THE expert in this field. It's a big book and somewhat tedious at times, though

⁶ [The Molecule of More](#) by *Daniel Lieberman*: great resource to understand my brain better (it focuses on Dopamine)



Habit 2: Get the Basics Right

Let me make it very brief: the basics are sleep, food and exercise. I summarize them as a habit because they should be pretty self-evident. That doesn't mean they're super easy to implement well, else everyone would be much healthier.

If you think "I already know all that and I'm already perfectly rested, fit and well-fed" (which I doubt), you're welcome to jump ahead to [habit 3](#).

You may ask: What does this stuff have to do with peace of mind? Well, a lot, it turns out. Without taking care of the basics, you won't have a fighting chance to overcome anxiety and depression. They're your first line of defense, so to say. In fact, these basics are more beneficial for your health and happiness than any pill you could take, and more effective than all tools and techniques for finding calm.

And no, you and I are no exception. Sure, when I was younger, I could do alright after little sleep or eating junk food. But as I get older and more sensitive to my body, the more I notice that even that one croissant in the morning can make me tired, unproductive and irritable for the rest of the day.

You don't have to be perfect, no. But you need to at least a) have a basic understanding of what good nutrition, sleep and exercise look like (most people don't have that) and b) have daily habits to ensure you don't screw up all the time



Become a Master Sleeper

Two-thirds of adults throughout all developed nations fail to obtain the recommended eight hours of sleep.⁷ I doubt you're surprised by this fact, but you may be surprised by the consequences:

You live longer. It enhances your memory and makes you more creative. It makes you look more attractive. It keeps you slim and lowers food cravings. It protects you from cancer and dementia. It wards off colds and the flu. It lowers your risk of heart attacks and stroke, not to mention diabetes. You'll even feel happier, less depressed and less anxious.⁸



Some measures for better sleep

- How much sleep do I need? This varies from person to person (and tends to decrease with age), but: 8h as a rule of thumb. Too little is bad, but too much sleep isn't good either. To test if you sleep enough, ask yourself in the morning if you could fall back asleep right away. If the answer is "yes," you are likely not getting sufficient sleep quantity and quality
- Let's start with one of the most important tips for better sleep: **Wake up** at the **same time** every day. If you've got that down, try to go to sleep at the same time
- "**Sleeping hygiene**": Darken your room (pitch dark, if possible, otherwise use a sleep mask), good mattress, comfortable bedding & pillows. Old housewife tips like a warm bath or lavender also help
- "**Powernaps**" can be effective, especially if you don't get enough sleep at night. However, they should not be taken too late in the day and should be under 30 minutes long
- **Caffeine** is a stimulant: Reduce it, especially in the afternoon and evening. Switch to Decaf if you love the taste. Nicotine is also a stimulant - I hope you don't smoke
- The **blue light** from PCs or mobile phones keeps you awake: Use Night Mode (or special glasses), and, if possible, remove electronic devices from the bedroom completely
- **Sleeping pills** should not become a habit, but may be ok in exceptional cases when important appointments are scheduled for the next day. More **natural remedies** are preferable: CBD or melatonin
- There might be underlying **health conditions**, e.g. apnea. Go see a doctor or a sleep centre
- **Advanced tools for sleeping**: Cool-Pad, Joov Red-Light, a headband for sleeping, weighted blankets
- Severe insomnia is usually associated with general anxiety and stress problems



Eat real food!

I hope I don't have to explain to you that regularly eating garbage not only makes you fat, but is associated with just about every disease. Try getting into a calm state of mind after overeating at Pizza Hut or when hung over (it's very hard). The direct connection between gut health and our brain is being revealed more and more.

Why is it even so hard to eat healthy? First, it's obvious that heavily processed junk food and sugary sodas are readily available wherever you go. Often these are in fact our only (affordable) food choices, carefully crafted by billion dollar companies to make us addicted. Second, and this is almost sadder: We're grossly uneducated about what good food is. We're lucky if our parents were good role models, because most schools didn't teach us shit. We actually got fed misinformation about food for a long time (e.g. fats like eggs are unhealthy, milk is great for the bones hence eat chocolate). The "food pyramid" printed on our Kellogg's cereal with wheat as the basis for a good diet needs to be turned around, in fact, for it to be healthy.

The jungle of diets is confusing, and even experts disagree. My recommendation: Don't try to be perfect, it's okay to "splurge" on special occasions. The important thing for you is to get educated on nutrition, eliminate "Frankenfoods" and replace them with real food. Here are some pointers:⁹



What the hell is real food?

- Eliminate **obvious garbage** as much as possible: Everything that is heavily processed with a long ingredient list. Cookies, sweets, everything with lots of sugar, which is like crack to our brains. Avoid soda (also the "diet" variants with tons of artificial sweeteners), fruit juices, energy drinks
- Reduce **wheat products**¹⁰ (pasta, bread) and everything with corn syrup. They're not healthy
- Don't overdo it with **fruits** such as grapes, bananas, apples (they're too sugary)
- Reduce **dairy** products; try unsweetened almond milk, for instance, instead
- Less **alcohol**: A glass of red wine can be ok, but anything above that is damaging
- **Listen to your body**: check which foods make you bloated and exhausted. There's a lot of undiagnosed gluten or lactose intolerance. If you can, get tested for **food intolerances**

- Eat more **vegetables** like broccoli, kale or spinach. Aim for filling half your plate with veggies
- **High-fat foods** like avocado and eggs are healthy (high cholesterol people need to be careful, though)
- **Oils** are good for omega-3 fats (native olive, fish, flaxseed or walnuts oil are better than grain oils)
- You probably don't get enough **protein**: Get it through meat, fish, eggs, soy or supplement
- Opt for **locally grown** and **organic** if you can afford it
- Don't follow every new **diet trend** (while there seems to be some benefit to Keto and Paleo¹¹).
- By the way: **Learn to cook** (at least the basics). Try new recipes, add spices, improvise
- **Fasting** isn't only for weight loss, but also for longevity and mental clarity. I do "Intermittent Fasting" (8h feeding window, I skip breakfast). And I do a longer fasts (2-3 days) once a month.¹²
- **Supplements**: You don't really need them with a good diet, but most of us are deficient in vitamin D3 (especially in colder climates). Fish Oil/Omega 3 and a multivitamin (especially if you're travelling) are advisable. Drinking some protein + creatine shakes is a good idea, even if you don't do bodybuilding. Supplement iron and vitamin B12 if you're vegetarian



Move Your Body

Our entire physiology is designed for and will reward us if we move!

The effects of sport on our well-being and mental clarity are amazing, and keep surprising me. When my head is about to burst, sport is the best medicine (it can just be 20 push-ups that I do when I feel unfocused). Here are a few tips:

- Sitting all day is not good! Get up and move every hour. Try a standing desk
- Do something **intense**, too: weight lifting or high intensity training (this also applies for women: don't only do cardio)
- Master the "**basic**" **exercises** and improve them: squats, deadlift, bench press, pull-ups, dips. Have a good coach or mentor explain the correct form to you
- Make yourself a simple **fitness plan**. Here's what I do: move a little every day (something that raises my pulse like jogging, yoga). And I make myself **really sweat 3 times a week** (weight lifting or kickboxing)
- It helps to make it **measurable** (e.g. track your weights) to see your progress
- You don't *need* weights and gyms: With **Body-Weight-Exercises** you will get a great workout, even when travelling.¹³
- Find **what works for you**: Maybe you need a group sport, maybe you prefer your home gym, maybe you need music to get going¹⁴



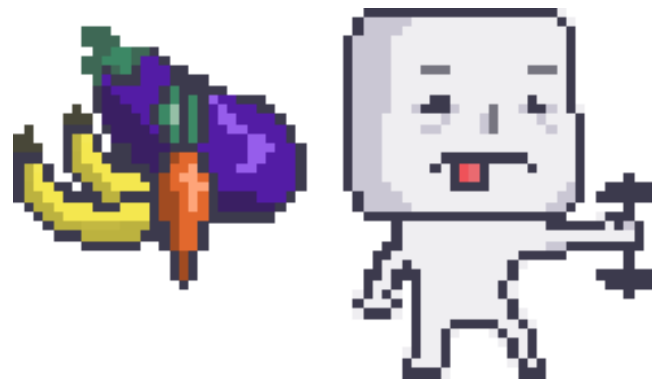
Implementation: Now it's Your Turn!

Ok, now it's up to you. How good would you rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 10, regarding your sleep, nutrition and fitness?

Where you're *below 8/10*: what steps can you take to improve?

Aim for forming **habits** right away and setting reminders in your planner, e.g.:

- Set an alarm not only for waking up, but also for going to sleep. Track your sleep with an app
- Learn more about good nutrition, and try a month of only self-cooked, healthy recipes!
- Sign up for a gym or weekly sports class, and track attendance



Resources (if you want to learn more)

⁷ [Why We Sleep](#) by *Matthew Walker*: A great explanation of why we sleep, dream and more (believe me, it's interesting) by the director of Berkeley's Sleep and Neuroimaging Lab

⁸ [The Sleep Solution](#) by *Chris Winter*: another good, very practical book on sleep

⁹ [What the Heck Should I eat?](#) By *Mark Hyman*. He goes through all food categories and says whether they're healthy or not. Very useful and science-based

¹⁰ [Grain Brain](#) by *David Perlmutter* and *Kristin Loberg*: A neurologist explains how carbs are harming your brain (and why high fat diets are better)

¹¹ The [New Primal Blueprint](#) by *Mark Sisson*: Great book (updated) on nutrition, which managed to popularize the Paleo diet to the mainstream

¹² [The Complete Guide to Fasting](#) by *Jason Fung, Jimmy Moore*: Everything you need to know about intermittent fasting, readers are raving about it

¹³ [You Are Your Own Gym](#) by *Mark Lauren* and *Joshua Clark*: The cover is pretty terrible, but it's a very good guide on bodyweight exercises

¹⁴ [The Joy of Movement](#) by *Kelly McGonigal*: Inspiring, but not very practical

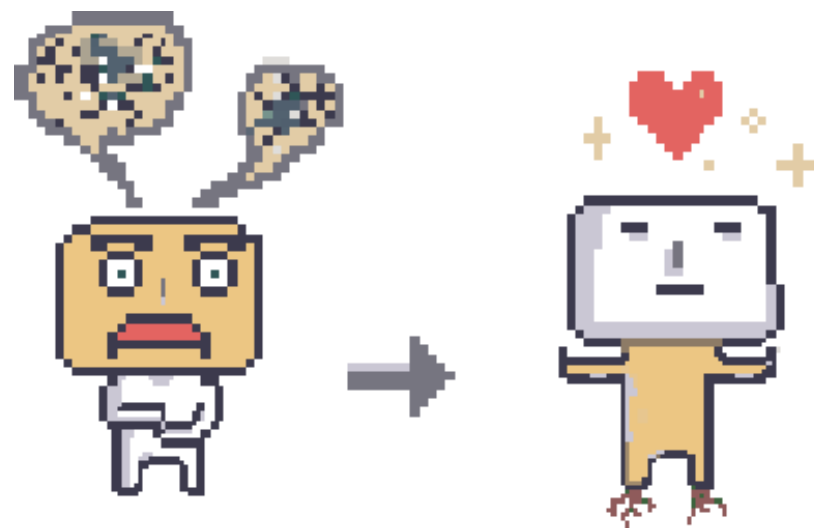


Habit 3: Calm Body

Once the aforementioned “basics” are more or less taken care of, there will still be times where we feel stressed and restless, that’s for sure (it’s going to be less, though).

Here’s where I would start with my **body** as a gateway to be calmer! In fact I prefer body tools to mind tools, as the former seem to be more effective and reliable. Our mind creates most of these “problems”, after all, so why would we entrust it with solving them?

Also, given our modern sedentary lifestyles where we sit for most of the time in front of screens, moving our bodies more is always a good idea.



Grounding Yourself

Here's what all the body exercises in this chapter will revolve around: Moving your focus from your head (which produces all our anxious thoughts) to your body.

This can be called *grounding*. Here's how you can do it at any time and place:

- It could be just **observing** your body like we learnt in [habit 1](#)
- **Focusing** on a specific **body part**, like:
 - Your **hands** (e.g. put your hands your lap and ask yourself: which hand feels warmer?)
 - Your **feet** (we don't hold anxiety there). You can also visualize the grounding by standing or sitting and imagine roots growing from your feet into the ground
- **Breathing**



Breathing is a superpower

I'm serious: Breathing consciously is one of the most effective techniques for quickly changing your state. If you consciously pay attention to your breath, you signal to your body: "Hey, you're not in danger! There's no tiger chasing you, because if it was, you wouldn't be breathing calmly" (ha! checkmate lizard brain)

Breathing is uniquely powerful in that it is something we can control which directly changes your mental and physical state. Yogis and meditation teachers have preached its healing power for centuries.

And the best thing is: You can do it anywhere! Here are a few recommendations:¹⁵

- I pay attention when my breath becomes shallow, which indicates I get stressed
- As a default response, but also habitually throughout the day, I do this: I take **6 calm, deep breaths** (counting 3 on inhalation and 5 on exhalation – this lowers blood pressure).¹⁶
- Breathe into your **belly** (diaphragmatic breathing) and not your chest
- **Advanced breathing techniques** like Kundalini¹⁷ or the Wim Hof Method¹⁸ have grown in popularity (both are similar to hyperventilation with proven health benefits). There are [online tutorials](#) and (free) group classes, if you're interested



Taking walks is my second superpower

No, they're not just for grannies. I go for a walk after lunch every day; It's one of my favorite times of the day. I never miss one, because it has so many benefits!

- It forces me to get out of the house and move my body. Sometimes I listen to podcasts, make a phone call or make some errands. But I make sure to have at least 10 minutes of "distraction-free" walking
- I try to make it a "walking meditation" by breathing calmly, feeling my feet on the ground and [gazing into the distance](#) (all of which reduce stress)
- Vitamin D! I try to spend at least 20 minutes outside and expose my bare skin to the sun. (But if you live in a cold country you should still supplement it)
- Whenever I can, I walk somewhere where it's **quiet** (no cars, few people. Once I worked in a very busy street in Paris, so I went into a small quiet church every day) and where there's **nature**. If you have a forest or park to walk in, go there, it'll be a blessing for your nervous system (Japanese call it "[Forest Bathing](#)")¹⁹
- I usually take the same route so I don't have to think. But it's also a great way to get to know your neighborhood and meet some new people, too!
- To make it even more beneficial, I incorporate some real **physical exercise**: I sprint up a hill as fast as I can or do some planks and push-ups in the park



More ideas for using your body to calm yourself

- **Stretching/Yoga:** Feels good, stimulates blood flow, and it's great for short breaks from desk work. I regularly do the [Sun Salutation](#)!
- **Dancing:** I love getting up during the day and starting to dance to my favorite songs. Don't try to look cool. I also like Aubrey Marcus' practice of [Ecstatic Dancing](#) (he intuitively dances to a playlist which starts calmly and ends with uplifting songs to transform his mood)
- Any kind of exercise is obviously good to ground yourself, but you should already work out regularly after incorporating habit 2, right?
- **Laughing:** Change your state by finding something funny to laugh at
- **Cold/Heat:** This is one of my favorites for an instantaneous "state shift": jump in a cold shower, or even better in a cold plunge after a sauna session. You'll feel reborn. [Tony Robbins](#) does these cold plunges every day, and Wim Hoff popularized cold exposure. Most athletes and fitness experts do this, and we learn more and more about the [various health benefits](#)
- **Massages & Intimacy:** I love giving and getting massages (who doesn't?). It seems we humans love anything with a) touch and b) when someone pays full attention to us. Maybe [Reiki](#) might do it for you. And intimacy too, of course (how about "[Slow Sex](#)" or "[Tantra](#)" to make it less about performance?)



Implementation: Now it's Your Turn!

How can *you* make “getting into your body” a daily habit?

I suggest you incorporate these (at least the first two) into your life:

1. As an **“immediate relief”**: Which techniques can you utilize during the day when you feel stressed? (here's what I do: Stand up from my desk every hour and move/stretch. Gaze outside of the window into the distance every 20 minutes, approximately. Slow breathing and grounding in my feet when I get stressed). You can update your *“Rescue Plan”* from habit 1 accordingly
2. As a **daily habit**: Which habit could you use daily to ground yourself? You should be moving your body every day (working out does count, but adding something, at least on your off days, that is enjoyable like Yoga or Dancing would be great!) If you don't do it already, why not go on a daily lunchtime walk like described above? I think it's one of the best habits
3. You can also think of ways to **regularly give your body more attention and affection**, whatever that may look like for you. Maybe book a massage for next week, look for a Sauna nearby or ask your partner if he or she wants to try tantric breathing together.

Whatever you pick, it's best you schedule it in your calendar so you don't forget!



Resources (if you want to learn more)

¹⁵ [Mastering Breath](#) by *Dan Brule*: A solid guide on breathwork with more in-depth techniques

¹⁶ [Own the day, own your life](#) by *Aubrey Marcus*, founder of Onnit. It's about how to optimize your entire day with healthy habits. He has a [great podcast](#), too

¹⁷ For learning Kundalini (Yoga/Breathing), you can of course buy a [book like this one](#), but I'd start by watching YouTube tutorials [like this](#) or find a (free) class

¹⁸ *Wim Hof* has a good YouTube channel where he explains [his method](#) and [guides you through it](#). You don't need to [buy his book](#), but I think [his classes](#) where you do intense cold exposure and learn techniques could be worth it

¹⁹ [Shinrin-Yoku: The Art and Science of Forest Bathing](#) by *Qing Li*: Maybe you don't need a book to understand that we should be more in nature. It's still a good read



Habit 4: Calm Mind

Let's now move from our "hardware" to our "software": our mind, what we think each day (or "what it thinks in us" might be more accurate).

It has never been easy for me to turn off my head. If it were easy there would be no depressed people and there'd be paradise on earth, I think.

Nevertheless: "turning off your head" or at least switching it down a notch is a muscle that can be trained. You don't want to have your mind run on autopilot all the time, else it'll mostly make you unproductive and unhappy.

Similarly to habit 3, there are two types of tools to help you master your mind:

- a) Immediate techniques (making your thinking more objective and useful), and
- b) Positive habits that are good for your mental health



Let's start with a few important things I learned about my brain

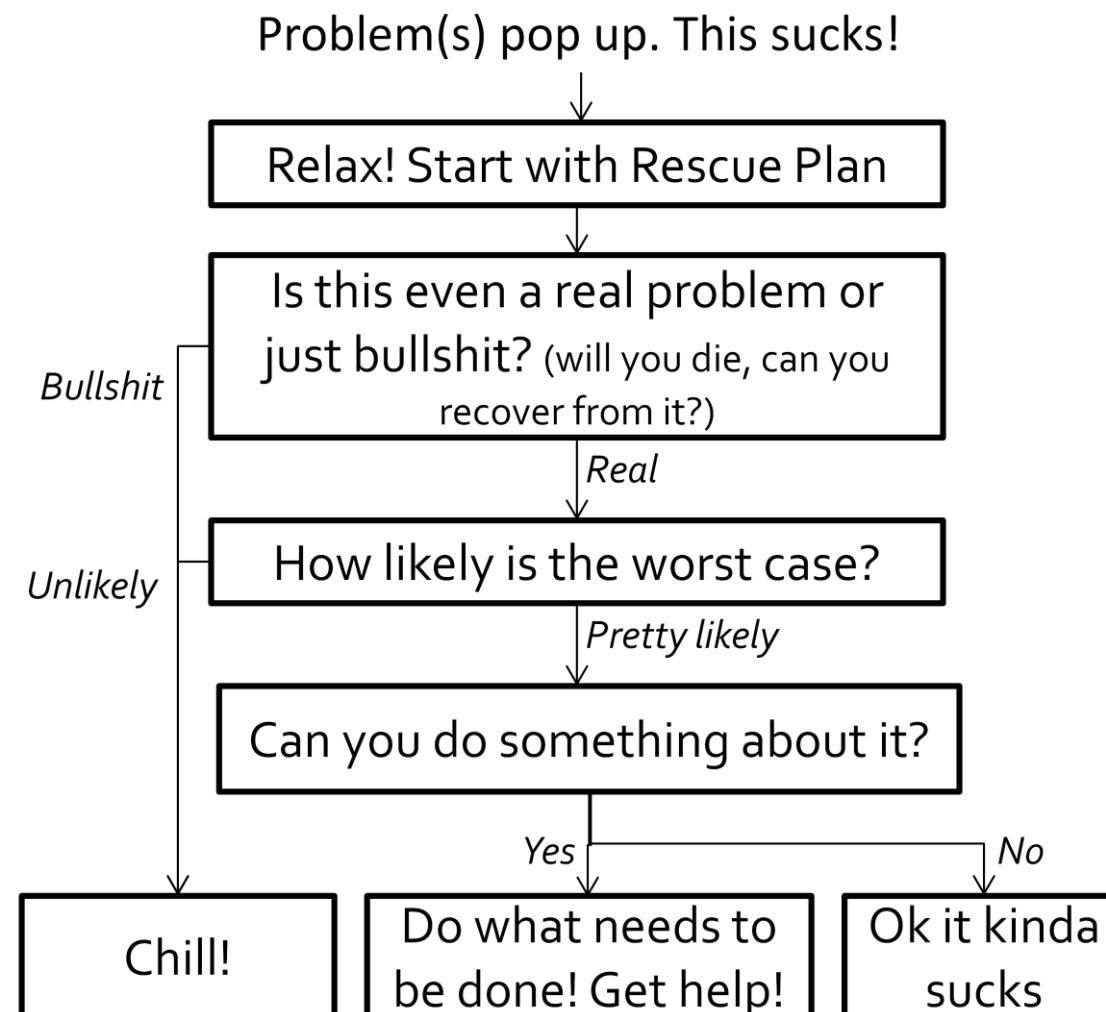
- Your thoughts are immensely powerful. They create your reality
- Most of our thoughts are repetitions, and most are quite inaccurate. Becoming aware of our **cognitive biases** is eye-opening: we are irrational most of the time, and learning more usually just shows us how little we know
- **Neuroplasticity** can work in your favor or not: We “train” our brains to either become a positivity or a negativity-producing machine
- **Addiction to thoughts** is a thing, and it can be more harmful and painful than physical additions.²⁰ Worry is a result of this, it's a learned behavior that gives us the illusion of control
- **Mental illness** (from mild depression to severe bipolar disorders) is not **your fault**. It's a result of chemicals in your brain which you inherited, and/or a consequence of trauma
- This doesn't mean that we can't change for the better:
 - If you can afford it, **therapy** is probably a good idea, even if you feel ok
 - **Drugs** aren't always evil: they can break our chains and allow us to walk outside our mental jails (but should be used with caution, of course)
 - Healthy habits (in general and related to your mental health) can change your brain for the better, due to incremental improvements. See next pages for more details on useful tools and habits



I. Solve problems that pop up

Instead of going into this dumb autopilot fight-or-flight mode, we should aim to bring some rationality and solution-orientation into our thinking. The two key questions to ask here are: 1. Is it really that bad? and 2. Can I do something about it?

Here's a little decision tree I try to stick to (feel free to make your own):



More mental tools for handling problems

- If your life and your problems seem unbearable, **reduce your time frame:** Instead of thinking what will happen in 2 months, focus on getting through today (or the next hour)
- Tim Ferriss' [Fear-Setting exercise](#) is helpful: It involves conquering fear by defining worst-case scenarios and thinking of ways to mitigate these risks
- With "the Work", Byron Katie²¹ popularized a method of asking [four simple questions](#) about something that causes us pain (basically questioning our conviction that our thoughts are "true")
- **Reframe** your problem. By using different vocabulary ("I will overcome this challenge" instead of "this is a catastrophe"). Or think about what unforeseen positive changes could come from your pain. If there's not much positive to come up with, like getting very ill, it could be "I can help others in a similarly difficult situation overcome this"²²
- Adopting a belief that there's some higher power that "has a plan for me", or that life in general "means well with me" can be transformative (see also [ch. 7](#)). Similarly, you can adopt the guiding principle that thoughts that feel good are true, and those that make you feel bad are untrue (I learned this from [Robert Betz](#)).



“Problems”

I've been using the term “problems” quite a bit. I'd like to throw in some of Mark Manson's²³ thoughts, because the way we view problems might be a problem in and of itself: “Life is essentially an endless series of problems. The solution to one problem is merely the creation of another. (...) Don't hope for a life without problems. There's no such thing. Instead, hope for a life full of good problems.” Happiness comes from solving those problems (not avoiding them).

It boils down to us having **unrealistic expectations**: That we can solve our problems and get to a point where it's “smooth sailing” for the rest of our life. Like playing with godmode cheats in a game. We're allergic to the painful parts of life, which coincidentally makes us suffer more: “Wanting a positive experience is a negative experience, while accepting a negative experience is a positive experience. The avoidance of suffering is a form of suffering. The avoidance of struggle is a struggle. The denial of failure is a failure. Hiding what is shameful is itself a form of shame.” Hence, instead of trying to avoid the painful parts, accept them and **choose your struggle**. Choose your battles wisely.

As for the other stuff that annoys you (like what your neighbors think of you, what people on Twitter say): Stop going around giving a fuck about everything and everyone. We have a limited amount of fucks to give. So choose well.



II. Healthy Habits for Healthy Minds

Meditation: It took us a long time in the West to adopt this amazing practice, but it's now well established how beneficial it is, being one of the few effective and non-invasive tools for making our brains more peaceful. Every high achiever seems to have some meditation practice. Here are some things I learned:

- Meditation is often misunderstood as "I sit in the lotus position and mustn't think of anything." Stop trying to get to a certain outcome. Meditation is a training to create space between event and reaction, it's lived equanimity
- For me, a key learning from meditation was: I can observe my thoughts. I am not my thoughts. I can stop identifying with them. Most come from a strange, needy place called "ego". I seem to have a "pain body" that feeds on pain²⁰
- There are powerful forms like [Loving-Kindness \(Metta\) Meditation](#) which help develop the mental habit of selfless, altruistic love
- Apps like [HeadSpace](#), [Waking Up](#) or [10% happier](#) are good for starting. Of course you can also try a meditation class or join a free [Vipassana Retreat](#)
- Maybe meditation isn't for you. Especially for "head-people" who "are not in their bodies" like me, meditation can potentially reinforce this tendency. In this case, practices like breathing exercises, yoga or walking mindfully can be very meditative, too, and have similar benefits



Journaling: I've been journaling daily for several years, and it's one of my favorite habits. I've changed the format of my journaling throughout the years. The objective is not getting a to-do plan (see [habit 5](#) for that), but getting out what's on my mind so I don't carry it around all day, and orienting my mind towards gratitude and positivity. Here's what my journaling looks like (do what works best for *you*):

- I have my journal lying open on a small table. I write in it every day (with a pencil), right after getting up and taking a coffee
- After noting the date, I start with "**free journaling**": How do I feel? What worries me, what is my mind obsessing about? (it's quite relieving to get it out)
- Then I write down 2-3 things for which I am **grateful for** (it can be small things like my coffee or feeling healthy)
- Then, I write down 2-3 things that I **look forward to**. Sometimes this isn't so easy, then I'll make an effort to visualize it and envision a better future (see [ch. 7](#))
- Finally, I note the **ONE thing that is most important today** (it'll often be my key work related project, see [ch. 5](#), and this marks me changing into "work mode")
- What you can do throughout the day is write down further feelings, ideas or insights in the journal
- In the evening, you can **recap the day**: What was good today? What can I be proud of? And what could I improve on?



Shitty vs. useful information

It's insane how the internet gave us sheer endless information and entertainment choices, in a small device that we carry around with us all day – and our brains are overwhelmed by it. Don't get me wrong, I love the internet. But:

- "News" sources, even the big players, had to adapt by using clickbait and sensationalism instead of neutral, high-quality journalism. The other content can also be harmful: From toxic echo chambers where crazy people radicalize themselves to young girls getting body-image issues from Instagram²⁴
- We need to realize that online (social) media platforms have been optimized to make us **addicted** (by letting us scroll through unlimited feeds with content that sometimes gives us a little dopamine spike - by giving us novel content that makes us angry or horny. It's called intermitted reinforcement). We get **addicted to distraction**, especially if we have an "ADD brain"⁴

Ask yourself: Does consuming this make me smarter, better, happier? No, it's usually because we **run away** from something: Either our own foggy, unhappy brains, or a daunting task that we procrastinate from. Address the underlying root causes and find healthier coping mechanisms (like **breathing and moving**)!



The Healthy Content Diet

It's pretty self-explanatory: Go on a **"healthy content diet"** – More uplifting, high quality content; Less toxic, clickbaity stuff that isn't useful or enjoyable.

In other words, **raise your standards**: Consume less, but of higher quality (similar to what we should do with the food we eat). The format doesn't matter much (be it book, blog, video, audiobook, podcast or whatever you prefer), but I look for the following:

1. Accurate and useful information (I'm looking for **clear thinking**, empirically valid observations & new perspectives, even if they are controversial)
2. Wisdom (e.g. through books, especially biographies – see next page)
3. Or great entertainment, comedy and art that I *really* enjoy (it could be great movies, graphic novels, fiction, video games, music, whatever)

Replace the stuff you know isn't good for you with a better, less toxic substitute: Replace watching YouTube prank videos with a few, high quality content creators. Replace Twitter with Reddit (and join funny or hobby-related subreddits) or, even better, a good book. But if you truly enjoy that Trash TV show: go for it

A good rule of thumb that might help you is to **create more (content) than you consume** (that means do something creative for 1 hr before watching TV for 1 hr)



Wisdom

I wanted to clarify what I mean by *Wisdom* and why it's important (this concept seems obscure and anachronistic in today's world). The word "philosophy" literally means "the love of wisdom," and wisdom is the overarching aim of philosophy. Wisdom isn't memorizing lots of trivia or knowing Shakespeare by heart. This has little value nowadays.

Wisdom, to me, means **seeing clearly. Seeing things as they are, not as we wish they were.** Recognizing patterns. Understanding (a little) why people do what they do and why the world works as it works. Wise people are rarely surprised.

Wise people are open-minded, they learn and change their standpoints, even if they're controversial, instead of subscribing to group think and tribalism.

Wise people think for themselves. Their thinking has nuance and depth.

Do wise people know it all? No, not at all. In fact, one of the first things they realize is how little they know ([Buddha](#), [Socrates](#) and [Confucius](#) all said something to the effect of "smart people know how little they know. Dumb people don't").

A wise person has a sound grasp on statistics and human nature, and recognizes his own shortcomings. He or she has the tools to distinguish fact from wishful thinking, randomness from empirical validity and group think from reason.



Acceptance

If I had to choose one mental habit which is most important for a calm and happy life, it would be acceptance.

Not being able to accept the past or what is happening right now, who you are, what you look like, where you stand in life, means living in hell. Acceptance goes hand in hand with a calm mind. Acceptance (of whatever arises in you) is what meditation is. Acceptance is *the* mental superpower.²⁵

Accepting what is is a choice, and it can be practiced. This is how you will find [Equanimity](#), a stoic psychological stability that Buddhists aim for.

I think accepting generally requires **self-awareness** (e.g. “I notice that anger arises in me, see [habit 1](#))” and **wisdom** (see above: “I’m not actually angry at my partner, I’m just stressed from work”). I guess you can also accept what is without wisdom, without understanding why you or your environment is what it is. But most people seem to fail at it because they can’t come to peace with their expectations of what reality *should* be not being met (why would anyone vote for *him*? Why is my partner like this? Why am I always unlucky, why did I get sick?).

Disclaimer: This doesn’t condone becoming passive and doing nothing anymore. It’s about finding peace with what is, even while we’re working on improving ourselves



Implementation: Now it's Your Turn!

Here are the three things I'd like you to implement in your life:

- 1. Have at least one "mental tool" that you can fall back on if things get tough:**
Do any of the tools presented resonate with you? If not, come up with your own plan or set of questions to fall back on in difficult times, because life will throw those at you! You can update your "rescue plan" from habit 1 accordingly (so you'll have both "body" and "mental" tools at your disposal)
- 2. Have at least one daily habit for clearing your mind:** I'd suggest you do both journaling and some form of meditation, because they're both so beneficial. Instead of journaling with pen and paper, you could just do the exercise "in your head" on your way to work. And if meditation isn't for you, maybe start doing a "meditation-like" thing like yoga or walking, which you might already have incorporated from habit 3.
- 3. See where you can improve your information diet:** Make an honest self-assessment of your content consumption (write it down!): Which is really useful or entertaining vs. which is just distraction and negativity? Replace the bad stuff with better stuff!

Ideally, include content and practices that move you in the direction of **more wisdom and acceptance**. What helps me gain clarity is writing the most important "rules for life" down and revise them regularly.



Resources (if you want to learn more)

²⁰ [A New Earth](#) by *Eckhart Tolle*: It's a must read, describes addiction to thought, ego, pain body extremely well. I listen to the [audiobook](#) regularly

²¹ [Loving What Is: Four Questions That Can Change Your Life](#) by *Byron Katie* is a great read. Her backstory and how she transformed are inspirational, too

²² [Awaken the Giant Within](#) by *Tony Robbins*: I know he doesn't have a great reputation, but this book actually has some solid ideas and inspiration

²³ Given how popular this book was, you've probably already read [The Subtle Art of Not Giving A F*ck](#) by *Mark Manson*. [His blog](#) is great as well, by the way

²⁴ [The Information Diet: A Case for Conscious Consumption](#) by *Clay Johnson*: I guess the content is pretty self-evident, but it's still worthwhile to read

²⁵ [Radical Self Acceptance](#) by *Tara Brach*: pretty much what the title says. She has great [free guided meditations](#) which I recommend you check out



Habit 5: Calm Work

Let's move from your inner world to the "external world". Here, there are two areas that arguably give us the most headaches: work and relationships.

For many of us, the majority of our restlessness comes from stressful and unfulfilling jobs. Recognizing that our modern working world is one of the main causes of today's depression and addiction pandemic is not rocket science.²⁷

Why is that? Well, the nature of our work has drastically changed. The industrial revolution had us move from physical work outdoors with our "tribes" and families to either becoming highly specialized knowledge workers sitting in front of computers all day, or "human machines" doing a set of repetitive tasks over and over again. Most of us can sense that what we do isn't really meaningful. It doesn't feel fulfilling if we work for a week on PowerPoint slides that nobody reads, there's no tangible result.

Author Charles Bukovsky (he's even more cynical than me) said it best: "How in the hell could a man enjoy being awakened at 8:30 a.m. by an alarm clock, leap out of bed, dress, force-feed, shit, piss, brush teeth and hair, and fight traffic to get to a place where essentially you made lots of money for somebody else and were asked to be grateful for the opportunity to do so?"



However, you probably didn't inherit millions and cannot skip the "having to work to pay the bills" part of life. And your work is a good place to practice your calm tools and habits, so there's one bright side.

I'm not discounting the fact that many people already love their jobs. And I hope that you have the courage and luck to get there, too. I think finding a work you love (most of the time) is one of the best things you can do for your quality of life. Most of our problems with procrastination or stress evaporate once we find something we find truly enjoyable and meaningful.

Even without being in your dream job, you will find that learning to become a "calm, deep worker" makes a huge difference not only in your satisfaction but also in the quality of your work. Nervous and frenetic workers produce disastrous work. Hence, we'll need to get better at "calm work".



What should I even work? (Or should I quit?)

Let's start with the most important question here: Did you choose the right career? If you hate every minute of it, you can't be calm and happy, no matter how much you meditate to "make up for it". I understand many of us are stuck in our jobs, but we can all work on getting out to something better:

- It comes back to **knowing yourself**. Find something where you can use your natural strengths and proclivities: Do you prefer an office environment or work at home? To what extent do you want to interact with co-workers and clients? Do you enjoy repetitive tasks or creativity?²⁸
- Before quitting, I'd recommend you try to talk to your current boss or HR person about a) getting a better work environment for you (maybe try part time, more home office, having a room for yourself) and/or b) getting other tasks and responsibilities within the company
- If it doesn't get better: Quit! Don't suffer in a job you hate for too long! But do it intelligently: Build useful skills, build a network and apply for jobs before quitting, or have at least a vision of what you're doing next²⁹
- Not everyone is cut out to be an Entrepreneur, it's hard (but perfect to some)
- However, I think most of us would benefit from having a more flexible schedule and **more autonomy** to do the type of work we enjoy (work towards that!)



A healthier and more relaxed working day

Even if you don't have a job you love (yet), here are some things I (and experts) recommend to make our workdays better:

- Try to match your working schedule with your **natural energy levels & proclivities**: There's a time in the day where you're most "on" and productive, which you should use for your most important work. Conversely, I usually wake up confused and antisocial, so I work on easy repetitive tasks in the mornings
- **Focused work blocks + breaks**: What helped me immensely was adopting the **Pomodoro technique**: splitting up my workday in 50 minute blocks of uninterrupted, focused work (use a timer!) followed by 10 minute breaks where I get up and move a bit. You can start with 25 minutes of work if you can't do 50
- Practice **deep work**.³⁰ Avoid multitasking, our brains aren't good at it. Beware of distraction-addiction
- **Physiology matters**. Make your workday healthier: Get a good office chair. Sit straight. Don't put your screen too close to your face. Look out of a window into the distance from time to time & blink often to avoid dry eyes. Get a standing desk if possible or one of **those**. Get up and stretch regularly
- Identify **stress factors** and **reduce them** as far as possible (e.g., get noise cancelling headphones, find quiet working spaces)



Smart time and information management

A big part of my anxiety with work came from overwhelm & not having a plan. This is why good planning is half the battle. Here are some practical tips:

- Use a planner that works for you. I recommend having everything in one place and not 5 apps. E.g. use [Google Calendar](#), synchronized with all your devices
- **Plan ahead!** I try to plan my entire week on Sunday, including recurring habits like working out or appointments, and adjust during each day. Try to avoid missing your plan, else push what you cannot accomplish to another day
- **Prioritizing** is key: what is the *one thing* that matters most (focus on the 20% that brings 80% of the results).³¹ Or ask yourself: "what is the one thing that makes all other goals easier or unnecessary?" Bonus points if you do this *one thing* first thing in the morning and don't put it off for long. I use colors in my calendar to highlight the priority of tasks (and I "check" finished tasks by marking them green). It's also helpful to distinguish whether a task is important or urgent: check Stephen Covey's book for more details³²
- Unless it's a to-do which I'll directly schedule in Calendar, I use [Google Keep](#) to **note ideas**, resources or whatever is on my mind (it's much better than carrying it around in my head all the time). I use labels like *Shopping* or *eBook* to categorize inputs, and regularly review and "clean up" my notes



Audio to help you get through the day

Ok, I'll admit it: This isn't the most crucial aspect of productivity. But I'm a music and ASMR fan (and [creator](#)), so I wanted to at least mention them.

I *do* think that music and audio can be enormously beneficial to push through difficult and long workdays, and just make everything more pleasant. Some tips:

- Adapt your audio to what you need to work on: For difficult tasks like writing, I prefer listening to relaxing music such as [LoFi beats](#), [classical music](#) or [ambient](#)
- For more repetitive tasks like formatting a presentation or editing a video, I enjoy more stimulating music, podcasts or [ASMR](#)
- ASMR can be great for calming your mind. It can make me "dizzy", so I prefer it in the afternoon or evening for non-essential tasks. Here's a playlist of my [ASMR favorites](#). Some people prefer **unintentional ASMR** (just normal people with relaxing voices or doing relaxing things): [Here's my playlist](#) with my favorites
- I sometimes also listen to pretty boring [kid's audiobooks](#) when I have to study or write something. As I usually know the story already, I'm not too distracted!
- Consider getting noise-cancelling headphones, or use earplugs more often!

Bottom line: Do whatever works for you! Create your own playlists, and use the right audio (or whatever else helps you) strategically to get through tough days



Implementation: Okay, now it's your turn!

What can you change to make your workdays more productive and efficient, but also more relaxed?

I'd recommend thinking about the following, and writing it down:

- Do you have a good **planning / time management process** in place? If not, start now!
- Make an **energy inventory** (At what time do you have the most energy? When do you feel creative, when do you want to be alone, when do you do your best work?) and think of ways to split up your workload accordingly
- Can you **remove stressors** and distractions? (e.g., can you get a standing desk, use earplugs, get more alone time, etc.?)

Bonus exercise: Imagine your ideal workday (or: is there a way to make your current job ideal?) What do you do all day? Are you an employee or an entrepreneur? Are you in a large or small company? Do you interact with clients?

Write it down and start taking steps to get there!



Resources (if you want to learn more)

²⁷ [Lost Connections](#) by *Johann Hari*: This book hits the nail on the head with analyzing why our modern, “un-connected” world is making us depressed

²⁸ [The Pathfinder](#) by *Nicholas Lore*: Great book, even though the cover looks weird. It gives you solid tools and guidance on how to find a career that suits you. It also goes into your personality, talents, purpose etc.

²⁹ [What Color Is Your Parachute](#) by *Richard Bolles*: Classic for job-hunting. With practical tips on changing careers, the application process, writing resumes etc.

³⁰ [Deep Work](#) by *Cal Newport*: How to be successful in our modern work world by learning to *really* work, which is rare and valuable, and can be learned

³¹ [The ONE thing](#) by *Gary Keller*: It’s basically about 80/20 principle. Identify the one thing that is most important, and work on that thing relentlessly

³² *Stephen Covey’s* [7 Habits of Highly Effective People](#): It’s a bestseller, even though somewhat old (in case you haven’t noticed: I got inspired by the book title:)



Habit 6: Positive Relationships

Humans are social creatures, by and large. We need **real connection, real relationships**. That small talk about the weather with a coworker doesn't fulfill that need.

Researchers all come to a similar conclusion: strong social relationships are not optional, they're [a must-have for happiness](#). Unfortunately, loneliness is becoming more prevalent in all age groups, even though we're technically more connected than ever through Social Media.

But it's not always as straightforward as saying "just socialize more!" First of all, there are less and less opportunities for socializing as you grow older (even without being quarantined due to Covid-19). But what's more important: **People are different**; we need different types of relationships. Introverts like me want social time in small doses, others need a bubbly family life all the time. I know from personal experience how being stuck with difficult people (be it family, roommates or partners) can make everything worse and render peace of mind *impossible*.

Relationships should **do us good**. If we want a fulfilled, peaceful life, we'll need to find fulfilled, peaceful people and keep them in our lives.



Why our relationships fail so often

I cannot cover all sources of pain and drama caused by dysfunctional relationships (I'd need to write several books for that). But here are a few problems that seem to be very common:

Not being able to be alone with yourself

I can't be without her!

I can only be happy if I have a partner

My loneliness is killing me!

Trauma or predispositions that make forming strong relationships difficult

I'm so jealous!

Why can't I find real friends?

I don't even like people

He's suffocating me

All men / women are the same!

I don't understand why I always cheat

Not knowing yourself and stumbling into relationships that aren't good for you

I don't know why my partner makes me so angry!

He treats me like shit, but I like his confidence

Why is living together so hard? I thought I'd love the family life! I'm not sure if we're compatible I don't even like my friends!

Wrong expectations about love

There's the one perfect partner for me out there

My feelings have changed. This means I don't love him!

Marriage means porn-like sex, guaranteed for the rest of my life!

Why isn't he more romantic?



Friends and fellow human beings

Let's start with what's most important, I think: You need at least one **real friend** who you can talk to (when you feel like shit, too). This will likely help more than most techniques and pills. I'm not sure why, but there are few things more calming and reassuring than "being heard", it feels like a warm blanket put over my fragile heart. Most people seem to realize this only on their deathbeds.³³

Here are just a few things that I learned about friendship:

- *You are the average of the 5 people you spend most time with.* It's pretty overused, but generally accurate. Befriend people who want the best for you³⁴
- Don't expect to find and befriend selfless, enlightened, perfect people, otherwise you'll only be disappointed. I prefer funny and loyal people with a good heart. Who cares if they have some baggage, I'm not normal either
- You probably have those (potential) real friends in your life already, but maybe didn't appreciate them enough. Who "gets you"? Who stuck with you?
- Those good people are **rare**. Reward them, say "thank you" and keep them close! Be proactive in keeping in touch, be the one to plan cool stuff together
- If you can't find friends: find other ways to **give** love (it seems this is more important than *getting* love). Get a pet. Help others. Do charity (see [ch. 7](#))



Romantic Relationships

I don't have to tell you how these can be blissful and beautiful, but may also ruin your life. Or how drastically the dating world has changed with Tinder & co.

Here are a few pointers that helped me:³⁵

- It comes back to getting to **know yourself**: Don't assume the marriage and kids thing are right for you just because everyone else does it (also, e.g. cohabitation isn't for everyone. Be aware of the risks of marriage. There are **other viable options aside from monogamy**, though it may be difficult to make them work)
- Be very **diligent in choosing a life partner**: it's arguably the most important decision in your life. Beware of **dark triad**, **cluster B**. Similar values (esp. regarding finances & kids), shared interests and libido compatibility are key, too
- **Realistic expectations**: The honeymoon phase will fade. Don't expect the Disney love story – people change. Kids are exhausting. Resentment and **dead bedrooms** are a real thing. **Biology matters**, women and men are not the same
- Become a **better partner** by learning non-violent communication, establish positive routines like date-nights and "relationship status discussions". Learn about **love languages** and attachment style (for yourself and your partner)



Implementation: Okay, now it's your turn!

Okay, even though you might find it weird, I'd advise you write down what matters to you in relationship matters. I'd think about the following, particularly:

1. What would your **ideal social / love life** look like? Write down what friends you'd want in your life, what your romantic partner should be like and how your relationship would ideally look like (unless you prefer to stay alone)
2. What do your relationships look like **now**, and what do you need to change to get where you want to go?
3. Think of and implement **habits** to accomplish your "relationship goals". This could be:
 - Schedule a time to socialize or talk to or do stuff with "real friends" (otherwise you might always put it off, like me)
 - Try a dating platform, try speed dating or create situations where meeting a partner could happen, like an art class
 - Schedule a weekly "relationship status meeting" with your partner and talk about how things are going, what you could do better, etc.



Resources (if you want to learn more)

³³ [The Top Five Regrets of the Dying](#) by *Bronnie Ware*. You don't need to read it, here they are: I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me. I wish I hadn't worked so hard. I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends. I wish that I had let myself be happier

³⁴ [12 Rules for Life](#) by *Jordan Peterson*: an interesting read with wide-ranging insights on psychology and philosophy (I don't agree with everything)

³⁵ Here are some relationship & intimacy books that really opened my eyes:

[Attached](#) by *Amir Levine und Rachel Heller*: Practical relationship advice based on attachment theory (anxious, avoidant, secure)

[Mating in Captivity](#) by couples therapist *Esther Perel*: Interesting, somewhat controversial insights on relationships, affairs, and the antithetical pull between the familiar versus the novel, stable vs. mysterious

[The Evolution of Desire](#) by *David Buss*: love and mating based on evolutionary psychology (quite scientific, somewhat controversial, very interesting)

[Come as you Are](#) by *Emily Nagoski*: Eye-opening, science-based exploration of female sexuality (why don't we learn this stuff in school?)



Habit 7: Growth & Meaning

Ok, we've (hopefully) learned something about healthy habits for our bodies and minds to have a more peaceful, fulfilled life. But chances are this nagging feeling of "something's missing" is still there, and it doesn't seem to go away.

Part of it is just our human condition, probably. But I'm convinced that it also stems from an intuition that we **lack meaning**, some higher purpose. Most of us (myself included) don't really know what we're supposed to do with our lives. And everybody will have to find their own answer to this fundamental question.

But I'm more and more convinced that, while we each walk our unique paths, we will eventually all face similar obstacles (be it self-doubt, losing loved ones or feeling lost), and those of us who don't give up will end up finding a similar "why", a true north. I think it will be something in the ballpark of love and kindness.

Ok, this sounds a bit cryptic, so let's go back to the practical steps. If you don't know what to do with your life, here's a good rule of thumb:

1. Start with "**getting your shit together**" (taking care of your health, getting work and relationships that are good for you – make this your mission). And don't stop **growing** while you continue to get to know yourself and this world
2. Choose a "**Why**" that is bigger than you (I'll explain what I mean)



Why We Should Continue to Grow

I am under no illusion that one day I will “be there” and feel completely fulfilled and content for the rest of my life. That might happen in movies or if you become a Buddhist monk, but it seems to be in our human nature to always look ahead and be a bit discontent. And that’s ok.

That’s why I borrowed Scott Adam’s idea to always grow and hope for a better future: ³⁶

- We are happy if things **move in the right direction**. “Happiness has more to do with where you’re heading than where you are”. Ideally, choose a career that will lead to a lifetime of improved performance. You should have at least some areas in your life where you can see steady, visible improvements, like a sport or creative hobby (those don’t have to do with finding calm)
- **Cultivate hope by mastering your imagination**: “Pessimism is often a failure of imagination.” If you can imagine the future being brighter, you’ll be much happier. By contrast, if you can’t even imagine an improved future, you’re basically in depression. Scott Adams claims that he finds it useful to daydream “that the future will be better than today, by far”. I practice this by writing down things I’m looking forward to when I journal in the morning.



WHY, though?

Most of us will come to the point where we ask ourselves: Where is my destination? What am I *really* supposed to do with my life?

It's inspiring when we hear of people who devoted their lives to one thing, like helping animals or [making perfect sushi](#). These people seem to be more content and optimistic, don't they?

We usually don't know exactly what our "why" is, hence we should start with figuring it out for our work and life in general, [as Simon Sinek states](#).³⁷ The saying: "*He who has a why can endure every how*" sums it up quite well. Victor Frankl demonstrated how finding meaning allows us to endure almost any suffering.³⁸

It's hugely beneficial, maybe even necessary, to have something **bigger than yourself** that gets you through the lows of life, which will inevitably come.

But don't expect the perfect cause to find you! This is why I think "Find your true purpose" is a bit dangerous advice - it can paralyze us or make us passive.

Stop waiting for your purpose to find you, but **try different things** and **see what sticks**. *Choose* a purpose.

But I suspect that what's going to stick is some purpose that is a) others-oriented and b) has some community aspect to it.



Why Giving might be the missing piece

Let's be honest, most of the stuff so far has been about YOU, and how to improve your life. And there's nothing wrong with that, on the contrary: We need to take care of ourselves first and foremost. Your own (mental, physical and financial) well-being must remain your number one priority, especially if you're still in "survival mode".

But after a certain point, most of us realize that it's not that fulfilling to just optimize life for ourselves. Everything we hoped would make us happy, be it travel or that cool pair of sneakers, couldn't really fill that void inside of us.

I suspect that a big part of our unhappiness in the West is a result of this hyper-individualism. We've lost touch with what gave us stability in the past, which was **caring for our family and community**. Research has found that being "other-oriented" makes us happier. In a way, depression is remarkably self-centered.

There seems to be something relieving about finally finding something "bigger than you".³⁹ Some cause that is important enough for us to subordinate our own profane wants and desires to. And no, that higher cause doesn't have to be ending world hunger. It can be something simple like finding meaning in your job. Or charity. Or having kids and noticing how your own "problems" become pleasantly secondary as you care for their challenges.



Religion maybe isn't so bad

I'm more of an atheist myself. Nevertheless, and despite all the shit that has been done in the name of religion: People who are religious and actively participate in a religious community **tend to be happier**.

I'm willing to bet that the main benefits come from the **sense of meaning** (life isn't completely random because God has a plan for me, my good deeds will be rewarded and my suffering has a purpose), and the **community** aspect (e.g. by going to the church, singing together, volunteering – all of that can give us a great sense of stability and belonging).

And **praying**, as evidenced by research, is a great way to heal and build resilience.⁴⁰

Some people view it very pragmatically: Their main reason they subscribe to a certain religion or belief is because it increases their subjective quality of life. Lifehacker **Dave Asprey**, for example, says he believes in rebirth in the Buddhism sense. He has no proof, but says it makes him feel a bit better every day.

But it doesn't have to be religion. Perhaps you have other spiritual practices or inspiring teachers who can give you strength and keep your "inner nihilism" in check. All the better if there's a community aspect to it as well (like meditating in a group on a weekly basis).



“Drugs”

There's another way to break out of our own mental prisons and to tackle our lack of spirituality and meaning. I'm talking about “drugs” like psychedelics (e.g. psilocybin, LSD, possibly also MDMA and Ketamine - not the alcohol and crack type). The public slowly wakes up to the fact that these can actually be greatly beneficial, while they are still criminalized in most of the world (mostly due to lawmakers' ignorance and big pharma lobbying). There's a good reason why “plant medicine” has been used for centuries in indigenous cultures.

Luckily, established authors⁴¹ have started [advocating for these substances](#), and research at renowned universities has [revealed incredible benefits](#). We've seen transformational change in severe depressions, addictions and many other mental health issues where modern medicine couldn't help anymore. Many describe it as a forced change of perspective, a “reboot” of their dysfunctional brains, an escape from their mental cages - and the effects can last forever. It can be a profoundly spiritual experience, seeing how we are one, that our egos and fears are illusions. Many report these drugs being among the [most impactful experiences](#) of their lives.

However, please note that these substances do have risks, but they can be administered in a controlled, safe manner. I just want you to keep an open mind, look up the research, and make your own decisions!



Implementation: Now it's Your Turn!

Ok, let's start by eating a *big* dose of magic mushrooms (I'm kidding ... kind of:)

But I'd recommend you think and write about these points:

1. Are you on a **growth trajectory**, do you **continue improving**? If you don't really feel like it, think about whether you can make your work an area of growth, or if you can take on hobbies where you can see a visible, continuous improvement
2. Do you have **goals that inspire you**?
This can be "selfish" stuff like having a nice big house at the beach or a family. Write down what your ideal day would look like (when you wake up, where, next to whom, and what you do throughout the day). Is there a path to getting there?
3. Do you have an idea what your "**Why**" is?
You can write it down as a "mission statement", even if it might sound cheesy. It doesn't have to be spectacular. Or maybe you just don't know it yet, and that's ok (consider volunteering, in this case, or make it a habit to help friends & family)



Resources (if you want to learn more)

³⁶ [How to fail at everything and still win big](#) by *Scott Adams*: Pretty funny and smart book by the creator of Dilbert about success and living well

³⁷ I'd watch *Simon Sinek's TED talk* instead of reading [Start with Why](#) – it's one of those books with a good title but very little substance

³⁸ *Victor Frankl's Man's Search for Meaning* is obviously a classic. Many people read this book over and over again, to gain perspective, to appreciate what they have

³⁹ [I like Giving](#) by *Brad Formsma* is an inspiring read about the power of giving, but also receiving gratefully

⁴⁰ [Prayer Is Good Medicine](#) by *Larry Dossey* is a nice exploration of the science behind prayer and its benefits (I like that it's devoid of religious endorsements)

⁴¹ Most notably, [How to Change your Mind](#) by *Michael Pollan*: A well-written, open-minded book on psychedelics and its applications for addiction, depression and more



Final Words

Did you really read this?

This means a lot to me (after all, it took me quite a while to write and draw this stuff).

I sincerely hope that this was useful and that you'll be able to implement some of these healthy habits in your life!

By the way: I have a [free weekly newsletter](#) where I share similar ideas, as well my favorite relaxing and uplifting content (including ASMR).

I create more content here:

- My [findcalm YouTube channel](#) where I create ASMR and share relaxing ideas
- My [Unintentional ASMR channel](#) where I collect voices and stuff that (unintentionally) gives me ASMR (I have a [second, smaller Unintentional ASMR channel](#) with shorter, more frequent uploads)

If you want to support what I do, the best place would be [my Patreon](#).

Ah, and by the way: You can reach out to me at hi@findcalm.com if you have questions or remarks. I will really read it and reply!

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